



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE  
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

**DÁIL ÉIREANN**

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

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# DÁIL ÉIREANN

*Dé Máirt, 1 Deireadh Fómhair 2019*

*Tuesday, 1 October 2019*

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

*Paidir.*

*Prayer.*

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## Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders' Questions

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** The British Prime Minister said today that he will be tabling proposals to the European Union shortly on alternatives to the backstop and dismissed the non-papers disclosed on RTÉ news last night as more or less redundant at this stage. The Taoiseach met the British Prime Minister twice recently, on 9 and 24 September, and has also had telephone contact with him. I met the Taoiseach and other party leaders on 15 September but at no stage was there any reference to these non-papers or their contents, particularly with regard to customs posts. In the Taoiseach's discussions with Mr. Johnson, were these non-papers referenced or discussed? What is their provenance? The Taoiseach stated to the British Irish Chamber of Commerce on 5 September that in the event of a no-deal Brexit, there would be checks on goods and live animals but that these would, in as far as possible, take place at ports, airports and business premises. He said that some checks may need to take place near the Border and that the Government was working out the details with the European Commission. On 17 September, the Tánaiste said that he did not expect checks to be near the Border. The Taoiseach had said that they would be near but I do not think the Tánaiste will do to the Taoiseach what he did to the Minister, Deputy Shane Ross, in respect of the issue. Nonetheless, the checks would have to take place somewhere and that remains to be clarified. We need to remind ourselves that the talks are on the terms of the exit of the United Kingdom from the European Union, with a full trade deal presumably to be negotiated between the two subsequently. The need for an insurance policy in the exit deal negotiations is key in order that there will be no reintroduction a hard border between the North and the South.

The key issue in the ongoing negotiations is whether Northern Ireland will remain within the EU customs union unless or until a full trade deal that removes the need for the insurance policy is negotiated. It comes down to customs, and the comments of Arlene Foster in that regard are somewhat unhelpful. It is easy to rule out things; it is much more difficult to create solutions and resolutions to complex issues. We always have to be careful about leaks, their timing and the motivation behind them. I did not believe we would see any serious British proposals until after the Conservative Party conference. We await those proposals. There has been

much megaphone diplomacy and we need to be conscious of that. The Good Friday Agreement has been badly damaged by the collapse of the institutions and would be damaged further by regulatory divergence if that was to occur, and by the reintroduction of a customs infrastructure. These are serious and profound issues. Were the Taoiseach and Tánaiste aware of the existence of these non-papers prior to yesterday evening's disclosure? Did they discuss them with Boris Johnson during their meetings and communications with him? Will the Taoiseach confirm what is the Government's position on discussions with the European Commission regarding a no-deal Brexit, particularly in light of the various statements he and the Tánaiste have made in respect of checks, where they will take place and what they will involve?

**The Taoiseach:** In answering the Deputy's question, I am conscious that I will be talking about non-papers that I have not seen. I do not mean that as a double negative. I have not seen them. I was aware of their existence, which was public knowledge and was commented on in the newspapers in the past week or two. Essentially, the UK provided non-papers to the EU task force on the basis that they would be kept confidential and not shared with member states. They were not shared with member states. I welcome Prime Minister Johnson's words earlier today, when he disowned and distanced himself from those non-papers. Had he not done so, it would have been hard evidence of bad faith on the part of the British Government.

In December 2017, the British Government promised Ireland and the European Union that there would be no hard border as a consequence of Brexit and no physical infrastructure or associated controls or checks. We expect the British Government to honour that commitment, made in good faith in the withdrawal agreement. People in the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland do not want a customs border between the North and the South. No British Government should seek to impose customs posts between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland against the will of the people in both places. I was especially interested in what businesses in Northern Ireland have to say. They speak much more eloquently than me about this. The Northern Ireland Retail Consortium stated that the British Government has not been listening to Northern Ireland businesses. The Freight Trade Association stated that what has come to light contradicts all of the advice it gave to the British Government. The Confederation of British Industry in Northern Ireland stated that these proposals were a disgrace. Manufacturing Northern Ireland rejected the proposals out of hand. I ask anyone in the British establishment who thinks that this is a good idea to listen the voices of Northern Ireland - those in business, farmers and people in general. Both they and we are saying "No" to customs posts between the North and the South. No British Government should try to impose on Ireland a solution opposed by people in the North and the South.

In my meetings with Prime Minister Johnson, he spoke on occasion about not having checks at the Border, which raises the obvious question of where they will be if not there but we never got into the details. When the Government talks about checks, it is in the context of them being necessary if there is no deal. If we face a no-deal Brexit on 31 October and if the UK decides, and it will be its decision, to leave the European Union without a deal and operate on WTO rules, there will need to be checks at ports, airports and perhaps at business level and near the Border. That is the reality of the situation, but that is in the context of no deal. We have never been in the position of signing up to checks as part of a deal.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** The Taoiseach needs to be careful in welcoming everything Boris Johnson said this morning because he made it clear, saying "we will make a very good offer" blah, blah and so on, but he said there would be a difficulty in keeping Northern Ireland in the customs union because one of the basic things about being a country is having a single customs

perimeter and a single customs union. While he is dismissing the non-papers, his essential message today is that he wants to keep Northern Ireland out of the customs union. All of us in this House are agreed that Brexit makes no sense economically or for those in business or in farming in Northern Ireland and that it will damage the economy all around, but it seems very clear that the Prime Minister is sticking to his idea of not wanting, as part of the exit deal, any provision that would ensure and guarantee that Northern Ireland would remain within the European Union customs union. Does the Taoiseach accept that seems to be Mr. Johnson's position right now or does he have evidence to suggest that he may be willing to compromise on that point?

**The Taoiseach:** The Deputy's assessment is correct that it is his view that the United Kingdom should leave the European Union whole and entire, to use his own language. That means the UK, including Northern Ireland, leaving the customs union. However, as I explained to him when we met in New York, there is a reason we came up with the deal we did after two years of negotiations with Prime Minister May and her Government. The backstop provides for a single customs territory. It does not provide for Britain or Northern Ireland staying in the EU customs union; it provides for what is described as a single customs territory. That satisfied our demand and desire that there not be customs checks North and South, but also the concerns and desires of many unionists that there not be any customs checks east-west. A single customs territory was designed specifically to meet that need. That is why we ended up with the backstop and why it is the best solution. Having the entire UK within a single customs territory avoids the need for customs posts North-South and east-west. I explained to Mr. Johnson that we spent two years going up and down all of these rabbit holes and that we came up where we did because we needed a solution that avoided customs posts not only on the land border between North-South, but between Northern Ireland and Britain and between the Republic of Ireland and Britain. Very often those who were not part of negotiating an agreement do not know why those negotiations reached a certain point, but this is why we reached that point.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** I raise the issue of the dangerous overcrowding in our hospitals. Today's figures from the INMO are really shocking. As of this morning, there were 610 patients on hospital trolleys. That includes 81 people on trolleys in University Hospital Limerick, 58 people on trolleys in Cork University Hospital, and 50 people on trolleys in the Mater, in my own constituency in Dublin. The list goes on and on. Behind these figures are people who deserve better treatment and decent healthcare. This morning 610 families were worried sick about loved ones, whether parents, grandparents or children, lying on trolleys in a corridor instead of on hospital beds, where they belong.

I have told the Taoiseach on many occasions that his health policies are not working but it is clear that he does not listen. This September was the worst September on record with regard to hospital overcrowding. Some 10,641 patients went without a hospital bed. That is 10,641 families who had to see a loved one suffer the indignity of a hospital trolley. Landing in a hospital for whatever reason can be a very frightening experience but to find oneself in hospital to be told that one has to make do with a trolley only worsens the anxiety one experiences. The INMO is absolutely scathing in its assessment of the current situation. It says chronic hospital overcrowding is placing massive strain on nurses and seriously worsening patient care. It says chronic hospital overcrowding is beyond unsustainable. All of this is on the Taoiseach's watch. It is a direct result of the policy choices of his Government. There is no point in coming in here time and again talking about supposed progress and success around the edges of what is a crisis. That is just not good enough. Publicity initiatives around Sláintecare are not good enough either because it has to be implemented in a way that makes a noticeable difference on the front

line. Patients and their families are at this stage tired of the Government's ready-steady-stop approach.

Fianna Fáil might be well prepared to stand aside and allow this to continue but we will not. We cannot any longer tolerate a health service dragged into a perpetual state of crisis by the Government's policies and inaction. There are 610 people lying on trolleys today. There are 610 families worrying about them. Can the Taoiseach tell them whether he is finally going to take action that will actually work?

**The Taoiseach:** I acknowledge that overcrowding in our hospitals was indeed very severe this morning. I apologise to the patients and staff affected and also their loved ones, who deserve much better than to have to wait for a hospital bed. It is worth pointing out, however, that the vast majority of people on a hospital trolley this morning will be in a proper hospital bed before the evening is out.

During the first half of this year, we saw encouraging reductions in the numbers of patients on trolleys year on year but there has been a deterioration since June. It has been getting steadily worse since then, regrettably. Part of that is down to an increase in the number of people attending our emergency departments, but there was also an increase in the first half of the year when we had fewer patients on trolleys, so that does not explain it fully. When I spoke to the Minister for Health about this matter this morning, I learned that action is being taken. We are adding more beds to our hospital system. In fact, every year since 2012, we have added extra beds to the hospital system, reversing the policy of the previous Government to cut the number. We have been investing in the fair deal over the past week or two, recognising that there is a real problem in that area. I am informed by the Minister for Health that the fair deal waiting time is now down to about four weeks, and that is helping us to reduce the number of delayed discharges. Additional funding has been freed up for transitional care, allowing patients fit to leave the hospital to go into convalescence. Investment in primary care is ongoing to reduce the number who need to be admitted in the first place.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** I am glad the Taoiseach has apologised to the patients and their families. That is the very least they deserve. More than an apology is needed, however. Those patients and others, and any families who finds themselves in this situation, actually want change and a solution to this matter. The Taoiseach comes in here as a matter of routine and recites the actions he claims to have taken and numbers of beds and so on but the reality is that the system does not have the capacity necessary to deliver the care that the patients need.

Today, Sinn Féin launched its budget proposal for 2020. In it, we include additional hospital beds, recruitment of additional nurses and midwives, and pay equalisation for consultants. All of these measures are well within the Government's fiscal capacity. Can the Taoiseach, in addition to apologising to the families and patients, give an absolute guarantee that there will be sufficient investment in our health services in the budget next week so we do not have to endure these scandalous figures time and again?

**The Taoiseach:** I outlined the actions taken. They are not claims; they are real. The Deputy can check them for herself. More money is being invested and spent in our health services than ever before. *Per capita*, the level is one of the highest in the world. More beds have been added to our hospital system every year since 2012. In recent weeks, there has been extra investment in the fair deal and convalescence to get more patients out of hospital. There has been an investment in primary care. Over 120 primary care centres have been opened throughout the country,



including in the Deputy's constituency and in mine. They are dealing with GPs to improve the kind of chronic care they can offer in the community. When the budget is introduced next week, there will be another significant increase in resources for the health service-----

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** What about beds?

**The Taoiseach:** -----and beds too. If this was down to more beds, more staff and more money, we would have solved it a long time ago. We have never spent more money in our health service. We have been adding extra beds for seven years. We have never had more staff. It takes a lot more than additional resources. That is a simple solution. If simple solutions worked, they would have worked by now. The concern I have with the Deputy's proposals is that the budget plans released by Sinn Féin today involve a €5.5 billion increase in spending. The country simply cannot afford that as it heads toward dealing with a potential no-deal Brexit in a few weeks. Sinn Féin is proposing to part-finance its plans through €2 billion in new taxes on savings, incomes, inheritance and just about everything that moves. That is not what people need as we head into a no-deal Brexit either.

**Deputy Ruth Coppinger:** I am sure the Taoiseach will agree that fire safety should be an absolute priority, particularly in all buildings used by the public and by children. Representatives of the community centres in Huntstown and Hartstown in Dublin 15 have written to politicians because considerable sums of money are needed for fire safety works if these invaluable centres are to remain open. Childcare, bingo, youth clubs, Zumba and martial arts are among the facilities and activities provided at these community centres. They are even places of worship. Both of them are in the constituency shared by the Taoiseach and me. I doubt that they are unique. This must be a national issue. The communities of Hartstown and Huntstown have rallied in the past and they will do so again. They took the initiative to establish these centres in the first place, when they organised "buy a brick" campaigns and collected weekly donations. A silver lining to this cloud has been the emergence of younger activists who want to keep these community centres open for their children.

There is only so much bag-packing that can be done, and there are only so many "strictly" events, 5 km races, race nights and quizzes that can be organised. I suggest that at a certain point the State must step in and acknowledge the vital role played by community centres. Margaret Thatcher once said "there's no such thing as society. There are individual men and women ... and people must look after themselves". Is this the Taoiseach's maxim too, or does he appreciate the role of community centres in society? Huntstown community centre provides breakfasts for vulnerable children who attend the school next door. People in the centre help five homeless families to wash their clothes and to get hot meals in the coffee shop. Nobody asked them to do this. Nobody is giving them extra money for doing it. They do it because the housing crisis is hitting hard and they see the need for these services. They get no extra money for plugging these gaps, which stem from Government failures.

The voluntary and community sector was savaged during the recession. Approximately 16,000 jobs were lost. The local community development programme was cut by 35%. I have spoken to a community manager who was notified by email of a cut of €32,000 in 2010. Does the Taoiseach agree that it is time for the State to give some of this money back? It has to be pointed out that many of the works needed now can be attributed to the shoddy building regulations that were overseen by Governments led by Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael. In 2014, work was done on Huntstown community centre to insulate its crèche. The authorities at the centre have now been told that this could ignite and emit toxic fumes in the crèche. The Department

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of Children and Youth Affairs had a fund for fire safety with less than €1 million in it, but that fund has now been closed. As the Taoiseach is aware, school buildings in our community have had to close because of a lack of fire safety. I ask him to do this properly for community centres. Will he establish an audit of all community buildings? Will he fund that audit? Will he set up a national fund from which community centres can draw down funds to enable these works to be carried out? People should not have to pack bags to raise money for fire doors.

**The Taoiseach:** I am very much aware of the issues with fire safety in Hartstown and Huntstown community centres, which are in the constituency shared by the Deputy and me. Some community centres, particularly many of the new ones, are owned and controlled by local authorities, whereas many of the older ones are privately owned. One of them belongs to the Archdiocese of Dublin. In other cases, they are owned by charities. The Department of Rural and Community Development, under the Minister, Deputy Michael Ring, is engaged in this. I understand we have been able to find funding for Hartstown to allow it to carry out its fire safety works. I am not sure if the issue has been entirely sorted, but the work was being done a few months ago. I will look into Huntstown. The idea of having a national fund for community centres is a good one. It does not exist and, given the establishment of the Department for Rural and Community Development, it is something we could consider.

**Deputy Ruth Coppinger:** I am glad the Taoiseach thinks it is a good idea and has accepted that it will be needed because the issue will arise in community centres around the country. It is not possible for all of them to contact Deputies, get involved in individual fundraising and draw down individual amounts of funds. Significant amounts of money are involved. Each centre needs €120,000. As I said, significant funds have been raised by the local community, but that well can only be dipped into to a certain point before it runs dry. I am asking the Taoiseach to make it very clear where community centre fundraising groups and management committees need to go.

The Minister, Deputy Ring, has agreed to supply funds for Hartstown, but it has not yet been made clear how much will be provided, or when or how. The matter is still very much up in the air. Huntstown is at an early stage. These community centres, like most, are not run by local authorities and are not in DEIS areas. Rather, they are in ordinary working class communities where people have done things for themselves and they now need the Taoiseach to provide a commitment that the Government will not let the centres close and will help them by making the pathway by which they can get funds very clear.

**The Taoiseach:** I understand the amount for Hartstown has been settled, but I will check up on that. As the Deputy said, Huntstown is at an early stage and still needs to be worked on.

Funds are available. There is a €1 billion fund for rural development and a €2 billion fund for urban regeneration. Local authorities have community funds, funded through the local property tax, rates and so on. I appreciate that this is an issue which has arisen, and I am sure community centres around the country need not just fire safety but other works, and it is not clear to which fund they should apply. That is a genuine problem and that is why the Deputy's suggestion of establishing a dedicated fund for community centres, perhaps under the auspices of the Department of Rural and Community Development, might be a sensible way to go forward.

**Deputy Michael Harty:** There is great concern in the midwest region about the long-term viability of Shannon Airport in County Clare. The airport is an iconic institution in the midwest

and an essential driver of regional development. Air access is critical to regional development.

Shannon is an essential piece of infrastructure for the west and midwest, both from a tourist and economic point of view. In addition, it is the first port of call for emergency transatlantic landings and is, therefore, an essential part of aviation infrastructure. Shannon Airport, having gained its independence, has not been supported to perform as well as was envisaged. This is having a knock-on effect on the long-term economic stability and sustainability of the midwest region.

There has been a decline in passenger numbers this year, after modest growth over the past few years. Unforeseen events such as the grounding of the Boeing 737 MAX have ended Norwegian transatlantic services. There is, of course, uncertainty around Brexit which is having a disproportionately negative effect on the midwest region as Shannon has connectivity to London but not to a European hub such as Frankfurt or Paris.

Shannon lacks strong Government support in promoting it as a gateway to the west and the wild Atlantic way, but also as a counterbalance to the unhealthy dominance of Dublin Airport. The greatest challenge facing the midwest is that Dublin Airport now commands, or will soon command, a 90% monopoly of aviation traffic in an already congested airport and city. As Shannon loses its connectivity, this damages the economic development of the west which is contrary to project 2040 which sets out a target of 75% growth in regions outside of Dublin. The Government needs to step in to promote and protect Shannon Airport. If that involves changing its status or putting in place other mechanisms to allow it to develop and attract investment, that should be considered. A mechanism needs to be found to support new routes into the region. Tourism Ireland needs to dramatically improve its focus on marketing and supporting the development of new routes into Shannon which would benefit tourism, foreign direct investment and indigenous exporting industries in the area. Has the concern for the future of Shannon Airport and, by extension, the mid-west region filtered through to the Government? If so, what actions is it taking to ensure balanced regional development in the west by supporting the airport?

**The Taoiseach:** As the Deputy is aware, I am a very strong supporter of Shannon Airport, which has a special place in my heart because I was Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport when we decided-----

**Deputy Timmy Dooley:** To finish it.

**The Taoiseach:** -----to make it independent and debt free.

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** Does the Taoiseach use it much?

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** I thought he was going to say he started it.

**The Taoiseach:** We established Shannon Airport as a debt-free independent airport with its own board and governance. I am very proud of being part of that. As the Deputy is aware, the industrial zone around the airport is doing very well, with a significant number of jobs having been created there in recent years. Indeed, the first aircraft maintenance hangar to be built for many years is under construction there. The zone around the airport is doing quite well.

Passenger numbers rose by approximately 6% last year, to 1.9% but, for reasons outlined by the Deputy, they are down this year, which is of concern. At the time of the airport being made



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independent, I set a target of reaching 3 million passengers. We are currently very far off that level. We need to examine how we can support the airport to develop new routes.

We must be mindful that there are other airports of which we must take account, such as Cork Airport, which is having a good year but had bad years in the past, Ireland West Airport Knock, which is doing well, and Waterford Airport, which is keen to get flights again. Dublin Airport receives no Government or State support.

**Deputy Timmy Dooley:** It is given money by Tourism Ireland.

**The Taoiseach:** On the contrary, the Government takes one third of its profits in dividends to pay for services across the country.

We need to see if there is something we can do, particularly for Shannon Airport. Although it has very strong routes to the UK, including Heathrow in particular, and North America, it lacks a route to a significant continental hub such as Frankfurt, Paris, Amsterdam or Copenhagen. If that could be achieved through marketing supports, it would be of real benefit to the airport. In so doing, we need to ensure we get it right. More flights to Malaga, Faro or Mallorca would be of little economic benefit to the region. If one provides route supports to an airport, one must ensure it does not cannibalise another. It is of no benefit to the country as a whole for a route to be moved from Cork Airport to Shannon Airport.

I am interested in this issue. I have been in touch with the chairman of the airport and recently met her in Limerick. We are examining proposals in regard to how we could, in a meaningful way, assist the airport to get more routes.

**Deputy Timmy Dooley:** The Taoiseach could start by getting rid of the chairman.

**Deputy Michael Harty:** I acknowledge that many positive things are happening within the Shannon Group but, unfortunately, the airport is not thriving. What can the Government do to establish a route to a European hub? That is essential for Shannon's connectivity. I do not agree that the board is doing a poor job. It needs to be strengthened rather than abolished or replaced. There have been several calls in the mid-west to replace the board. It is doing significant work but needs to be strengthened, particularly in regard to aviation policy.

I take the point that the Government is not promoting Dublin Airport, but the current economic environment is such that Dublin has a dominant position within the Irish aviation industry. That needs to be countered by a change in Government policy. I ask the Taoiseach and the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport, Deputy Ross, to examine how a change in Government policy could support Shannon Airport. The existing policy is not doing so.

**The Taoiseach:** The existing policy is to not support Dublin Airport. It receives no Government support. In contrast, the Government takes one third of its profits to invest in services all over the country.

**Deputy Timmy Dooley:** Tourism Ireland give its routes support funding.

**The Taoiseach:** However, we support regional airports like in Knock, Waterford and Kerry. Cork and Shannon airports operate as semi-State companies on a commercial basis. In terms of getting to a solution, which is what we both want, to try to secure a mainland European hub route for Shannon, what can be done? The Government and the airport acting together can eliminate airport charges. Airports can do that to incentivise an airline to establish a new route.

They can waive charges for up to five years. The Government can come in with marketing supports to make it more attractive for an airline to open that route. These things have been done in the past and I believe they can be done again. However, there are two crucial things to bear in mind. Ultimately, a new route only succeeds if there is sufficient demand. Many routes fail because there just is not sufficient demand and the Government cannot create demand where it does not exist. We also need to make sure that we do not use taxpayers' money for displacement, subsidising a new route that is just a route move from Cork to Shannon or from Knock to Shannon. That does not make any sense.

Local authorities can get involved. I visited Knock Airport recently and I was enthused at the fact that not just Mayo County Council but seven local authorities in the region got behind that airport, not just with words but with money. I saw that in Waterford also with three local authorities, not just in Waterford, getting behind that airport with money. I encourage the local authorities in the mid-west to consider what has been done in the south east and at Knock and do the same.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** That concludes Leaders' Questions. Leanfaimid leis an gcéad phíosa gnó eile.

### **An tOrd Gnó - Order of Business**

**Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh:** Go raibh maith agat. Tá gnó na seachtaine leagtha síos i dtuairisc Choiste Gnó na Dála, 21 Méan Fómhair 2019.

Don lá inniu, is é atá molta ná No. 14, motion re sittings and business of the Dáil in budget week, and No. 14a, motion re reappointment of five members of the Legal Services Regulatory authority, referral to committee, all to be taken without debate and any division demanded thereon shall be taken immediately; agus No. 38, statements on the status of history in the framework for junior cycle, to conclude within 100 minutes, with the statements of a Minister or Minister of State and the main spokespersons for parties and groups, or a Member nominated in their stead, and shall not exceed ten minutes each, followed by a second round of 15 minutes in total for members of the Government, Fianna Fáil and Sinn Féin to be divided proportionately on a 40:40:20 basis, respectively, with a five minute response by a Minister or Minister of State, and all Members may share time.

I dtaca le gnó na Céadaoin, is é atá molta ná No. 62, Second Stage of the Firearms and Offensive Weapons (Amendment) Bill 2019 shall conclude within two hours; No. 39, statements on industrial action by school secretaries, shall conclude within 100 minutes with a statement of a Minister or Minister of State and the spokespersons for parties and groups, or a Member nominated in their stead, and shall not exceed ten minutes, followed by a second round of 15 minutes in total for members of the Government, Fianna Fáil and Sinn Féin to be divided proportionately on a 40:40:20 basis, respectively, with a five minute response by a Minister or Minister of State, and all Members may share time; agus No. 40, statements on climate action following the UN Climate Action Summit, shall conclude within 100 minutes, with statements of the Minister or a Minister of State and the spokespersons for parties and groups, or a Member nominated in their stead, and shall not exceed ten minutes each, followed by a second round of 15 minutes in total for members of the Government, Fianna Fáil and Sinn Féin to be divided

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proportionately on a 40:40:20 basis, respectively, with a five minute response by a Minister or Minister State, and all Members may share time.

I dtaca le gnó an Déardaoin, tá sé molta go nglacfar le No. 14*b*, motion re reappointment of five members of the Legal Services Regulatory Authority, back from committee, gan díospóireacht.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** There are three proposals to put to the House today. Are the proposals for dealing with today's business agreed to?

**Deputy Bríd Smith:** No.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** They are not agreed.

**Deputy Bríd Smith:** We requested at the Business Committee that there be a discussion on the importation of American fracked gas, otherwise known as the LNGs from Shannon. We made that request absent the knowledge that this Friday the energy regulator in the European Union will sign off on projects of common interest, which include the Shannon LNG project. We asked this question in September but we did not get an answer. We were told it would be sometime in October. As a consequence, there is a committee discussion scheduled but it will take place after the fact that we will, as a nation, have signed off on a project which will import American fracked gas. This gas is extremely dangerous to the people and environment of North America. This House and people generally know little about this dangerous move. We need time for discussion. Are we ignoring the advice of the EU energy regulator who said we should not sign off on this because the cost outweighs the benefits?

**An Ceann Comhairle:** This is on the Order of Business. We cannot have a lengthy statement on the matter.

**Deputy Bríd Smith:** Can we have a discussion before Friday on fracked American gas being imported into this country?

**An Ceann Comhairle:** The Deputy has raised a legitimate point. The Minister is going to respond.

**Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment (Deputy Richard Bruton):** The position is that Shannon LNG has been on the list of projects of common interest for six years. It is likely that it will remain on that list. Gas has been recognised as an important transition fuel, as we move away from oil, peat and coal to renewables. I am considering the terms of a motion tabled by the Deputies.

**Deputy Thomas Byrne:** On a point of order-----

**Deputy Richard Bruton:** I have also signalled-----

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Will the Minister give way to a point of order from Deputy Thomas Byrne?

**Deputy Thomas Byrne:** This is a question about the timing of a debate. Can each of us have the same opportunity to ask a Minister a detailed question?

**Deputy Eoghan Murphy:** The context is important if the Minister is to answer the question.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** This concerns the Business Committee.

**Deputy Thomas Byrne:** Deputy Bríd Smith is taking advantage of the Ceann Comhairle's generosity to get a detailed response. This is about the scheduling of debates.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Hold on Deputy. Can we stop the clock? Deputy Bríd Smith raised a matter which was dealt with at the Business Committee. She has chosen to come in here and raise it again.

**Deputy Bríd Smith:** That is not correct.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Excuse me, Deputy. We dealt with the matter at the Business Committee. We understood it was to be referred to the appropriate Oireachtas committee.

**Deputy Bríd Smith:** That is not fair. We had an agreement in the absence of the knowledge that the projects of common interest should be signed off this Friday.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Will the Deputy resume her seat?

**Deputy Bríd Smith:** What is the point in having a debate on it next week?

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Will the Deputy resume her seat? That is why I asked the Minister to respond to the Deputy. The Deputy's query is reasonable in the circumstances. The Minister has given the Deputy his response.

**Deputy Bríd Smith:** No, he has not.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** He has not given the response the Deputy wants.

**Deputy Bríd Smith:** He just went on about gas as a transitional fuel. We need the debate on Shannon LNG before Friday.

**Deputy Michael Creed:** That is only if the Dáil decides we need it.

**Deputy Bríd Smith:** Otherwise we will be letting people down not just here but internationally.

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** This is a hijack.

*(Interruptions).*

Question, "That the proposal for dealing with Tuesday's business be agreed to," put and declared carried.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Is the proposal for dealing with Wednesday's business agreed to?

**Deputy Bríd Smith:** It is not agreed on the same basis that there needs to be a slot allocated for this discussion.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** The Deputy has made her point.

**Deputy Bríd Smith:** I have the support of other Deputies.

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** Can I just add my voice to that?

**An Ceann Comhairle:** No.

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** The idea that-----

*(Interruptions).*

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Deputy Paul Murphy should resume his seat. I know he has departed his grouping but, to some extent, he is still part of it. We will have only one speaker per group.

Question, “That the proposal for dealing with Wednesday’s business be agreed to,” put and declared carried.

Question put: “That the proposal for dealing with Thursday’s sitting be agreed to.”

<i>The Dáil divided: Tá, 71; Níl, 35; Staon, 0.</i>		
<i>Tá</i>	<i>Níl</i>	<i>Staon</i>
<i>Bailey, Maria.</i>	<i>Adams, Gerry.</i>	
<i>Brassil, John.</i>	<i>Barry, Mick.</i>	
<i>Breathnach, Declan.</i>	<i>Boyd Barrett, Richard.</i>	
<i>Brophy, Colm.</i>	<i>Brady, John.</i>	
<i>Browne, James.</i>	<i>Broughan, Thomas P.</i>	
<i>Bruton, Richard.</i>	<i>Buckley, Pat.</i>	
<i>Burke, Peter.</i>	<i>Collins, Joan.</i>	
<i>Butler, Mary.</i>	<i>Connolly, Catherine.</i>	
<i>Byrne, Catherine.</i>	<i>Coppinger, Ruth.</i>	
<i>Byrne, Thomas.</i>	<i>Crowe, Seán.</i>	
<i>Cahill, Jackie.</i>	<i>Cullinane, David.</i>	
<i>Calleary, Dara.</i>	<i>Ellis, Dessie.</i>	
<i>Carey, Joe.</i>	<i>Funchion, Kathleen.</i>	
<i>Casey, Pat.</i>	<i>Harty, Michael.</i>	
<i>Cassells, Shane.</i>	<i>Healy, Seamus.</i>	
<i>Chambers, Jack.</i>	<i>Kenny, Gino.</i>	
<i>Coveney, Simon.</i>	<i>Kenny, Martin.</i>	
<i>Cowen, Barry.</i>	<i>Martin, Catherine.</i>	
<i>Creed, Michael.</i>	<i>McDonald, Mary Lou.</i>	
<i>Curran, John.</i>	<i>Mitchell, Denise.</i>	
<i>D’Arcy, Michael.</i>	<i>Munster, Imelda.</i>	
<i>Daly, Jim.</i>	<i>Murphy, Catherine.</i>	
<i>Deasy, John.</i>	<i>Murphy, Paul.</i>	
<i>Deering, Pat.</i>	<i>O’Reilly, Louise.</i>	
<i>Doherty, Regina.</i>	<i>O’Sullivan, Jan.</i>	
<i>Donnelly, Stephen.</i>	<i>O’Sullivan, Maureen.</i>	
<i>Dooley, Timmy.</i>	<i>Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.</i>	
<i>Doyle, Andrew.</i>	<i>Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.</i>	
<i>Durkan, Bernard J.</i>	<i>Quinlivan, Maurice.</i>	



Dáil Éireann

<i>English, Damien.</i>	<i>Ryan, Brendan.</i>	
<i>Farrell, Alan.</i>	<i>Ryan, Eamon.</i>	
<i>Fitzmaurice, Michael.</i>	<i>Sherlock, Sean.</i>	
<i>Harris, Simon.</i>	<i>Smith, Bríd.</i>	
<i>Haughey, Seán.</i>	<i>Stanley, Brian.</i>	
<i>Healy-Rae, Danny.</i>	<i>Tóibín, Peadar.</i>	
<i>Healy-Rae, Michael.</i>		
<i>Kehoe, Paul.</i>		
<i>Kyne, Seán.</i>		
<i>Lawless, James.</i>		
<i>MacSharry, Marc.</i>		
<i>Madigan, Josepha.</i>		
<i>Martin, Micheál.</i>		
<i>McConalogue, Charlie.</i>		
<i>McEntee, Helen.</i>		
<i>McGrath, Finian.</i>		
<i>McGrath, Mattie.</i>		
<i>McHugh, Joe.</i>		
<i>McLoughlin, Tony.</i>		
<i>Mitchell O'Connor, Mary.</i>		
<i>Moran, Kevin Boxer.</i>		
<i>Moynihan, Michael.</i>		
<i>Murphy O'Mahony, Margaret.</i>		
<i>Murphy, Eoghan.</i>		
<i>Murphy, Eugene.</i>		
<i>Naughten, Denis.</i>		
<i>Neville, Tom.</i>		
<i>Nolan, Carol.</i>		
<i>O'Brien, Darragh.</i>		
<i>O'Callaghan, Jim.</i>		
<i>O'Connell, Kate.</i>		
<i>O'Dea, Willie.</i>		
<i>O'Keeffe, Kevin.</i>		
<i>O'Loughlin, Fiona.</i>		
<i>O'Rourke, Frank.</i>		
<i>Ó Cuív, Éamon.</i>		
<i>Ring, Michael.</i>		
<i>Rock, Noel.</i>		
<i>Ross, Shane.</i>		
<i>Smyth, Niamh.</i>		
<i>Varadkar, Leo.</i>		
<i>Zappone, Katherine.</i>		

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Seán Kyne and Tony McLoughlin; Níl, Deputies Bríd Smith and Richard Boyd Barrett.

Question declared carried.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I point out to the parties to that particular matter that if it had been brought to our attention prior to this sitting, it could have been dealt with without this time being taken. However, we will now proceed.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** We did not know until the weekend.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** We will proceed now to questions on promised legislation. There are 24 Deputies offering and 25 minutes remaining.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** In the media this morning, specifically the *Irish Daily Mail*, it is outlined that the number of active insurance claims against Dublin City Council has increased by approximately 820% in the past two years. I refer to claims following slips and trips. As the Taoiseach knows, such claims may relate to injuries due to potholes in footpaths and so on. The number of such claims is rising dramatically across the country. It is clear from the statistics that a compensation culture is rife. Councils have been penalised, insurance costs are far too high and the Alliance for Insurance Reform is concerned that motorists, businesses and community groups will continue to be under huge strain unless moves are made to recalibrate injury awards. As the Taoiseach knows, the Judicial Council Act has been passed, but the Minister for Justice and Equality has yet to commence a key section that would provide for the setting of new guidelines by the judges-----

3 o'clock

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I thank the Deputy. His time is up.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** -----for personal injury awards. Can the Taoiseach give an indication as to when the relevant section will be commenced?

**Minister of State at the Department of Finance (Deputy Michael D'Arcy):** The issue is that a request has been made to the Chief Justice in respect of this matter stating that there is no reason the personal injury committee within the judicial council cannot be formed in an informal manner and act in parallel with the establishment of the judicial council to recalibrate the awards in the five primary areas, which would account for approximately 75% of personal injury claims. This can be done by the end of the year if there is a willingness to do it.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** Is it there, though?

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** I notice from the Taoiseach's comments earlier that he has obviously had sight or some account of our pre-budget proposal. If that is the case, he will be aware that we want the Government to make medical cards automatically available to all patients suffering from cancer. As matters stand and as the Taoiseach knows, medical cards are automatically awarded to children suffering from cancer who are under the age of 18. We believe, however, that this should be the case for everyone who has the devastating diagnosis of cancer. As the Taoiseach is aware, a cancer diagnosis can often cause a person to have to reduce his or her hours or even give up work, and medical expenses can increase significantly. Such a diagnosis can be financially as well as emotionally crippling. In that context, I ask the Government to adopt this proposal from Sinn Féin. It is part of a wider budgetary scheme to give families and workers a break, but this cohort in particular is in need of attention.

**The Taoiseach:** That matter was examined by an independent expert group a number of years ago. I was Minister for Health at the time and Ms Kathleen Lynch was a Minister of State in the Department. The expert group concluded that to do what Deputy McDonald proposes would not be the right way forward because, of course, we would then be saying to people with multiple sclerosis or motor neurone disease, for example, that their diseases do not merit automatic eligibility for a medical card, even though they are very severe and debilitating illnesses, but that somebody who may have a curable skin cancer would be automatically entitled to a medical card. If the Deputy can explain why she thinks somebody with a curable skin cancer should be automatically entitled to a medical card and somebody with multiple sclerosis should not, she can tell us.

**Deputy Jan O'Sullivan:** I return to the issue Deputy Harty raised regarding Shannon Airport. While the Taoiseach made some encouraging noises in his response, any replies to parliamentary questions to the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport indicate that Government policy is not to support Shannon, despite the fact that the Government can do so under EU rules on foot of the passenger numbers. Basically, there is an incongruity between aviation policy and planning policy in respect of regional balance and the importance of connectivity to a region. Will the Taoiseach ensure that support is given to Shannon Airport, as he appeared to indicate he might do, particularly as he can do so under European rules? In addition, will he review aviation policy to ensure that it ties in with the policy of achieving more regional balance in this country?

**The Taoiseach:** There are many ways to support airports. The State can aid them through capital expenditure grant, CAPEX, and operational expenditure subvention, OPEX, schemes or it can provide them with route development and marketing supports. That has been done in the past for Shannon and is open for consideration again.

**Deputy Gino Kenny:** In June this year, the Minister for Health introduced a protracted medical access programme for cannabis. The Taoiseach and Members know that this followed a very lengthy process. To date, no cannabis has been prescribed. The medication is in the country but medical practitioners cannot prescribe it. People want to know when the medical cannabis access programme will commence.

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Jim Daly):** The situation is the same as the last time I answered this question for the Deputy. The current arrangement is that a consultant prescribes it as necessary for a patient and the Minister can sign a licence. We are a long way from the position the Deputy seeks where it will be widely available. Work is continuing in the Department on it, but that situation is some time away.

**Deputy Catherine Connolly:** Fiafraím den Aire, nó den Taoiseach, soiléiriú a thabhairt faoin aersheirbhís do na hOileáin Árann agus an síneadh conartha a bhaineann leis. Chomh fada agus atá sé ina sheasamh, an dtabharfaidh an tAire soiléiriú maidir leis an bpróiseas ceannacháin freisin?

**Minister of State at the Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Seán Kyne):** Mar is eol don Teachta, tá síneadh breise ceithre mhí sínithe don chonradh seirbhíse d'Aer Arann, suas go deireadh mí Eanáir 2020. Ina dhiaidh sin, beimid ag breathnú ar chonradh fadtéarmach agus tá muid fós ag brú ar aghaidh leis an iarratas chun an t-aerfort agus na haerstráice sna Mine a cheannach ar son an Stáit.

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** Like many people in rural Ireland I am a little confused by the Fáilte Ireland decision to stop promoting greyhound racing, both nationally and internationally, as part of its itineraries. This is bizarre. It is damaging for the industry and for the livelihoods of people such as small-scale greyhound owners and the many people who benefit from greyhound racing through employment and so forth. I do not know what is going on or who is running the Cabinet. How can Fáilte Ireland be interfered with by a Minister and requested to do this? Imagine if the Guinness Storehouse was taken off the itinerary. This is blackguarding rural Ireland again. It is a Dublin-centric Cabinet that just says to hell with rural Ireland - to hell or to Connacht and leave everything. This is madness. I call on the Taoiseach to reverse this decision and insist that Fáilte Ireland advertise the full range of sporting events we have and not victimise a particular sector.

**Deputy Michael Healy-Rae:** Is the Taoiseach willing to distance himself from statements made by a colleague which I consider to be an attack on our greyhound industry? The people Deputy Mattie McGrath and I speak for adore their greyhounds. They love their greyhounds and their sport. There is nothing wrong with that sport. It is a proud tradition. As with everything, there was an exposure recently of practices that were not right, but nobody condones those. No Member of this House would condone any type of cruelty or the like under any circumstances. It is the opposite. The people we are talking about love their animals and their sport. There is nothing wrong with that sport. Will the Taoiseach distance himself from those comments and show that this Government is not against everything we stand for in rural Ireland?

**Deputy John Brassil:** Is it appropriate for a Minister to interfere with the advertising campaigns of the tourism promotion agencies in this country? I believe it is not. Is the Taoiseach happy with a Minister making such an intervention? To put it in context, last year I and many of my constituency colleagues were seeking support for the Valentia-Renard ferry through a tourism grant from Fáilte Ireland. The same Minister made it very clear that he could not interfere with the decision making process of Fáilte Ireland. Subsequently, the ferry service did not receive the necessary funding. If it is not appropriate to talk to Fáilte Ireland about funding processes, then neither is it appropriate to talk to it about its marketing campaigns. I ask the Taoiseach to distance himself from those remarks.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Deputy Kevin O’Keeffe on the same matter.

**Deputy Kevin O’Keeffe:** It is ironic that the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport, who is causing problems here today, is the colleague of the Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht, Deputy Josepha Madigan, who is also responsible for greyhound racing. This House only recently passed the Greyhound Racing Bill with the backing of Fianna Fáil. While I have some concerns about the RTÉ programme which was somewhat like “Rolling Back the Years”, the way the greyhound industry is being portrayed by some of the Taoiseach’s ministerial colleagues is appalling. How can we have confidence in the Government, having passed the Greyhound Racing Bill? The Minister of State at the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, Deputy Andrew Doyle, has said that he will bring forward amendments to correct animal welfare legislation and here we have a senior Minister undermining the whole industry. I remind the Taoiseach I was in Shelbourne Park last Saturday week and went with friends to Curraheen Park last weekend where the first round of the Laurels was run and there was a full house. More importantly, the prize money has been guaranteed for the next four years because of public support. I ask the Taoiseach please to intervene.

**The Taoiseach:** No one in this House would condone cruelty or mistreatment of animals. I

know we are all agreed on that and that is not what this is about. I understand that the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport, Deputy Ross, asked Fáilte Ireland to consider this matter but it made the decision for itself. For my own part, I go to Shelbourne Park every Christmas and have a very enjoyable evening. I intend to go again this year-----

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** He should bring Deputy Ross with him.

**The Taoiseach:** -----and recommend-----

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** If he can find him.

**The Taoiseach:** -----that anyone who wishes to form an opinion on this should go along to their local meeting and make a decision for themselves as to whether they want to promote it or not.

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** That is not satisfactory-----

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Deputy Eamon Ryan is next.

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** The Minister must ask Fáilte Ireland to reinstate the funding.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** The Deputy should put down a Topical Issue.

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** I am trying to avoid legislative work here but it seems to me that there is a lacuna in our law. The Broadcasting Authority of Ireland, BAI, seems unwilling to take action against Communicorp, which has recently made a decision that certain members of the media, namely Mr. Tom Lyons and Mr. Ian Kehoe from *currency.ie* will be restricted from taking part in any radio programmes on its stations. It is similar to the decision taken two years ago in response to an article by Fintan O'Toole which saw journalists from *The Irish Times* banned from the same stations. The recent case is, they say, because of commercial rivalry. My sense, having talked to every grouping in the House today, is that every party is in agreement that this is egregious and has a poor effect on our democracy. We need a free press that is open to debate and allows different voices to be heard. Whether it is for commercial reasons, an editorial view or the fact that a certain owner might not like what is written in a newspaper, to ban journalists from radio stations is not what we want. In order to avoid legislation, I ask the Taoiseach to join the other groupings and leaders in this House in writing a letter to Communicorp asking it to reverse the decision in both cases and to stand up for press freedom. I am keen to hear the Taoiseach's views on that.

**The Taoiseach:** I thank Deputy Ryan for raising this matter which we have discussed in the past. My sentiments are the same as his on this matter. I believe in free speech and I believe in a free press. I do not believe anyone should be banned from the airwaves - journalists or citizens - except for very good reasons. Those reasons should be something like incitement to hatred but I do not think that anyone should be banned from the radio, the TV or from any publication solely based on who is his or her employer. I would be happy to join the Deputy in that.

**Deputy Bernard J. Durkan:** The Citizens' Assembly has facilitated debate on a number of issues over the past number of years and continues to do so. What is the current position in regard to the gender discrimination proposal, which is about to come before the assembly? What is likely to happen in that regard in the future?

**The Taoiseach:** I thank Deputy Durkan for raising this matter. Today the Cabinet approved



the appointment of Ms Catherine Day as chairperson of the new Citizens' Assembly on gender equality. The secretariat is already established so the next step now is to select the citizens. It is intended that the assembly will meet for the first time before the end of the year. I extend the thanks of the House to Ms Catherine Day, former head of the European Commission Service, for agreeing to chair the assembly.

**Deputy Charlie McConalogue:** My question is for the Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government, Deputy English, and relates to the lack of progress on the establishment of a mica redress scheme for the 5,000 home owners in Donegal whose houses are affected by mica in defective blocks. The Government has treated these homeowners disgracefully. Next Tuesday marks the first anniversary of an announcement that a scheme would be established and €25 million provided. The promise at that time was that the scheme's terms and conditions would be finalised and published by last Christmas, with work beginning on repairing the homes at the start of this year. As of now the scheme's terms still have not been published. It is absolutely unacceptable. Can the Minister update the House today on when the scheme's terms will be published, when homes will be fixed and if additional funding will be provided in the budget to accompany the €25 million fund announced last year, not one euro of which has been spent yet?

**Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Damien English):** I sent a letter to Deputy McConalogue today on this matter so I will give him a short answer now. We agreed last year to allocate money in order to show our commitment to addressing this issue, to be fair to all of the homeowners affected. We did that, even though the scheme was not fully worked out at that stage. That work has been ongoing since then. As the Deputy knows, there have been some very good meetings between officials in the Department and the local authorities in Donegal and Mayo about the finer details of the scheme. That work is very close to its conclusion and the scheme will be able to start in the weeks ahead. That work had to go on and the Deputy was well aware that last year when the money was allocated that the scheme was not fully ready but we wanted to make sure that the money was there so that we could begin work.

**Deputy Fiona O'Loughlin:** I wish to refer to the decision that was announced this morning in relation to Oughterard and the fact that the tender for a direct provision centre has been withdrawn. This is incredibly worrying, particularly following on from what happened in Roskealy and Merville. At the end of the day, the direct provision system is far from ideal. It was introduced 20 years ago as a temporary measure. That said, it is what we have on offer for our asylum seekers and refugees, a third of whom are children. Given the current overcrowding in many of our direct provision centres and the fact that almost 1,500 asylum seekers are in emergency accommodation, I am really worried about the message that Ireland is sending out in the context of the last three centres that have been considered. Where do we go from here?

**An Ceann Comhairle:** The Deputy's time is up.

**Deputy Fiona O'Loughlin:** One of the key issues raised in Oughterard was a lack of consultation. I agree that there should be consultation with the people of an area, with schools, doctors and so on. That should happen. I brought this up with the Minister myself in the context of direct provision in my area. Where do we go from here?

**The Taoiseach:** I thank the Deputy and share her sentiments. Direct provision is far from ideal but we will never be in a position, nor will any other country, to provide a house or an

apartment to everyone who comes into the country as an asylum seeker. That is just not possible and no country does that. The sad reality is that the alternative to direct provision is what happens in France, Germany, Greece and Italy, which is camps and containers. I hope we never get to that point in Ireland. Part of the solution is proper consultation with communities. That is important and it has worked in places around the country. We must also explain to people what direct provision is because some have a misconception about it. It is not compulsory and people can leave at any time. They do not need to sign in and sign out. Many asylum seekers work and provide their own accommodation and many stay with friends and relatives. Direct provision is accommodation, light, board, food and spending money. We need to consult with communities but we also need people to understand direct provision better. We also need to explain to people that we will never be in a position to give everyone who walks into the country a house or an apartment. That is not feasible. The alternative, which is camps and containers, is much worse and I hope it never happens.

**Deputy David Cullinane:** Two weeks ago, when the Taoiseach was absent from the House, I raised the issue of the south-east palliative care centre. The matter was addressed by the Minister for Health, who promised to meet a delegation of local Members. So far, he has not done so despite several requests from those Members. This centre cost in question more than €30 million to build. Capital funding was allocated. It involves 72 acute beds in one part of the building but the bottom two floors provide, for the first time, a palliative care service for the people of the south east. Two weeks ago, local Oireachtas Members, including the Minister of State at the Department of Business, Enterprise and Education, Deputy Halligan, and Senator Paudie Coffey, were given a tour of the centre. It is a fantastic facility that is equipped and ready to be opened but it has no staff. To date, funding has not been provided to open the facility. Will the Taoiseach indicate when that will happen? The people of the south east are scandalised that this unit has been built and yet cannot be opened because there is no funding available for staff.

**Deputy Jim Daly:** I thank Deputy Cullinane for the query. As he is aware, the cost to build the facility was €31.6 million and the annual running cost is €5 million. We will consider whether it is possible to include the centre in the upcoming Estimates. The HSE has provided €300,000 this year to try to prepare the building to be opened. The Minister for Health will meet Deputy Cullinane and others from the south east on Thursday and is prepared to discuss the matter further with them. It is an initiative that will be considered when the Estimates are being prepared.

**Deputy Maurice Quinlivan:** There is a reference on page 7 of the programme for Government to wanting a green Ireland to inform all areas of policy and having one of the cleanest, safest environments in the world. The latter is something with which nobody can disagree. Residents of my city, Limerick, are extremely concerned that the ambition in the community is about to go up in smoke. Irish Cement was recently given permission to burn tyres and other rubbish at an incinerator in Castlemungret outside the city. Castlemungret is a suburb in which are located homes, sports fields and community facilities. The local community is completely opposed to this plan and we are extremely concerned about the impact it will have on the area and on people's health. Will the Government intervene and ensure that this plan does not go ahead? I would appreciate a response from the Taoiseach or the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment, Deputy Bruton.

**Deputy Richard Bruton:** Licensing of a plant such as that to which the Deputy refers falls within the remit of the independent Environmental Protection Agency. It makes decisions on

applications and polices compliance with the conditions that it imposes on applications. It does not fall to the political system or to the Minister to make decisions on these matters, which have to be based on scientific evaluation and scrutiny of the individual application.

**Deputy Margaret Murphy O'Mahony:** Will the Taoiseach find out the completion date for the southern bypass near Bandon, my home town? This bypass has remained incomplete for many years. If completed, it would substantially enhance the town of Bandon and the general area of west Cork. I stress the importance of a northern relief road being built in Bandon. It is important that the northern relief road would be completed in one phase rather than two because that would make it worse in the end by causing total gridlock in Kilbrogan Hill.

**The Taoiseach:** I know that both Deputy Murphy O'Mahony and the Minister of State, Deputy Daly, take real interest in these road projects. I will obtain an update from the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport and pass it on to the Deputy.

**Deputy Margaret Murphy O'Mahony:** I thank the Taoiseach.

**Deputy Thomas Byrne:** Will the Taoiseach or the Minister, Deputy McHugh, outline the position of the Department of Education and Skills regarding school secretaries and indicate whether it will engage in meaningful negotiations as required under the Workplace Relations Commission in 2015 and scheduled for this year, although this has not happened?

**Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh):** We are pulling together information now to try to establish how many are involved and what is required. I have had meetings with my officials about the matter and met representatives from Fórsa regarding other matters three months ago. In my first week as Minister, I raised this issue in the Dáil. It has been outstanding since 1978. There have been 23 Ministers responsible for education since then. I am the 23rd of those Ministers and I have some illustrious predecessors, including the current leader of Fianna Fáil. Bertie Ahern may also have held the position. This issue has not been addressed since 1978. We will deal with it through the mechanisms available in the pay talks. It is an outstanding issue that needs to be addressed and I appreciate the Deputy raising it.

**Deputy Pat Buckley:** My question relates to the commitment in respect of disabilities in the programme for Government and is directed to the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport and Minister of State with responsibility for disability. Why have their Departments not taken a more proactive role in supporting Youghal woman Sinéad Kane to compete in the world championship ultra-running event in France this month. Sinéad has completed seven marathons in seven days despite being visually impaired but because she requires a guide runner, she has been excluded from competing in the world championships because she has a disability. I wrote to the Minister and the Minister of State but did not receive a reply. Will they meet with Sinéad Kane to try to resolve this issue? Will they write to Athletics Ireland to request that it to be more proactive in supporting Irish runners, regardless of whether they are disabled?

**The Taoiseach:** I am afraid that I am not familiar with the issue but I will mention it to the Ministers of State, Deputies Finian McGrath and Brendan Griffin, that Deputy Buckley raised it in the Chamber. I will ask them to reply to the correspondence to which the Deputy refers.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Deputies Danny Healy-Rae, Neville, Breathnach and Michael Moynihan have not been reached. They will be given priority tomorrow.

**Noise Pollution (Management and Abatement) Bill 2019: First Stage**

**Deputy Thomas P. Broughan:** I move:

That leave be granted to introduce a Bill entitled an Act to provide for certain matters relating to the management and abatement of noise pollution and for that purpose to amend the Aircraft Noise (Dublin Airport) Regulation Act 2019 and the Environmental Protection Agency Act 1992 and to provide for related matters.

I thank the Ceann Comhairle for the brief opportunity to introduce the Noise Pollution (Management and Abatement) Bill 2019. The Environmental Protection Agency, EPA, defines noise as “unwanted sound” or “sound that is loud, unpleasant or unexpected” and “that can eventually cause disturbance, impairment or damage to health”. Noise has been identified as one of the most significant environmental causes of ill health by the World Health Organization, second only to air pollution. Increasing knowledge of the health impacts of noise pollution indicates a greater risk of stroke, depression, high blood pressure, heart disease and many other serious medical conditions. All Deputies have probably been contacted by constituents enduring noise pollution from defective alarms, barking dogs, construction sites, nearby factories and businesses, open air events, very loud music and from transport, including vehicle traffic, trains and aircraft.

I was very supportive of the Noise Bill 2006, introduced by Ciarán Cuffe, now an MEP who was then a Deputy. However, his Bill was never progressed by the Green Party in government. As with the road traffic legislation, a modern consolidation of legislation and regulations governing noise pollution is necessary. This Bill began as an effort to fill the legislative gaps regarding serious noise pollution. I am deeply grateful to the staff of the Office of Parliamentary Legal Advisers, particularly Ms Niamh McKenna, for their extraordinary support and guidance in researching noise pollution law and framing this Bill. Work and discussions on the Bill took place against the background of the passage of the Aircraft Noise (Dublin Airport) Regulation Act 2019 through the Oireachtas. As we examined the legislative environment regarding noise in Ireland, we felt that the missing pieces of the jigsaw of regulations were in the key areas of enforcement, transparency and accountability and what work was actually being done in the management and abatement of noise pollution by the local authorities and other designated noise control agencies.

Section 106 of the Environmental Protection Agency Act 1992 established the EPA as the regulator of noise pollution. EU Directive 2002/49/EC, the environmental noise directive, was implemented here by means of the Environmental Noise Regulations 2006, which again appointed the EPA as the national authority, the oversight body to which local authorities must report. Section 5(3) of the European Communities (Environmental Noise) Regulations 2018 states that noise regulating powers in respect of local authorities may include local authorities to which noise mapping functions are assigned.

This Noise Pollution (Management and Abatement) Bill builds on this legislation and reaffirms the role of the EPA to regulate noise pollution and to report to Ministers and to this House. In the Aircraft Noise (Dublin Airport) Regulation Act 2019, despite strong objections from Opposition Members, including Clare Daly, who is now an MEP, Deputy Brendan Ryan and me, based on possible serious conflicts of interest, the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport, Deputy Ross, appointed Fingal County Council as the competent authority for monitoring noise at Dublin Airport, including setting the noise abatement objective for the facility. Section 2 of

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this Bill appoints the EPA as the body which will set the noise abatement objective in place of Fingal County Council. We argue that this amendment of the Aircraft Noise (Dublin Airport) Regulation Act 2019 is in the interests of the wider community potentially affected by noise at the airport. There must be separate bodies: one tasked with setting the noise abatement objective and another tasked with attaining or reaching it. Under section 4 of our Bill, Fingal County Council, as the competent authority, must submit a report to the Environmental Protection Agency on the activities at Dublin Airport. It is already obliged to undertake such a report pursuant to the Aircraft Noise (Dublin Airport) Regulation Act 2019. Reports under sections 2 and 4 must be submitted to the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport and the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and the Environment and laid before the Oireachtas.

The Bill also addresses environmental noise more generally. This may include noise from roads, rail, commercial activities, construction, waste and energy facilities, and neighbourhood nuisances. Under sections 5 and 6, which deal with reviews of noise control measures and reporting on noise pollution management and abatement activities respectively, the Environmental Protection Agency Act 1992 is also amended to provide for reports to the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment at least every three years on the operation of the existing section 106 and the new section 108 of that Act, with regard to the performance of the EPA in managing noise pollution and on its noise abatement activities.

Of all aspects of environmental pollution, noise pollution, which can have such a destructive impact on citizens' lives, has probably received the least reporting from the Environmental Protection Agency over the years. This modest Bill, which we hope to publish tomorrow, seeks to restore the Environmental Protection Agency to a central role in all aspects of regulating noise pollution and in the implementation of the European Commission's environmental noise regulations of 2018. I commend the Bill to the House.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Is the Bill opposed?

**Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach (Deputy Seán Kyne):** No.

Question put and agreed to.

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

**Deputy Thomas P. Broughan:** I move: "That the Bill be taken in Private Members' time."

Question put and agreed to.

### **Sittings and Business of Dáil: Motion**

**Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach (Deputy Seán Kyne):** I move:

That, notwithstanding anything in Standing Orders, and unless the Dáil shall otherwise order, the following arrangements shall apply in relation to the sittings of the Dáil on 8th, 9th and 10th October, 2019:

(1) (i) there shall be no Order of Business or questions on promised legislation within



the meaning of Standing Order 28 on Tuesday or Wednesday, respectively, and questions on promised legislation shall take place on Thursday for 30 minutes;

(ii) Leaders' Questions shall not be taken on Tuesday, and shall be taken on Wednesday and Thursday after Oral Questions as the second item of business, and in accordance with the Schedule to this Resolution;

(iii) Oral Questions under Standing Order 38(1)(b) shall be taken on Wednesday and Thursday at 10 a.m.; otherwise no Oral Questions under Standing Order 38(1) shall be taken: save that written questions under Standing Order 42(2) shall appear on the Order Paper and be answered in the normal way;

(iv) topical issues under Standing Order 29A shall not be taken on Tuesday or Wednesday and shall be taken on Thursday as the last item of business, when the Ceann Comhairle may select a maximum of six;

(v) leave may not be sought under Standing Order 34 to adjourn the Dáil on a specific and important matter of public interest;

(vi) private members' business shall not be taken;

(vii) no Committee report shall be taken on Thursday evening under Standing Order 140(2);

(viii) all divisions shall be taken immediately;

(ix) the Dáil shall sit at 1 p.m. on Tuesday, and at 10 a.m. on Wednesday and Thursday;

(x) on Wednesday, the Dáil shall adjourn not later than 11 p.m.;

(xi) on Thursday, the Dáil shall adjourn not later than 6 p.m.;

(xii) there shall be no block voting time within the meaning of Standing Order 70(2) on Thursday; and

(xiii) any votes claimed on Thursday, 3rd October, 2019, after the block voting time shall be taken at the block voting time on Thursday, 17th October, 2019;

(2) in relation to the sitting of the Dáil on Tuesday, 8th October, 2019, the following arrangements shall apply:

(i) the Dáil shall sit later than 10 p.m., the motion for the General Financial Resolution shall be moved not later than 12 midnight, and upon the moving of the General Financial Resolution, the Dáil shall adjourn forthwith; and

(ii) the business to be transacted shall be the Budget Statement and Financial Motions by Deputy Pascal Donohoe, Minister for Finance and Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, and the following arrangements shall apply:

(a) the statement of Minister Donohoe shall not exceed one hour;

(b) following the statement of the Minister, statements may be made by the spokespersons on Finance and Public Expenditure and Reform for Fianna Fáil,

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Sinn Féin, the Labour Party, Solidarity-People Before Profit, Independents 4 Change, the Rural Independent Group, and the Social Democrats-Green Party Group, who shall be called upon in that order, and whose statements shall not exceed an aggregate of 60 minutes in each case, and such members may share their time; and

(c) following the statements, the sitting shall be suspended for 30 minutes, and on the resumption of the sitting, a Minister or Minister of State shall move an allocation of time motion for the Financial Motions; and

(3) in relation to the sittings of the Dáil on Wednesday and Thursday, 9th October and 10th October, 2019, the business to be transacted shall be the business outlined in this Resolution along with the resumed debate on the General Financial Resolution, to which the following arrangements shall apply:

(i) the speech of the Taoiseach and of the leaders of Fianna Fáil, Sinn Féin, the Labour Party, Solidarity-People Before Profit, Independents 4 Change, the Rural Independent Group, and the Social Democrats-Green Party Group, or members nominated in their stead, who shall be called upon in that order, shall not exceed 30 minutes in each case; and such members may share their time;

(ii) the suspension of sitting under Standing Order 25(1) shall take place on the conclusion of speeches by leaders, or a member nominated in their stead, and shall continue until 5.30 p.m.;

(iii) the speech of each other member subsequently called upon, who may share his or her time, shall not exceed 20 minutes in each case; and

(iv) when there are no further members offering, the debate shall adjourn, and, in any event, on Thursday 10th October, 2019, the debate shall adjourn not later than 4.48 p.m.

#### SCHEDULE

Wednesday	Thursday
1 Fianna Fáil	Fianna Fáil
2 Sinn Féin	Sinn Féin
3 Labour Party	Independents 4 Change
4 Social Democrats-Green Party Group	Rural Independent Group
5 Fianna Fáil	Sinn Féin
6 Labour Party	Social Democrats-Green Party Group

Question put and agreed to.

**Proposed Approval of Reappointment of Members of the Legal Services Regulatory Authority: Referral to Joint Committee**

**Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach (Deputy Seán Kyne):** I move:

That the proposal that Dáil Éireann, noting that the Government agreed on 1st October, 2019, to propose, for the approval of Dáil Éireann, the re-appointment of the persons concerned to be members of the Legal Services Regulatory Authority, and pursuant to sections 9 and 10 of the Legal Services Regulation Act 2015, approves the reappointment, with effect from 1st October, 2019, by the Government of the following persons to be members of the Legal Services Regulatory Authority, who shall hold office for a further period not exceeding three years from the date of his or her appointment in accordance with that Act: Sara Moorhead, Geraldine Clarke, Stephen Fitzpatrick, Dermott Jewell and Deirdre McHugh, be referred to the Joint Committee on Justice and Equality, in accordance with Standing Order 84A(4)(k), which, not later than 3rd October, 2019, shall send a message to the Dáil in the manner prescribed in Standing Order 90, and Standing Order 89(2) shall accordingly apply.

Question put and agreed to.

**Ceisteanna - Questions**

**Taoiseach's Meetings and Engagements**

1. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his contact and engagements with the British Prime Minister, Mr. Boris Johnson. [37276/19]

2. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his meeting with the British Prime Minister, Mr. Boris Johnson. [37373/19]

3. **Deputy Micheál Martin** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his meeting with Prime Minister Johnson; the issues that were discussed; and his plans to hold additional meetings and or engagements. [37403/19]

4. **Deputy Brendan Howlin** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his meeting with the British Prime Minister. [37444/19]

5. **Deputy Joan Burton** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his recent meeting with Prime Minister Johnson and the issues discussed. [37564/19]

6. **Deputy Micheál Martin** asked the Taoiseach if he discussed the Operation Yellowhammer paper with Prime Minister Johnson when they met or since 9 September 2019. [37688/19]

7. **Deputy Eamon Ryan** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his recent meeting with Prime Minister Johnson. [38502/19]

8. **Deputy Joan Burton** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his recent meeting with Prime Minister Johnson at the United Nations. [39455/19]

9. **Deputy Michael Moynihan** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on reassurances he sought and received from Prime Minister Johnson regarding the Good Friday Agreement and that there would not be a need for checks or controls at the Border; and if he discussed alternatives to same. [39629/19]

10. **Deputy Michael Moynihan** asked the Taoiseach if Prime Minister Johnson indicated when the UK Government will be in a position to produce its alternative suggestions for a possible deal to the EU in order that they can review same before the EU Council meeting on 17 October 2019. [39630/19]

11. **Deputy Micheál Martin** asked the Taoiseach if he has spoken with Prime Minister Johnson since he met him in the United States of America; and the issues that were discussed regarding Brexit; if a written proposal will come from the UK to the EU in the near future. [39892/19]

**The Taoiseach:** I propose to take Questions Nos. 1 to 11, inclusive, together.

I have met with Prime Minister Johnson twice in recent weeks. We had a meeting in New York on Tuesday, 24 September, when we were both at the United Nations General Assembly. We previously met in Government Buildings in Dublin on 9 September. Brexit was, of course, the main topic of conversation on both occasions.

While we both acknowledged that formal negotiations take place between the EU and the UK through the EU task force, TF50, we agreed that there was also merit in us having direct discussion. We confirmed that we both want to see an agreement between the European Union and the United Kingdom. Prime Minister Johnson explained the changes he is seeking while I set out our view that the withdrawal agreement represents a compromise and the best basis for agreement. The discussions were useful, but there is still a very wide gap between the EU and the UK in terms of reaching an agreement. We also discussed Northern Ireland and our shared commitment to the Good Friday Agreement and the restoration of the power sharing institutions in Northern Ireland and the North-South bodies.

While we did not specially discuss the details of Operation Yellowhammer, we both acknowledged the disruption that a no-deal Brexit would cause for Ireland, Britain, and Northern Ireland. Our discussions were not focused specifically on security in the Border region but that is, of course, a major concern for all of us and one of the reasons we need to secure an acceptable agreement. I urged the Prime Minister to accelerate engagement with the European Commission. The UK has yet to put forward any credible proposals and I urge its Government to bring forward formal proposals as a matter of urgency, given the limited time that is now available.

In addition to our meetings, we have spoken twice by phone, on 30 July and 19 August. At our meeting in New York, we agreed to meet again in the near future and that our officials would keep in close contact.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** I thank the Taoiseach. If his discussions were directed toward bringing some logic, common sense, or rationality to the British Prime Minister, I am afraid he has failed in his mission. For a British Prime Minister to claim that he or she cares about the Good Friday Agreement and peace and security on this island on the one hand while floating a non-paper which very provocatively - almost maliciously - envisages a scenario that would be deeply destabilising simply does not add up. From here on in, in the discussions the

Taoiseach has with the British Prime Minister, he needs to remain very firm and very focused. Discussions between Dublin and London cannot in any way be used as a mechanism to dilute or step back from the bottom-line requirements of this island.

Like the Taoiseach, I have been very clear in my engagements with the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland and with the British Prime Minister that any proposals for customs checks are unacceptable and provocative because such checks effectively represent a hardening of the Border, which in turn is an abdication of the British Government's general responsibilities in respect of good neighbourliness and economic and social stability, but also in respect of the Good Friday Agreement. I put it to the Taoiseach that it would be very dangerous for us to go down a political or diplomatic cul-de-sac that might pit the Border against the integrity of the Single Market. We should not have to make a choice between the Single Market on the one hand and the Good Friday Agreement on the other.

In the course of the Taoiseach's discussions with the Prime Minister, as he shared his inner thoughts did he indicate the contents of this non-paper, which I acknowledge he distanced himself from this morning?

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** Boris Johnson's non-paper proposal for a string of customs posts on either side of the Border has been rightly dismissed by everybody as completely unacceptable. It demonstrates the total disregard, if not contempt, Boris Johnson holds for the economic and political well-being of this country. I find it alarming that the Taoiseach says that this is totally unacceptable and that this proposal could not possibly be considered in the context of trying to do a deal, but that he hints he will do the same thing Mr. Johnson is proposing in the event of a no-deal Brexit. The Taoiseach's proposals for a no-deal Brexit are very similar to Mr. Johnson's proposals for a deal, that is to say, that there will be checks somewhere in order to protect the integrity of the Single Market. I put it to the Taoiseach that this is not really good enough. While border checks imposed by Boris Johnson are unacceptable and threaten the peace and stability of this island, so do border checks imposed by anybody in any context, regardless of whether there is a deal.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** Hear, hear.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** We need to absolutely, categorically rule out border checks or anything else that will move us towards a harder border or that will damage the all-Ireland economy. The Taoiseach needs to say that very categorically to Boris Johnson, but also to the European Union.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** In just over four weeks the latest deadline for Brexit will pass. Anyone paying even the most basic attention will agree that we have so far seen zero evidence that Prime Minister Johnson's Government in London is actually trying to reach a deal or that it is acting in good faith. Is the Taoiseach satisfied that the British Government is acting in good faith with regard to wanting to avoid a no-deal Brexit? It seems the Brexiteers care little about the impact of Brexit on Northern Ireland. With regard to electoral proceedings in Britain, a general election is imminent. It seems the pre-eminent issue for the Tory Party is to dominate the pro-Brexit vote in that election and to marginalise the Brexit Party. That is its starting point in these negotiations. One of the most striking developments so far concerns the number of areas in which there is a point-blank refusal to explain what is being planned and the impact of various options.



Earlier this year, we came within weeks of a no-deal situation for which Ireland was manifestly not ready. A large amount of work has taken place in recent months. This was completed in other countries before March. We still have no idea what will happen on 31 October if Mr. Boris Johnson and Mr. Dominic Cummings get their way and if Britain crashes out of the European Union. We all saw the leaks of the non-papers yesterday. Everybody knows they are not credible at one level and involve what is, in effect, a hard border. They would take a long period to put in place and rely on technology that is simply not in place. The proposals show ignorance of the reality of our Border and, equally, disinterest in how peace was slowly built on this island. Of equally great concern - Deputy Boyd Barrett alluded to this - is that the emerging reports on the non-papers and the British proposals are a mirror image of what we propose to put in place in the case of no deal. The Taoiseach said there will be checks near the Border, back from it. The Tánaiste has said likewise. He said they will not be on the Border, that they may not be near the Border and that they will be some distance back.

The Taoiseach has said he wants to be transparent with the Irish people. He has had discussions with the European Commission. It is becoming a little lacking in credibility to suggest these are not concluded or that both sides have not some outline as to what will happen. I take the Taoiseach's point that in the context of negotiations and things coming to the wire, he has difficulty in showing all his cards. I can understand that but it seems we are down to a choice. Is that the case? Is there another formula being developed? I refer to a choice involving Northern Ireland staying within the customs union at the point of the exit deal, or no deal. Is that what could form part of the negotiations yet to take place, if they are to take place?

It seems the UK-wide backstop is something the UK Prime Minister has clearly set his face against. Therefore, one is back to the Northern Ireland backstop. There was some talk about a consultative role earlier this month for the Northern Ireland Assembly in terms of regulatory alignment and taking on new EU regulations. That was coupled with the idea of Northern Ireland somehow remaining within the customs union. The British Prime Minister and DUP have publicly hardened their position on the customs union idea, whereby Northern Ireland would remain within the customs union. It seems this is the key area for resolution or no resolution. The choice seems to be falling down to that. Is that a fair assessment? I am basing my views on public discourse and the commentary. I am very conscious, and we should all be conscious, that there is a desire on the part of the British Government to create all sorts of hype and angst between now and 31 October.

**Deputy Jan O'Sullivan:** Clearly a chaotic Brexit, including a hard border, is now on the cards. Only an election or progressive alliance of Opposition parties can now stop a no-deal Brexit and seek an extension from the European Union. Last week, my party leader, Deputy Brendan Howlin, attended the UK Labour Party conference and met a number of the key stakeholders, including Mr. Jeremy Corbyn. Mr. Corbyn has repeatedly promoted the idea of putting whatever exit deal is negotiated back to the people again in a referendum, which would also keep the remain option on the ballot paper. If the Labour Party is in government in the United Kingdom, a fresh referendum of the people will be held, with the option to remain on the ballot paper. The EU must make it clear that it would enable such an extension to allow the British democratic process to proceed and conclude. Can the Taoiseach confirm that his Government is open to the granting of such an extension? Will he stress this need to our EU partners?

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** It seems the British Prime Minister, whom I heard demand on the radio this morning that British sovereignty be recognised in any deal, is disregarding the constitutional ambiguity stitched into the Good Friday Agreement. I refer to ambiguity in the

sense of having the ability to swap or share identity. That is a real tragedy at this moment. The Prime Minister made much play on the radio this morning of phytosanitary arrangements and of not having checks on animal movements. Could the Taoiseach confirm whether this one area would require further arrangements? Would there have to be some sort of check on animal products coming from Britain into Northern Ireland, whatever about the rest of any potential deal? On a related matter, is there agreement, in regard to that deal, on the common environmental standards needed in agriculture and other areas in terms of the nitrates directive, the water framework directive and the habitats directive? These are all transboundary measures that relate to the agriculture issue. How can it be said the agriculture sector is being looked after if there is no recognition of common jurisdiction in how the environmental rules are managed?

Is there any communication on or understanding of what the Labour Party's proposal might be in the deal it says it might like to strike should it take over control of the House of Commons or the UK Government in the end? Historically, I understand it was supportive of the backstop but then joined the Tory Party in saying it was a key part of the problem with the current withdrawal agreement. Has the Labour Party made it in any way clear to the Irish Government what it would do differently? That might influence what happens in the next few weeks.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** We have used up most of the 15 minutes for this group. The third group contains just two questions. Would it be conceivable to take five minutes from that and use it for the Taoiseach's response to this group? Is that agreed? Agreed.

**The Taoiseach:** I thank the Deputies for their questions. Once again, I welcome the fact that Prime Minister Johnson has distanced himself from the proposals for customs posts on either side of the Border between Ireland and Northern Ireland. The withdrawal agreement, in the view of the Government, remains the best way forward but we are, of course, willing to listen to proposals that achieve the same objectives, that is, avoiding a hard border between the North and South, allowing the all-island economy to continue to thrive, and ensuring that North-South co-operation can continue as it does now, with free movement of goods and people north and south of the Border.

In the meetings and telephone calls I have had with Prime Minister Johnson, we did not discuss the non-papers or their content specifically but obviously we discussed the kinds of issues that arise in them, including customs, sanitary and phytosanitary controls, the Single Market and all those issues pertinent to the non-papers, which I still have not seen.

It is a fact that if the United Kingdom leaves the European Union without a deal, it will do so on World Trade Organization, WTO, terms. There are some enthusiastic hard Brexiters who want to do exactly that. They want to leave without a deal and on WTO terms but if that happens, it will be their decision, not ours and certainly not that of the European Union. Those concerned will be responsible for any consequences that flow from it. If it happens, as the Tánaiste and I have said, we will not allow ourselves to be dragged out of the Single Market also. Our jobs, economy, livelihoods and industry are all dependent on our remaining a full member of the Single Market of 450 million people in 27 countries.

Perhaps I misunderstood Deputy Boyd Barrett, who seemed to be suggesting that we would allow ourselves to end up in the worst of all worlds and have the UK leave without a deal, involving customs and inspection posts on the UK side, and find ourselves out of the Single Market, facing checks in Rotterdam, Zeebrugge and Calais and tariffs and checks on our trade from north to south and east to west and with the Single Market. We certainly cannot allow

ourselves, out of belligerence, to end up surrounded by a border on all sides. That is certainly not a situation we want to be in. If we think about it from first principles, we will realise that there have really only ever been five ways of avoiding a hard border between North and South. The first option is a united Ireland-----

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** That is the best option.

**The Taoiseach:** -----for which there is not a majority at present. The second option is that we join the United Kingdom.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** That is a terrible option.

**The Taoiseach:** I do not think anyone in this House would entertain that option. The third option is for the UK to remain in the EU, which it does not want to do at present. The fourth option is for the UK to stay in the Single Market and the customs union. This is known as the Norway-plus option and has been rejected by the current UK Government. The fifth option is the backstop or something like it. We still think that the fifth option is the best one to be pursued. We have always been open to the idea that there might be alternative arrangements that would achieve the same objective. We have yet to see such arrangements. If the non-papers that were leaked the other day reflect what is meant by “alternative arrangements”, those alternative arrangements look very like a hard border to me.

The Irish Government is absolutely open to a request from the UK Government for an extension, should it come. I think there would be a strong view across the EU that if there is an extension, it would have to be for a very good reason - perhaps to facilitate a referendum or a general election, which would give us a change of policy, more clarity on policy or a parliament that is able to ratify a deal of some sort.

I am not an expert on SPS checks, but I am starting to become one, bit by bit. My understanding is that there are SPS checks into Northern Ireland already because we are treated as a single phytosanitary zone. We want to avoid SPS checks between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland.

The last time I met representatives of the British Labour Party was when I met Jeremy Corbyn and his team some months ago. They are pursuing their own model, which they call Single Market 2.0. This is a different model for leaving the EU while having a close relationship with the customs union and the Single Market, still having a say in the customs union and aligning to some European standards, but not others like state aid and competition. Again, it is a kind of cake-and-eat-it solution that probably would not fly at European level.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** I asked a question about the choices. Is it a question of the customs issue versus no deal? Is that where we were at?

**The Taoiseach:** No, because we do not have an agreement on regulatory alignment either.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** The Taoiseach has dodged my question.

**The Taoiseach:** It is worse than that.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** The Taoiseach has avoided my question.

**The Taoiseach:** It has not come down to customs as the only issue remaining.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** I know, but the Taoiseach could have given a response - even a broad one - and maybe that tells me something too.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** This is a nice little chat between the lads.

### **Cabinet Committee Meetings**

12. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the work of the social policy and public service reform division of his Department. [37277/19]

13. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on social policy and public services will next meet. [37375/19]

14. **Deputy Joan Burton** asked the Taoiseach when Cabinet committee E (Health) last met; and when the Cabinet committee on social policy and public services is scheduled to meet. [37566/19]

15. **Deputy Brendan Howlin** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the work of the social policy and public service reform division of his Department. [38479/19]

16. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Taoiseach when Cabinet committee E (health) last met; and when the Cabinet committee on social policy and public services will meet. [38483/19]

17. **Deputy Brendan Howlin** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on social policy and public services will next meet. [38489/19]

18. **Deputy Micheál Martin** asked the Taoiseach the Cabinet committee at which education policy is discussed; and when it last met. [39893/19]

**The Taoiseach:** I propose to take Questions Nos. 12 to 18, inclusive, together.

The role of the social policy and public service reform division is to assist me, as Taoiseach, and the Government in delivering on the objective in the programme for Government to provide public policies and services which drive a socially inclusive and fair society, and to assist in renewing and transforming the public service. Specifically, the division assists the work of the Cabinet Committee on social policy and public services and the associated senior officials group. This committee, which covers issues relating to health, Sláintecare, education, children, equality, social inclusion, the Irish language, the arts, culture and continued improvements in and reform of public services, last met on 10 September and is due to meet again before the end of the year. The division also assists the work of the Cabinet committee on security and the associated senior officials group. This committee, which covers issues relating to justice, defence and policing reform, is expected to meet on 10 October.

The social policy and public service reform division also provides programme office assistance to the policing reform implementation group and the high-level policing reform steering board on the implementation of A Policing Service for the Future, which is the Government's four-year plan for the implementation of the report of the Commission on the Future of Policing. The division advances the north-east inner city initiative, including through the north-east inner city programme office, the programme implementation board and the oversight group.

It assists the work of the Civil Service management board, which oversees the implementation of the Civil Service renewal plan. It assists in the delivery of Our Public Service 2020 through membership of the public service leadership board and the public service management group. It incorporates the programme for Government office, which monitors and reports on the implementation of the commitments contained in A Programme for a Partnership Government across all Departments, with the latest annual progress report published in May 2019. It has departmental oversight of the National Economic and Social Council. It provides me with briefings and speech material on social policy and public service reform issues and participates in relevant interdepartmental committees and other groups.

Cabinet committee E last met on 22 November 2018. Following a Government decision in July to reorganise the Cabinet committee structures, the Cabinet committee on social policy and public services now covers health and Sláintecare.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** I am not sure whether the Taoiseach is aware that engineers have identified structural flaws in 17 public school building projects that house 18 schools. This came to light during the summer. Educate Together is the patron body of several of the affected schools, including one in my constituency. These schools are in addition to the 22 schools that were found last year to have had defective builds. It is worth noting that the schools in the most recent batch of defective builds were cleared for use last October and November after limited assessments found no requirement for precautionary measures to be put in place. I understand that following its review of the affected schools, the Department of Education and Skills intends to undertake a wider independent review of its design and build programme. Such a review is very necessary.

I must state honestly to the Taoiseach that I have significant concerns about wider Government public procurement processes and the Department's ability to deliver schools building projects. My personal experience of engaging with the Department on one of the affected schools - Broombridge Educate Together national school - has been a real eye-opener. I have found it impossible to secure basic information from the Department. I have found it impossible to establish what was wrong with the school, what remediation works have been carried out and what further remediation works are envisaged next summer and the following summer. The school in question also houses a crèche. Parents were hugely put out when their children could not enter this childcare facility to avail of its services for many weeks during the summer.

Despite my best efforts, up to and including with the Minister, I have not been furnished with basic information to which any Member of the Oireachtas and any taxpayer should be entitled when such defective work has been done as part of a school construction project. Can the Taoiseach assist me in getting to these basic facts? Wider issues like public procurement and the delivery of these projects also arise in this context. There have been many defects in school builds. I ask the Taoiseach to explain why there is almost a secret of Fatima atmosphere from the Department and the Minister, who refused to answer basic questions during the summer. What is wrong with the building? What remediation has been done? What further remediation is necessary? I would have thought that such questions were very straightforward.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** Any social policy worth its name would understand the key importance of treating pensioners with respect and fairness. Even though they are no longer working, we must ensure their rights are upheld and the contribution they have made to our society through their work is respected. Earlier today, hundreds of pensioners protested in the pelting rain as part of a protest organised by the Federation of Pensioners Associations. They



believe the Government is failing to respect this country's pensioners, to give them their rights and to give them the level of access to State agencies and institutions that they should have to ensure they are represented properly and treated fairly. The point they are making is that they have suffered with FEMPI and with other changes that have been made by employers and Governments. Their pensions have been substantially affected. Some pensioners have not seen a pension increase for ten years. They have absolutely no right to be represented as a group with the Government at partnership talks, the Workplace Relations Commission or the Financial Services and Pensions Ombudsman. When their pensions, incomes and quality of life are affected by changes and cuts, they have absolutely no say in the matter.

Will the Taoiseach respond to these concerns raised by pensioners? Will he give them the right to be collectively represented at wage agreement talks in respect of any area where their pensions might be affected and to have the right to collectively go to the Financial Services and Pensions Ombudsman and WRC? Pensions are, in effect, wages deferred.

*4 o'clock* Pension schemes comprise money which was put in by workers while they were working. However, once they have retired and are pensioners, they have no right to access the WRC. That is not right and I want the Taoiseach to respond positively to the demands of pensioners.

**Deputy Jan O'Sullivan:** Last week, the chief executive officer of Bord na Móna told trade union representatives that the company faced a dire future which will have devastating consequences for thousands of its workers. In his recent speech on climate at the United Nations, the Taoiseach spoke of a just transition. This is the first real test of a just transition, yet his Department and Government are already failing. The National Economic and Social Council, which falls under the remit of the Taoiseach's Department, has been given responsibility for dealing with the transition to a low carbon economy. The promised just transition task force, which was meant to tackle the threats to the jobs of Bord na Móna workers and others, has yet to be established. Will the Taoiseach commit to the immediate creation of a national just transition task force? Will he ensure that all stakeholders are involved so that workers like those in Bord na Móna can be protected?

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** Yesterday, it was announced that homelessness had reached a new record high and for the seventh straight month over 10,000 people were homeless. Even more shocking is the fact that 70 children became homeless last month. This has happened five years after the Government finally admitted that there is a housing crisis. It happened through the terms of four senior Cabinet members and Ministers for Housing, Planning and Local Government and three years after the publication of a plan which replaced four other plans and was presented as a belt and braces initiative which was certain to succeed. It is now two years since the Taoiseach announced the "plan is working" at a Fine Gael Ard-Fheis, a year and a half since he said homelessness was being overcome and a year since he said, with regard to housing, that the "worst thing we could do is change policy." Does the Taoiseach honestly believe that having a homelessness figure that exceeds 10,000 for seven months in a row and having 70 children become homeless last month alone represents a policy which has been working for the past three years? Clearly, he and his right hand adviser, the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government, Deputy Eoghan Murphy, have been surprised by these figures; otherwise they would not have spent so much time early last year claiming to have made decisive progress on the issue of homelessness. The Taoiseach did not find the time this week to tweet about or reference the new homelessness figures but he issued a claim that we are starting to see results in regard to house prices. How many people does he project will be homeless at the end of this

year? When will the figure be reduced to the level it was when he first said his policies were working?

**The Taoiseach:** I again thank Deputies for their questions. I am aware that there are structural flaws in quite a number of our schools and public buildings. These flaws are all of a different scale. In any case, where there are structural flaws in a school or public building, the number one priority, in particular in respect of schools, has to be the safety of children and staff. Any defects will be repaired on a needs and priority basis. I am not familiar with the school Deputy McDonald mentioned but I will advise the Minister for Education and Skills, Deputy Joe McHugh, that she raised it in the Chamber. I do not understand why there would be any need for secrecy about these issues. I have been able to get answers on the schools in my constituency where there have been structural flaws. I do not see why the Deputy should not be able to get answers but perhaps there are things I do not know.

Deputy Boyd Barrett said we should respect our senior citizens and pensioners, and I agree. I am very proud to lead a Government which has increased the State pension to a record high. We have one of the highest weekly pensions in the entire world. It is double or treble what it is in Northern Ireland or across the water in Britain. We have some really successful schemes which have been defended and funded through the years, such as free travel and the household benefits scheme. We are also constantly improving life expectancy, and Ireland is ranked among the highest in the world in terms of people living long and healthy lives.

Poverty among pensioners in Ireland is less than 2% or close to statistical zero. Pensioners in Ireland are less likely to be poor than any other social group in society, such as working people, children, etc. That did not happen by accident. Rather, it happened because for years, and perhaps even decades, parties in government pursued policies that looked out for our pensioners. That is not to say that we cannot do more, because we certainly can, in particular around the quality of our health services and the very long time many older people have to wait to see a doctor.

The Deputy referred largely to occupational and private pensions. They are all different and are paid in addition to the State pension. They are very much linked to how much is paid in, the quality of the investments made by the pension fund, if any, life expectancy and other such issues. It is very difficult to give the Deputy a comprehensive answer on an issue that is so multifaceted and complex.

When it comes to involvement in the WRC, I struggle to see how that would work. When workers go into the WRC to negotiate a pay increase or reduction, as the case may be, or to negotiate job losses, the negotiations concern productivity, changes to work practices and all of those things. It is difficult to see how this would be applied to pensioners. A pensioner could not be made redundant or sign up for productivity or workplace changes in return for an increase or decrease in a pension. It hard to see how that would work.

Deputy Jan O'Sullivan asked about just transition, which is something we are examining quite closely. We had a meeting of the Cabinet subcommittee on the environment yesterday to review the progress being made on the climate action plan. In a particular section of the meeting we discussed the midlands, where issues around Bord na Móna will require us to focus on just transition in that region. In many ways, the midlands and Bord na Móna will be the first test of just transition and we need to get it right. It is not just about looking after the Bord na Móna workers and making sure they are treated properly but also about making sure there is alterna-

tive employment and payroll coming into the region. That is something on which we need to work. At the moment, we are trying to work through whether we should have a single just transition task force for the entire country or whether it would make more sense to have localised ones where the issues are very different. The issue of just transition for Bord Na Móna workers in the midlands will be very different from a just transition in a different part of the country for a different type of industry. Maybe one size does not fit all and we need localised approaches.

### **Cabinet Committee Meetings**

19. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on infrastructure will next meet. [37374/19]

20. **Deputy Brendan Howlin** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on infrastructure will next meet. [38480/19]

**The Taoiseach:** I propose to take Questions Nos. 19 and 20 together.

The Cabinet committee on infrastructure met on 10 September 2019 and its next meeting is scheduled for 10 October 2019. The Cabinet committee works to ensure a co-ordinated approach in the areas of infrastructure investment and delivery, Project Ireland 2040 and Rebuilding Ireland. There is significant work under way across each of the areas covered by the committee through Government Departments, agencies and a range of interdepartmental groups such as the Project Ireland 2040 delivery board. These matters are also regularly considered at meetings of Government and in bilateral and multilateral meetings with the relevant Ministers.

Significant progress is being made on the implementation of Project Ireland 2040. In May this year, the Government launched the first annual report for Project Ireland 2040 and it is evident the strategy is already delivering better transport links, facilitating better healthcare and environmental outcomes and yielding more housing. For example, the biggest single project completed this year was the M11 Gorey to Enniscorthy motorway in the south east, and I was pleased to be present at the official opening. Project Ireland is also set to deliver another 14 major projects by year end and a further 20 major projects over the course of next year. More than 25 further projects are also due to be commenced by the end of 2020. More than 200 longer-term projects will be ongoing in 2020, including the national broadband plan, the north runway at Dublin Airport and the national train control centre to improve our rail services.

The four funds launched under Project Ireland 2040 have a total of €4 billion to invest across the areas of rural and urban regeneration and development, climate action and disruptive technologies innovation. The first round of funding allocations under the funds amounted to slightly more than €150 million in 2019. Second round calls have been launched for the disruptive technologies innovation fund and the rural regeneration and development fund. A further call for the urban regeneration fund will be announced soon and work is continuing on legislation to underpin the climate action fund. The Government will also announce reforms to the oversight and governance of project selection, appraisal and delivery, including an update to the public spending code.

The Land Development Agency, which is another cornerstone initiative of Project Ireland 2040, was established on an interim basis in law in September 2018. It is working to ensure the optimum management of State land with an immediate focus on providing new homes, includ-

ing social and affordable housing. Housing continues to be a priority for the Government and we have seen strong growth in housing completions and leading indicators such as planning permissions, commencement notices and housing registration. More than 19,300 new dwellings were completed in the 12 months to June 2019, a 20% year-on-year increase. More than 2,500 homes were brought out of long-term vacancy and almost 750 dwellings in unfinished estates were completed, meaning the number of new homes available for use increased by more than 22,600 last year. This does not include student accommodation. There was also strong delivery of publicly-funded social housing in 2018, with more than 27,000 new households having their housing needs met. Good progress continues to be made during 2019 on social housing delivery and other aspects of Rebuilding Ireland.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** I ask the Taoiseach simply to scrap the strategic housing development scheme as a complete failure. We discovered from a report published at the weekend that it is essentially a scheme dreamed up by property developers who gave the then Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government and current Tánaiste, Deputy Coveney, their recommendations. The Government took those recommendations lock, stock and barrel and stuck them into the housing Bill. Fast-track planning for property developers was supposed to deliver more housing, particularly affordable housing, to help deal with the housing crisis. However, work has not commenced on 10,000 of the 16,000 units that got such planning permission. There has been no effort by the developer to put in commencement notices for 41% of the units. In other words, as some Deputies have been saying to the Government all year, this was a licence for speculation, hoarding and driving up the value of particular sites. There are some such sites in the area I represent, such as the Bartra co-living site and a site where apartments were to be sold for €1 million each, which would do nothing to help the housing crisis. The scheme has been a licence to hoard, speculate and print money for private developers but has delivered almost nothing in terms of actual housing. I am suggesting that it should be scrapped.

**Deputy Jan O'Sullivan:** Only a very small part of the Taoiseach's response related to Rebuilding Ireland, which is understandable, given that Rebuilding Ireland is a complete failure. The construction of social and affordable homes has been moving at a snail's pace, as has the construction of the private homes to which Deputy Boyd Barrett referred. This week, we found out that, once again, more than 10,000 people are homeless. There has been an increase of 70 in the number of homeless children in the past month. It is clear that the Government's housing policies are not working. We are not seeing the speed we need in the construction of social and affordable housing. Swathes of our working population cannot afford the extortionate rents being charged in the private sector, into which everybody seems to be getting squeezed, and cannot secure a mortgage either. What will the Government do to alter and completely refurbish its Rebuilding Ireland plans which are simply not delivering for Irish people?

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** What is the status of the broadband contract? Has it been signed? When will it be signed? We were led to believe some months ago that it would be signed in September, but it is now October. Are there state aid issues, as was recently reported, in terms of other providers claiming they can operate within the area that was out for tender? What is the position with the broadband contract? What is the likely timeline for signing the contract? It was the Government's decision to pursue this course. Fianna Fáil does not agree with that decision, but I wish to know whether the timeline is on track with what was outlined some months ago by the Taoiseach.

On the national children's hospital, it was recently reported that it will cost more than the

high cost to which we were alerted earlier in the year and that there will be time delays. I ask the Taoiseach to provide clarity in that regard. As the Cabinet committee on infrastructure met on 10 September, it must be fairly clear what are the likely increases that have been documented. Surely, the Cabinet committee discussed these and the Taoiseach is aware of the cost increases. What are the delays in terms of the timeline for the completion of the hospital and the implications for other paediatric hospitals?

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** Will funding for the A5 be provided for in the budget next week? There has been much discussion of Brexit in the House and its effect on the island as a whole. All Members are aware of the impact Brexit will have on the north west of Ireland. Derry is Ireland's fourth-largest city but there is no rail or other proper transport infrastructure between it and Dublin. Partition has been devastating for that part of Ireland and Brexit looms large and threatens it further. Will funding for the A5 be made available in the budget?

**The Taoiseach:** Deputy Boyd Barrett asked about the strategic housing development scheme. I sometimes get the housing schemes mixed up because there are so many of them, but I think that is the scheme which allows a developer building 100 units or more to go straight to An Bord Pleanála rather than the two-step process involving going to a local authority first and then, if necessary, An Bord Pleanála. The scheme was logically designed to speed up the planning process such that homes could be built more quickly. As the Deputy mentioned, permission for 16,000 units has been granted under the scheme. Construction has commenced on 6,000 of the units. Construction has not commenced on 10,000 of them, but we do not know on how many of those work will commence in the coming months or years. We need to see that develop in the period ahead. We also need to consider the counterfactual question of whether homes that went through the old process are being commenced or built more quickly.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** What is the point in having fast-track planning if nothing is fast-tracked?

**The Taoiseach:** The scheme was introduced in order to fast-track planning.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** That has not happened.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** It is not happening.

**The Taoiseach:** Instead of a two-step process, there is a one-step process. The logic behind the scheme is that it allows houses to be built more quickly. It makes sense to look back three or four years after any policy change is made or new scheme brought in and consider whether it worked. Deputy Boyd Barrett is assuming that there would be a different result in respect 10,000 units that have not been commenced under the scheme had they gone through the old process. One would have to compare schemes that went through the old process to see whether that is the case. That analysis will be carried out. It was always the intention to review the scheme after some years to see if it had worked.

I do not agree with Deputy Jan O'Sullivan's contention. At long last, the social housing programme is really catching up. During the crash, almost no social housing was built for six or seven years.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** That was Fine Gael's decision.

**The Taoiseach:** Approximately 10,000 social houses are now being added to the social



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housing stock every year. Between two thirds and three quarters of those are new builds by local authorities rather than purchases or leases from developers.

On the national broadband plan, the contract has not been signed but we have appointed a preferred bidder. Imagine has challenged the maps and that has caused a delay. Deputies will be aware that Imagine provides a service in many parts of rural Ireland and has challenged the intervention area. We anticipate being able to-----

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** To whom was the intervention area challenged? Was it challenged to Europe?

**The Taoiseach:** The challenge was initially made to the Department. The Department was then required to consult the European Commission for reasons relating to state aid rules. We anticipate that the contract will be signed by the end of the year, which will allow the first homes across rural Ireland to be connected to high-speed broadband next year.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** September becomes the end of the year.

**The Taoiseach:** The Government is absolutely committed to the A5 project. It is one I strongly support linking, not just Derry to Dublin and the rest of the country, but it is also really important for Donegal. The money will be there when the project starts but currently it is stuck in a Northern Ireland process. Once the money is there, the project will start.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** What about the new children's hospital?

**The Taoiseach:** What about it?

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** Will it involve a higher cost than that to which we were alerted last year?

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** The Taoiseach can answer that if he is in a position to do so.

**The Taoiseach:** I do not have any new information on that. I have no doubt the developer-----

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** Could the Taoiseach check that for me?

**The Taoiseach:** I can.

### **Ábhair Shaincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Matters**

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Before we proceed to Oral Questions to the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, 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 Jackie Cahill - to discuss forestry licensing and its impact on our climate change targets; (2) Deputy Mary Butler - to discuss the waiting lists for home care supports in Waterford; (3) Deputy Niamh Smyth - to discuss the downgrading of Monaghan as a Garda divisional headquarters; (4) Deputy Pat The Cope Gallagher - to discuss the inordinate delay in inviting tenders for the new St. Mary's national school, Stranorlar, County Donegal; (5) Deputy

David Cullinane - to ask the Minister for Health to update the House on the national review of cardiac services and, if possible, to give an indication of when a report will be published, either interim or final; (6) Deputy Lisa Chambers - to discuss the waiting lists for home care supports in Mayo; (7) Deputies Denis Naughten and Brian Stanley - the need for the Minister with responsibility for energy to outline the steps which he is taking to ensure a just transition in Bord na Móna after further concerns have been expressed regarding the future of 2,000 jobs by the group of unions following a meeting with management last week and to ask the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment to make a statement regarding the future of workers at the Bord na Móna semi-State company; (8) Deputies Michael Healy-Rae and Mattie McGrath - to discuss the emergence of rabbit haemorrhagic disease in the hare population and its impact on coursing; (9) Deputy James Browne - the need for the Minister for Health to discuss the waiting lists for home care supports and home help in Wexford; (10) Deputy James Lawless - the chronic and persistent traffic congestion in Maynooth, County Kildare; (11) Deputy John Brassil - to discuss the waiting lists for home care supports in Kerry; (12) Deputy Sean Sherlock - the need to upgrade the N73 in County Cork, especially considering a large fuel spill on the road occurred on Monday, 30 September, as the road is too narrow for trucks that travel it; (13) Deputy Stephen Donnelly - the need for the Minister for Justice and Equality to make a statement on Garda resources for the area of Bray in County Wicklow; (14) Deputies Frank O'Rourke and Fiona O'Loughlin - to discuss the long waiting times for children with disabilities-special health needs in accessing a HSE assessment of need and the subsequent delay in accessing essential services and supports such as physiotherapy, occupational therapy, speech and language therapy and psychology services; (15) Deputy Maurice Quinlivan - to discuss the overcrowding and recent record numbers on trolleys at University Hospital Limerick; (16) Deputy Anne Rabbitte - the need for the Minister for Health to address the lack of home support-personal assistance for acute patients under 65 years of age who could otherwise be discharged; (17) Deputy Declan Breathnach - to discuss the large numbers of diseased and deformed fish found in the Castletown, Boyne, Fane and Dee Rivers in County Louth; (18) Deputy Pat Buckley - to discuss the lack of CAMHS capacity in Wexford; (19) Deputy Thomas Byrne - the findings of the Comptroller and Auditor General regarding the purchases of school sites by the Department of Education and Skills; (20) Deputies Mick Barry and Richard Boyd Barrett - to discuss the August homelessness statistics and the latest homeless figures; (21) Deputy Alan Kelly - to ask the Minister for Justice and Equality to explain the rationale behind the decision by An Garda Síochána to move the regional headquarters of the new Tipperary-Clare division to Ennis; (22) Deputies Gino Kenny and Bríd Smith - to discuss air quality in Dublin and recent reports; and (23) Deputy Timmy Dooley - the need for the Minister for Health to address the severe overcrowding in the accident and emergency department in University Hospital Limerick.

The matters raised by Deputies Jackie Cahill, Michael Healy-Rae and Mattie McGrath, Maurice Quinlivan and Declan Breathnach have been selected for discussion.

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

### **Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions**

### **Estimates Process**

62. **Deputy Barry Cowen** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the Supplementary Estimates that will be required in 2019 based on current information; and if he will

make a statement on the matter. [39878/19]

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Deputy Cowen has 30 seconds to introduce his question.

**Deputy Barry Cowen:** I will use those 30 seconds after the Minister replies to it.

**Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** Managing expenditure within allocations is a key responsibility of every Department and Minister. A number of measures are in place to ensure that expenditure and budgetary targets are being achieved on an ongoing basis. There is regular reporting to Government on expenditure levels and expenditure profiles, which are published every month. The drawdown of funds from the Exchequer is monitored throughout the year and reported on against profile on a monthly basis in the Fiscal Monitor.

As set out in the most recent Fiscal Monitor, total gross voted expenditure at end-August was €42.015 billion. This is €262 million, or 0.6%, below profile. Gross voted expenditure is 0.3% below profile. Of the 17 ministerial Vote groups, 14 are on or below profile on current expenditure for the end of August. Gross voted capital expenditure is €130 million, or 3.7%, below profile but up €683 million, or a quarter percentage versus the same period a year ago. The end of September figures will be published later this week.

Due to the scale of Government expenditure, which is over €66 billion in aggregate for 2019, and the cash basis of Government accounting, the need for Supplementary Estimates can arise for a number of reasons. This includes in-year policy decisions, timing issues, overspends in particular areas and the need to respond to emerging events where Departments do not have the scope to deliver offsetting savings.

The key issues that were highlighted in the mid-year expenditure report include where we are with the health sector and, in particular, expenditure pressures in the Department of Justice and Equality arising from pressures regarding asylum seeker accommodation.

**Deputy Barry Cowen:** I thank the Minister for his response. In the event of a Supplementary Estimate being required and based on the fact that since 2012 €6.3 billion in total has been used - I presume from corporation tax revenue - to meet those Estimates, will the Minister go down that road again in respect of corporation tax revenue or will he put that to the basic figures next year?

**Deputy Paschal Donohoe:** I did not catch the last part of what the Deputy said.

**Deputy Barry Cowen:** In the absence of using revenue from corporation tax receipts, how does the Minister intend to meet the Estimate if a Supplementary Estimate is required? Will it be from underspends going into next year?

**Deputy Paschal Donohoe:** It will be a combination of a number of different things. At this point in time, I am confident that our level of Supplementary Estimates will certainly be reduced versus where we were a year ago. They were at a very high level a year ago and I said at that time that the total volume of underspends and the way they materialised so quickly was not acceptable.

In terms of how we will pay for it, there will be three ways. First, with respect to what we can do to reduce the level of Supplementary Estimate for this year, a huge amount of work has gone into that to date. The second is whether over-delivery on certain tax heads later on in the

year will cover the Supplementary Estimate. The third is our ability to pay for any Supplementary Estimates out of the overall budgetary framework that is included in the summer economic statement.

**Deputy Barry Cowen:** At this stage, the Minister sees no impact on the 2020 figures as a result of any Supplementary Estimate that might be required.

**Deputy Paschal Donohoe:** It could have an effect because it depends on how we treat those figures. What has happened in the past, for which I have been criticised, is the level of Supplementary Estimate that has been brought into the base that was spent and then the budget day package came on top of that. The Irish Fiscal Advisory Council has been critical of two things. First, it has been critical of the level of total Supplementary Estimates and, second, it has been critical of them being brought into the base and then the budget day package being on top of that. In the coming days, I will need to see what is the best way of managing this issue for 2019 and 2020.

### **Departmental Properties**

63. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the rent paid by the Office of Public Works for the rental of properties (details supplied) in each of the years 2014 to 2018, inclusive, and to date in 2019; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [39622/19]

**Deputy Pearse Doherty:** The Office of Public Works, OPW, has paid Green REIT €10.5 million to rent 85 to 93 Lower Mount Street and €5 million to rent a property in Harcourt Street since 2014. Given the lenient tax structure and treatment backing up this international investors group, which is pricing families and domestic businesses out of the market, I ask the Minister why the Government, through the Office of Public Works, is renting properties in Harcourt Street and Lower Mount Street from Green REIT.

**Deputy Paschal Donohoe:** The Deputy's question asked me to make the levels of rent in those two properties available to the Dáil, which I have done.

In terms of why we are making use of those properties and paying those rent levels, it is because the OPW has judged that this is the best way of securing property for the State offices using these properties and that the rent is at a level it believes offers best value to the taxpayer.

**Deputy Pearse Doherty:** The Minister needs to examine a number of issues before we dismiss the fact that we are pumping millions of euro into this company through rental income. The first aspect that concerns me is the sale of Green REIT itself, which is the landlord in this case. Under the Minister's watch, Green REIT and its shareholders have enjoyed tens of millions of euro in tax being avoided through the sale of properties earlier this year under the capital gains tax, CGT, exemption. We now have Henderson Park, which will purchase the Green REIT shares. There is a loophole in the legislation which allows for it not to pay the 6% commercial stamp duty, which should be paid on commercial property and the sale of shares, but instead 1% on Green REIT shares will be paid in respect of this transaction. This is despite the fact that Green REIT's portfolio consists entirely of commercial property. Given that Green REIT was sold for €1.34 billion, this is a loss to the taxpayer, who has paid over €15 million in rent on these two properties. This comes to a loss of €67 million to the taxpayer because of

this loophole. If the Minister will use public moneys to rent from Green REIT, will he at least ensure that the company pays its taxes? Will he give us a commitment that he will close down the capital gains tax exemption and fix the commercial property stamp duty loophole in the forthcoming finance Bill?

**Deputy Paschal Donohoe:** It would not be appropriate for me to comment on the rental or even the tax arrangements of any particular company or organisation in the State. However, this is an issue which I did investigate in the context of the tax strategy group papers we published during the summer. In these, we assessed the contribution entities like this are making to housing and commercial property output in the State and what is the information we can make publicly available regarding the levels of tax they are paying. However, it simply would not be appropriate for me to comment on any single organisation or company such as this, let alone the tax it pays.

**Deputy Pearse Doherty:** I have already asked parliamentary questions on this matter. The replies are clear that Green REIT will not pay the 6% stamp duty on this transaction. Instead, it can avail of a loophole in the tax code that will allow it to pay 1%. The latter means that the taxpayer is being screwed over to the tune of €67 million on foot of this one transaction. This is a structure which does not pay capital gains tax on the disposal of assets. We also have limited taxes on these structures in the first instance. We know, for example, that rental income is paid out in dividends which are then paid to investors. The Central Bank believes that half of the total equity in Irish REITs is held by overseas investors. The dividend withholding tax - the introduction of which I argued for - is set at 20%. We know, however, that this is only a rate on paper because many of these companies, as a result of double tax treaties, can reduce their rate to on average 15% and, indeed, that many more can reduce it even further.

As far back as 2012, the Department of Finance was forecasting significant tax leakage as a result of the REIT structure. I have pointed out three different areas in which that leakage is happening. The Minister needs to close these loopholes in the finance Bill.

**Deputy Paschal Donohoe:** As a result of the debate I had with the Deputy on last year's Finance Bill regarding the level of tax associated with the organisations and companies in question, I put in place a process which led to the publication of the tax strategy group paper this summer. My strong view is that all companies, large and small, must pay a fair level of taxation. The Deputy knows I cannot comment on any particular organisation and the tax it pays.

The Deputy asked me for information regarding the rent from properties that this entity earns from the State. I have made that information available to him.

### **Capital Expenditure Programme**

64. **Deputy Barry Cowen** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the estimated cost of the national broadband plan and the national children's hospital from 2021 onwards; the area from which funding for the projects will come; if no project will be impacted upon as a result of these spends; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [39879/19]

**Deputy Barry Cowen:** The Minister will know only too well that the costs associated with the national broadband plan and the national children's hospital have ballooned out of all proportion in recent years. Will he make a statement as to how they will be funded beyond



2021 in light of the alterations which will have to be made on foot of the information becoming available in respect of their costs? I am also mindful of the commitment given on the broadband plan that a contract would be signed in September for its delivery, even in light of these massive costs and notwithstanding our opposition to it. Where does the Government stand on that commitment?

Earlier this year, I inquired of the Minister as to how the Government gave preferred bidder status to a consortium involved in the broadband tendering process. In the event of the Government not proceeding with the signed contract, is there a penalty and what costs would be incumbent on the State?

**Deputy Paschal Donohoe:** The Department of Public Expenditure and Reform is responsible for monitoring expenditure allocations on a monthly basis at departmental level. Responsibility for individual projects rests with the relevant Departments. Accordingly, managing the cost of both the national children's hospital and the national broadband plan projects is a matter, in the first instance, for the Departments of Health and Communications, Climate Action and Environment.

Regarding the estimated cost of these projects from 2021 onwards, I am informed that spending on the national children's hospital will be in the region of €650 million and the national broadband plan will cost up to €3 billion, albeit for a long period after 2021. In both cases, annual funding will be voted through the Dáil in the Revised Estimates and will subsequently issue from the Exchequer.

The funding for these two projects forms part of the overall capital allocations for their Vote groups. As with all Vote groups, it is for individual Ministers to prioritise the projects to be funded from their allocations.

My role is to oversee the implementation of the National Development Plan 2018-2027, including the capital ceilings underpinning it. To ensure the efficient implementation of the plan, there is a Project Ireland 2040 delivery board, an investment projects and programmes office, a capital projects tracker and a construction sector working group to ensure how best to deliver these projects.

I have published our Estimates ceilings beyond 2021 until 2025. Given the commitment I made that these projects would go ahead and that they would not push out any other projects Departments had in these areas, the capital allocations for these Departments were added on during the summer economic statement. It comes from either running a lower surplus in the event of being able to avoid a no-deal Brexit or a slightly higher deficit if we must deal with a no-deal Brexit.

**Deputy Barry Cowen:** During a discussion on the cost of the national broadband plan on "RTÉ News: Six One", the Minister stated that, despite it going to a headline rate of €3 billion, the country could withstand it and that it would be paid for out of surpluses and provided for in the coming years. As he has rightly recognised, however, we could be heading into a series of deficits as a result of Brexit, an event that will have implications for the State's finances. Does that leave the Minister in a precarious position regarding his commitment on signing a contract while that wider issue prevails?

Conferring preferred bidder status to a consortium in the broadband tendering process has some legal basis. Has the Minister any estimate of the costs which will accrue to the State in

the event of it not proceeding to sign the contract or is there a penalty built in?

**Deputy Paschal Donohoe:** My recollection of what I said on “RTÉ News: Six One” is that it would be paid for from Government revenue. However, the Deputy is correct that if we move into a no-deal Brexit scenario, then the country is likely to be running a deficit for a period as we respond to the consequences of dealing with that shock. If that were the case, the Government has not made a final decision on the signing of the broadband contract.

It is at preferred bidder status. My view is that the national broadband plan is still the form of plan with which we should be going ahead. First, for those counties and communities which are likely to experience the most shock from the impact of a disorderly Brexit, the national broadband plan is one that will benefit them the most. From all the modelling we have done on the effect of a no-deal Brexit on different sectors of our economy, it tends to affect more those located outside the larger cities. To help them respond to the shock that a no-deal Brexit could bring, broadband connectivity is exactly what we should be providing. The point at which we will get into a debate is when we are about to sign a contract. If we do not go ahead with the project, as I believe we should, we will all need to explain, as I know Deputy Cowen will, whether there are alternative ways of delivering the outcome within the timeframe we all want.

The Deputy asked whether there are penalties involved. I understood he had received an answer on that but that is clearly not the case. I will ensure he receives a reply tomorrow.

**Deputy Barry Cowen:** It would appear that the decision not to sign a contract in September, as had been envisaged, is the result of the implications that signing the contract would have for the State because it now appears that we would borrow much of the €3 billion cost, rather than providing for it from revenue sources based on the projections that had been made, as the Minister indicated in answer to a question on “Six One”. Is it the case that a revision is taking place or the matter is being reconsidered in light of the circumstances? The Minister may answer that question in writing tomorrow and answer my question on the obligations of the State in respect of penalties now.

**Deputy Paschal Donohoe:** I am happy to give the Deputy Cowen an answer now. I was apologising to him because the question on legal penalties had not been answered and I thought it had been answered. I will make sure he receives information tomorrow, insofar as it is available to me, to clarify where the Government stands on the national broadband plan.

Any delay in the Minister, Deputy Bruton, bringing a memorandum to Government, which I expect soon, is entirely unrelated to Brexit or any of the macroeconomic concerns that the Deputy and I have touched on. Lest there be any doubt, I still believe we should go ahead with the national broadband plan. A no-deal Brexit would most adversely affect the same communities and parts of the country that would benefit from the national broadband plan. As the Deputy can imagine, when we reach the point of signing a contract, those who believe we should not sign it or that the contract could be improved will need to make a case for how that could be done. As somebody who grappled with this issue for a year, I ask anyone who is committed to 100% coverage and believes fibre optic is the best way of delivering nationwide coverage to come up with a better way of delivering those objectives and making the service available soon.

*Question No. 65 replied to with Written Answers.*

## **Public Spending Code**

66. **Deputy Barry Cowen** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform when the public spending code will be updated; the specific changes to the public spending code that are being envisaged; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [39880/19]

**Deputy Barry Cowen:** I ask the Minister to respond.

**Deputy Paschal Donohoe:** As part of the ongoing reform of the public investment management systems, we are updating our public spending code. The purpose of this update is to strengthen the existing guidance to better align with the realities of project delivery and with a particular focus on improved appraisal, cost estimation and management. Clearly, our experiences with the national children's hospital earlier in the year have informed and influenced the work.

In terms of what is under way, we are looking at a number of different areas. The first of these is how we can better appraise big capital projects far earlier in their life cycle and before decisions are made on them. The second focus is on achieving greater clarity on who decides what and when. We also need to be clearer on what cost estimates are and to be able to compare them with the business case for the projects. More realistic expectations regarding how a project can be delivered are needed for big projects and we need to be more transparent regarding the publication of business cases and evaluation reports. The work on these issues is almost complete and I anticipate publication of the conclusion of all this work in the coming weeks.

**Deputy Barry Cowen:** I thank the Minister for his response. This came to a head earlier this year when a contract was awarded by the HSE in Limerick to a company with a fractured history in the delivery of a capital programme. The Taoiseach stated at the time the children's hospital issue was being debated in the House that previous performance in the delivery of capital projects would have to be given weight in the procurement process. We had hoped and expected the update to be forthcoming much quicker but that has not been the case. I acknowledge the Minister's comment that much work has been done and the conclusions of this work will be before the House soon. It is imperative that this happens as soon as practically possible. People want to see that lessons have been learned from the children's hospital debacle and that it is not repeated. This requires correcting the appropriate legislation or procurement policy to ensure the same thing does not happen again. While I do not like mentioning names in the House, I will do so if I have to. After the children's hospital debacle, the HSE awarded a contract to a company which had a poor record in delivering another project. However, its record could not be taken into consideration as part of the process.

**Deputy Paschal Donohoe:** I am aware of the issue to which Deputy Cowen refers and it is one that we are evaluating. The challenge we have is that if a company submits a tender for a particular project, unless there are exceptional extenuating circumstances, we must evaluate that tender for the project. The Deputy has been understandably careful in referring to this issue. Some companies that experience difficulties with individual projects subsequently demonstrate that they are capable of delivering other large and demanding projects on time and on budget. I am considering the issue of how we weigh up the performance of a company in its entirety versus its ability to deliver a particular project. At this point in the process, it appears to me that we must continue to give weight to the value of tenders submitted against the project itself, as opposed to allowing the process to be influenced by other broader considerations. We are weighing up that issue.

**Deputy Barry Cowen:** If a player who played poorly in the semi-final says he can improve his performance in the final, I still have to make a decision not to pick him when picking the team for the final. The public has seen the performance of the procurement process and the evaluation, preparation and recommendations of a contract for the children's hospital, and these have left much to be desired. People expect that lessons will be learned and new structures and mechanisms put in place to ensure this does not happen again but, lo and behold, it appears it has happened again. Let that be the last time. Hopefully, the spending code will be before us sooner rather than later in order that we can address it.

**Deputy Paschal Donohoe:** To use the Deputy's analogy, if the same player had a bad outing in the semi-final but played well in the quarter final and did very well in the group stage, how should we assess all of his performances? This is the calculus that we have. I understand the point the Deputy is making. If things do not go well in a project but the company in question had delivered many other projects very well, how should we weigh everything up? This is the challenge. In the case of a company of scale where the Deputy might point to things that went wrong, one could also point to many other projects which went well and were brought in on budget and on time. As I said, I am aware of the issue to which the Deputy refers. We are weighing up whether we can recognise this issue in changes we might make to the public spending code. However, if we do so, we must look at a player's overall performance as opposed to his performance in a single game.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Now that the Members are using sporting parlance, I hope the 11 changes will make a difference this week.

## **Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions**

### **Carbon Tax Implementation**

67. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the projected additional expenditure that will be committed to climate action measures; the way in which it will be ring-fenced for that purpose from an increased revenue from carbon tax; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [39625/19]

**Deputy Pearse Doherty:** Next week's budget, which is being brought forward by the Government and Fianna Fáil, is on course to increase carbon taxes on households. Research has shown that this tax is regressive. I am sure the Minister will not dispute that. Research has shown it will hit families on the lowest incomes hardest without effecting behavioural change. In next week's budget, how much additional expenditure will be earmarked for climate action measures and how will increased revenue from the carbon tax hike be ring-fenced?

**Deputy Paschal Donohoe:** The Government's climate action plan sets out ambitious savings targets across all sectors of our economy.

The Departments responsible for the achievement of those targets are incorporating and developing policies and measures required to reach them. As part of the work that is under way, we are evaluating what role carbon tax will play.

In response to the particular questions the Deputy put to me, I understand that a change in carbon pricing does in particular have an effect on lower income families and citizens. This is something we have to take account of in any decision that we make. In response to the Deputy's point regarding how such revenues would be used, my intention, if a move is made on carbon taxation, is that all the revenue raised from it would be used either to reinvest back into changing our economy or to deal with some of the social issues to which the Deputy referred that could be caused by a change in carbon pricing. The balance of expert opinion regarding the role of carbon pricing and carbon taxation is that they can play a valuable role in helping economies, families and businesses adjust to the kind of behaviours that we will need to deal with the risk of climate change. I am well aware of the concerns about this matter. Any change that I propose will be gradual and my intention, if such a change is made, is to reinvest it in order to deal with issues to which the Deputy referred.

**Deputy Pearse Doherty:** I am glad the Minister is aware that the tax he is proposing is regressive. Let us remind ourselves of what the ESRI's June report stated in the context of carbon taxes. The author stated categorically, "Carbon taxation is found to be regressive, with poorer households spending a greater proportion of their income on the tax than more affluent households." The report goes on to state that an increase in carbon tax would disproportionately hit rural households, particularly rural households in the lowest income quartile. Most worryingly, it suggests that single households with children are going to be the most affected by the Government's policy, which is supported by Fianna Fáil. It states that while the tax should be borne by everyone, the cost is greatest for the poorest households, and that households living in older dwellings and low-skilled workers have larger costs. On Wednesday last, at a meeting of the Joint Committee on Climate Action, the Minister's officials categorically confirmed to my colleague, Deputy Cullinane, that this carbon tax proposal is regressive. That is a fact which cannot be disputed. A carbon tax increase will hurt those on the lowest incomes in Irish society and that is backed up in the research. Given that this is the case and given that the Minister said it would be ring-fenced for climate action measures, can he outline how his Department intends to ring-fence this increase? Can he outline whether he plans to ring-fence any of the €400 million in carbon taxes that we bring in every year? Can he outline if he has the necessary statutory instruments in place to ring-fence the moneys that will accrue from the carbon tax increase? What measures will this regressive hike in taxation next year likely fund?

**Deputy Paschal Donohoe:** When the Deputy refers to the views of experts, I will quote back to him the Climate Change Advisory Council, which refers to a rise in carbon tax as an essential component of achieving decarbonisation. That was the recommendation and view of the panel whose job it is to advise all of us on the kind of change we need in responding to the challenge of climate change. The Citizens' Assembly reached a similar view. The Deputy made reference to the view of the ESRI. I am well aware of the opinions it has put forward regarding the income effects of carbon tax. Reports from institutions like the ESRI have also contended that a change in the price of carbon is a way in which we will be able to change behaviour and make the kind of long-term changes that are needed for our economy to respond to climate change and for citizens to be protected when that happens. I am aware of the income effects for lower-income citizens. If, therefore, a move on carbon is made, I will be looking at how we can respond to that particular issue. I am committed to this being a ring-fenced fund. I am looking at ways in which I can give confidence to the House and to the people that it will happen if we do make a move on carbon taxation.

**Deputy Pearse Doherty:** If the Minister is talking about ring-fencing this tax, does he have



the necessary statutory instruments to allow him to do so? It has not been done before. Hypothecation is not done in the context of the tax code. We have heard the Taoiseach talking about how the money is going to be ring-fenced. Is it going to be ring-fenced? Does the Minister have a statutory instrument to ring-fence this tax for climate change measures?

The Minister knows as well as I that a Government can raise taxes to achieve one of two purposes, namely, raise more revenue, which is completely justifiable, or effect behavioural change. With carbon taxes, it should only be about behavioural change. The reality is that we already have a carbon tax which was introduced in 2015 and brings in €400 million per year. It has not effected behavioural change and the Government has remained a laggard when it comes to climate action. We can see that from the targets that we are missing spectacularly. Behavioural change requires investment. It requires alternatives. The reality is there is no alternative being provided by this Government. It is not investing the necessary resources that we need, for example, in terms of public transport, energy efficiency or retrofitting. People who are going to be hit the worst as a result of this measure, going back to the ESRI research, namely, those on the lowest incomes, families with poor insulation and families in rural communities, need to have the alternatives. This is simply penny-pinching from people's pockets without having due regard to actually creating the alternatives that should be there. Can the Minister answer some of these questions, particularly in respect of whether he has the necessary tools to hypothecate this tax?

**Deputy Paschal Donohoe:** Many of the issues that Deputy Pearse Doherty is raising can only be dealt with in the context of the decision that is made on budget day and in the finance Bill that will follow. I am confident that if the House does make a move on carbon taxation, we will be able to give clarity regarding how that is ring-fenced. That is what we would love to do. The Deputy made the point that taxes have two different purposes. I agree with him. If a move was to be made on carbon tax, my intention would be to use the revenue in that area to further drive the change to which he is referring. The other questions that he put to me I will be able to answer in the context of the finance Bill if this decision is made. I wonder in the debate that is under way if the Deputy might offer a view regarding whether he thinks the Climate Change Advisory Council is right or wrong-----

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** Wrong.

**Deputy Paschal Donohoe:** -----in the context of the role that carbon pricing can play.

**Deputy Pearse Doherty:** Carbon pricing can play a very important role but only when the alternative is there for citizens to actually change behaviour. The problem is that someone from west Donegal or Gaoth Dobhair, where the Leas-Cheann Comhairle is from, does not have the alternative of jumping on public transport - either a bus or a train - and travelling to the capital city or other parts of the county. We need serious investment in public transport, retrofitting and the alternatives. That is where the Government is failing spectacularly.

### **Infrastructure and Capital Investment Programme**

68. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the details of each State infrastructure project that is in development or is due for completion in 2019 and that is in excess of the budget assigned to the project for its current stage to date. [39522/19]

**Deputy Peadar Tóibín:** Ireland has rare form when it comes to overspending on infrastructural projects. There was the motorway network, Luas, the HSE personnel, payroll and related systems, PPARS, Dublin Port and now we have a national children's hospital and the national broadband plan coming in at an extreme cost. In 2016, the Taoiseach stated that, short of an asteroid hitting the planet, the national children's hospital would be finished by 2020. He estimated that it would take €670 million in order to complete the project. The figure is now north of €1.7 billion. The Government estimated that the national broadband plan would cost €500 million and now it aims to deliver broadband to a third fewer houses over a period three times longer at six times the 2012 cost. Why are we spending so much on infrastructural projects and how is the Government going to stop overspending?

**Deputy Paschal Donohoe:** Just to reiterate some of the points I made earlier, what we are doing is looking at changes that can be made in the public spending code that build on the experiences we have had in respect of the national children's hospital and the national broadband plan. The cost relating to the national children's hospital was got clearly wrong and the length of time involved in delivering a project of that scale was got wrong too.

I have acknowledged this in many debates in this House. In regard to the national broadband plan, the learnings are different. The national broadband plan went through the kind of appraisal and focus that it should do, and the Government made the decision in regard to going ahead with that project conscious of the risks and of the higher costs. We then shared that with the Oireachtas and I believe we are going to have a heightened debate about that in the coming weeks.

In regard to what we are doing to address issues like this in the future, it is why we are revising the public spending code and why we have a capital tracker that lays out where different projects stand. While the Deputy is correct to point out two big projects in which the cost of delivery went wrong and there was significant public concern, we have many different projects across the country, from primary care, to schools, to higher and further education and to roads, which are on time and on budget, and where different agencies are able to deliver big projects on track and in the way the Government expects.

**Deputy Peadar Tóibín:** There are two outstanding points with regard to how the general public sees this. The first is that people are shocked at the sheer scale of the financial damage done to the country and shocked at the scale of financial self-harm being wrought by the Government's actions. People see it in their local areas and their local schools that are being threatened with closures. They see the caps for simple services like home help for elderly people, the shutdown of disability services and the four-hour commutes they are making every day. They see that the pleas they make for extensions to rail lines to their towns are being scoffed at by Ministers, who say it is just not possible as money is not available. They see their own children suffering from the lack of mental health services, the 1 million people who are currently on hospital waiting lists and the 100,000 people who were on trolleys last year. They put that massive need in their own lives sitting beside the Government's financial self-harm and they simply cannot get their head around it. It is impossible for people to understand how they can suffer so hard in their own lives to try to get simple services for their families when the Government can be seen to squander such a level of money, and nothing happens as a result of it.

**Deputy Paschal Donohoe:** I have already acknowledged and outlined to the House on many occasions how the costs in regard to the national children's hospital and the national broadband plan will not impact on the kind of issues the Deputy is referring to. Deputy Cowen

earlier asked how we are going to pay for these projects and I pointed out that, in the period from 2021 onwards, when the costs of these projects materialise, we have added the cost of these projects to the expenditure plans for Government Departments, so they are not affecting the issues the Deputy is raising. The Deputy referred to the commute times that citizens face. Surely the roll-out of the national broadband plan and ensuring that more homes have connectivity to high-speed broadband access is a way in which we can respond to that. The national children's hospital is not about delivering a building. It is about delivering better care and better services and supports to vulnerable children, the kind of citizens the Deputy has just referred to in his question.

**Deputy Peadar Tóibín:** The question asks for details of excessive spend on current infrastructure projects or those to be completed in 2019. There is an opportunity cost. If the Government takes money and puts it into one project, it has to come out of another project - it cannot just be developed out of thin air. There is an opportunity cost to the disasters that have happened under the Minister's watch. The Minister says something has gone wrong. If something has gone wrong, somebody needs to be made accountable for it. This is another issue people cannot get their heads around in this country. They cannot understand how a Minister can squander billions of euro of taxpayers' money and get off scot-free. People see in their own lives, in their work and in their clubs and community organisations that they themselves are held responsible on a daily basis yet, at the top of the decision tree in this State, it is an accountability-free zone. The Minister mentioned the public spending code that he has designed for the future. Is there any accountability in that code? If, for example, the disaster happened with the national children's hospital under the Minister's public spending code in the future, would it be the case that the Ministers who are responsible for the disaster are held to account?

**Deputy Paschal Donohoe:** Whatever the Oireachtas was across that period, it certainly was not an accountability-free zone.

**Deputy Peadar Tóibín:** The Minister was not held to account.

**Deputy Paschal Donohoe:** I do not know where the Deputy was across that period. I spent a lot of time in this Chamber, answering questions about the national children's hospital and the national broadband plan, as I should, given I am accountable to the House. I spent a lot of time in front of various Oireachtas committees, at which my role in regard to these projects and the decisions that I made were amply challenged by many Deputies.

In regard to broader accountability and what happened with the national children's hospital-----

**Deputy Peadar Tóibín:** With respect, that is not accountability.

**Deputy Paschal Donohoe:** Actually, accountability is putting questions to Members of this House and people who are in positions of influence, like myself, and my being held accountable to the House for them, which is what happened.

In regard to the national children's hospital, the Deputy will be aware there was change in regard to individuals who were in positions of responsibility across the period when the debate on the national children's hospital was at its highest. In terms of accountability beyond that, and in particular in regard to the national broadband plan, for those who think there is a cheaper and quicker way of delivering 100% coverage apart from this plan - perhaps the Deputy is one of them - the time is coming when they will need to spell out how that will happen. I can tell

him that I spent the best part of a year trying to establish if that could be done and I reached the conclusion that the plan in front of us was, on balance, the best way of making it happen.

### **Brexit Expenditure**

69. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the additional expenditure that will be committed for sector-specific mitigation measures in the event of a no-deal Brexit; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [39626/19]

89. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the areas of the budget he is planning to increase in view of the threat of a no-deal Brexit; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [39608/19]

**Deputy Pearse Doherty:** The recent proposals by the British Government to impose a belt of customs checks on either side of the British border on our island is testament to the disregard it has for the peace process that has been built on this island but it is also probably a sign of its disregard for other matters. It is a wake-up call to businesses, given the impact on the economy and jobs as a result of a no-deal Brexit, if it is to come to pass, and we all know it is now more likely than it was this time last year. In the event of a no-deal Brexit, what expenditure is the Minister committing for mitigation measures in affected sectors and what will they be? I am asking this a week out from the budget because my understanding was that we had moved away from the “big bang” announcement. I am not asking the Minister to detail the measures; I am asking him to give us the fiscal parameters of the Brexit contingency measures which, in all fairness, would usually be in the spring statement and the summer economic statement, but we now have to wait for the “big bang” approach.

**Deputy Paschal Donohoe:** I propose to take Questions Nos. 69 and 89 together.

My intention is not to provide a “big bang” announcement. Whatever my last two budgets have been, they cannot be accused of being big bangs in terms of the changes we made from an expenditure, tax and social welfare point of view. The reason I am not in a position to tell the Deputy today what the resources are going to be for dealing with the consequences of a no-deal risk is that I am still working with the Ministers for Agriculture, Food and the Marine, Business, Enterprise and Innovation and Transport, Tourism and Sport on it. What I have said is that in the event of a no-deal Brexit taking place, the funding in that regard will need to be additional to the budget framework we have outlined of €2.8 billion, plus any changes that can be made on top of it. I have outlined in the summer economic statement the kind of deficit swings that are possible for our economy to experience if we end up in the position of having to deal with this risk.

**Deputy Pearse Doherty:** I am aware of all that. As I said, I am not asking for the Minister to itemise the measures or to give figures down to the cent. However, surely to God, despite the fact there are negotiations ongoing, the Minister can tell us whether the Brexit contingency fund he proposes to announce this day next week is in the region of €100 million, €200 million, €300 million, €800 million, €1.5 billion or €2 billion. Can the Minister give the House any indication of what scale he is looking at because it is required?

Sinn Féin has made it very clear today that it wants the money that is earmarked for the rainy day fund to be diverted into a Brexit stabilisation fund. This is not new; we have argued

for it consistently with the Minister in recent years. It is a €2 billion fund that would be there to be drawn down, if necessary, to deal with the impacts of a potential no-deal Brexit. Can the Minister outline the scale of what is involved? Surely to God the negotiations over the coming weeks will not result in a doubling or quadrupling of the figure with which he is working. I refer to the discussion we had at the Committee on Budgetary Oversight regarding the concerns I raised about the rainy day fund. It cannot be used as per the legislation as drafted. I refer also to my freedom of information request and the response I received, which confirms this in the context of a no-deal Brexit. Is the Minister any closer to making a decision as to whether the €1.5 billion earmarked to be invested in the fund will go into it or whether he will reallocate those resources to deal with potential Brexit mitigation measures?

**Deputy Paschal Donohoe:** The Deputy is asking questions on which I have not yet even given the Cabinet a perspective because they are the result of the work we must do to get a budget ready. I will update the Cabinet on all that next week, when I have concluded my work with all other Departments. It is a matter for announcement on budget day. When I am in a position to inform the House of the scale of the fund, I will do so. That will be next week.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** I wish to argue in favour of a big bang of increased expenditure and boosting people's incomes in the event of a no-deal Brexit. That might seem like a radical proposal-----

**Deputy Eugene Murphy:** It is.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** -----but 20 or 30 years ago it would have been considered ABC Keynesian economics. In the face of a possible serious disruption of the economy, whether as a result of Brexit or, for that matter, a looming recession, what Keynes, who was not a socialist, argued is that one should boost people's incomes, boost demand, boost spending power and boost investment in key strategic areas. As the Minister considers his options in the case of a no-deal Brexit, I argue that he should consider this and that Brexit should not become a new excuse for austerity because in the case of the last major disruption post 2008, austerity made a bad situation worse. What we need, if there is to be a serious disruption to our economy as a result of Brexit, is increased expenditure in the vulnerable sectors, protection of jobs through State intervention and the boosting of people's incomes. We should not hold back on supporting vulnerable sectors, and workers should not have their incomes held back when what we need to do is boost their spending power in order to keep the economy afloat against the possible contraction that could result from Brexit.

**Deputy Paschal Donohoe:** The Deputy refers to the potential return of what he calls austerity. Let me be clear that my plan for next week, as we conclude our position on the budget, is for continued day-to-day spending on public services to be maintained and that we will continue to spend more to ensure that our public services have the funds they need to hire teachers, to have the right number of nurses and to put in place the money our hospitals need to cope with the rising costs in respect of demographics. That will not change.

Regarding the supports Deputy Boyd Barrett outlined and the Keynesian approach to this, my point of view is that if we end up dealing with a no-deal Brexit, the economy will need an injection of demand and investment to help it deal with the effects that that would have on people's lives and working standards. We are trying to craft a set of supports that will allow families, businesses and farms to respond to that. I hope we do not have to use those supports because the political consequences of a no-deal setting, as Deputy Pearse Doherty noted, and



the economic consequences are so serious. However, we need to be in a position that if it comes to that, businesses and citizens will have an understanding of what we will be able to do to respond.

**Deputy Pearse Doherty:** I am a bit taken aback by the Minister's response. As stated, I am not looking for details in respect of the specific measure or the final figure; I am looking for a ballpark idea of his thinking on the level of investment needed for a no-deal Brexit. This would normally be set out in the summer economic statement or the spring economic statement, and the Minister is telling me he has not even discussed it with Cabinet. We are a week out from the budget and possibly within 31 days of a no-deal Brexit and he is indicating that he has not discussed the scale of support that would be required in that context, a context that will take approximately €6 billion off the general Government balance. I am absolutely staggered that none of these discussions are happening at Cabinet level and that none of his Cabinet colleagues is asking him the questions I am asking. I am very surprised by that and also very nervous about it. However, if the Minister cannot give me an answer, he cannot give me an answer. Perhaps he can answer the question about the rainy day fund. The legislation is very clear. His Department officials, in response to my freedom of information request, were very clear as well. The fund cannot be used for Brexit mitigation measures. Can the Minister confirm that the €1.5 billion that is earmarked to go into the fund by the end of the year and the €500 million already factored into budget 2020 will not go into the fund and will instead be redirected or held back in case we need the money in the context of Brexit?

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** I welcome the Minister's comment to the effect that he will not let Brexit become the new austerity, particularly as that would be absolutely the wrong approach. However, there have been certain signals that, for example, social welfare increases or boosts in workers' incomes might be held back in the event of a no-deal Brexit. I put it to the Minister that that would be a mistake. Even holding things as they are would in effect amount to cuts in real terms. Workers and the least well-off need their incomes increased, particularly in the event of a no-deal Brexit.

I have a suggestion for the Minister. I refer to the Wrightbus company, which is in trouble in the North. Against a background of needing to increase our electric bus fleet and transform and expand our bus fleet for reasons of climate change, if no other, and also in the context of no-deal and the difficulties that could arise, a very good gesture on the part of the Government would be to look at perhaps trying to push some work the way of that bus company in order to get some buses down here and enhance cross-Border trade in a key area while helping to save jobs in the North. It would be a useful gesture and a practical economic measure.

**Deputy Paschal Donohoe:** It is up to the National Transport Authority and Bus Éireann to decide where they will buy their buses. They must try to source buses at best value, and hydrogen and mixed-fuel buses are an awful lot more expensive than the buses they have traditionally had in the past. As I said to the Deputy, it is my intention that our day-to-day spending on our public services will continue to increase if we end up dealing with a no-deal Brexit. That is what we are seeking to do.

I have stated that our position on tax and social welfare will be very different from what it was in the past. We should be really careful about finding ourselves in a position in which we must borrow to, for example, cut taxes. If the country finds itself dealing with the consequences of a no-deal Brexit, potentially within weeks, and if we are to borrow, we must borrow to support our economy, help to keep people in work and intervene in particular parts of our country.

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That is what we will borrow for, and I will take great care to try to ensure that I do not make any further changes which might ultimately prove unaffordable.

Deputy Pearse Doherty knows that what I was referring to was the fact that budget day packages must be agreed by the Cabinet on the morning of the budget. Not a Cabinet meeting goes by without very extensive and lengthy discussions on Brexit. What I specifically said to the Deputy was that I am already engaged in lengthy discussions on no-deal supports with the Departments of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, Transport, Tourism and Sport and Business, Enterprise and Innovation. I will bring that to an end on budget day. Likewise, I will deal with the decision regarding the rainy day fund on budget day.

### **Public Sector Pensions**

70. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform if he will meet with representatives of retired public and semi-State workers (details supplied) to discuss their grievances about reductions and changes to their pension schemes in previous years which have not been fully restored ahead of the upcoming budget; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [39615/19]

**Deputy Bríd Smith:** Will the Minister meet with representatives of retired public servants and semi-State workers to discuss their grievances about reductions in their pensions and changes to their pension schemes in previous years which have not been fully restored ahead of the forthcoming budget, and will he make a statement on the matter?

**Deputy Paschal Donohoe:** My officials and I have engaged with public service pensioners regarding public service pensions issues through meetings with the Alliance of Retired Public Servants, ARPS.

Over the past few years, the interests and concerns of public service pensioners have been regularly articulated in those meetings. Through this process of engagement, I believe that public service pensioners have had, and continue to be afforded, a meaningful and direct means of articulating their concerns on pensions and related issues. The Deputy should note that two of the three bodies mentioned in the details supplied are members of this alliance. It is my intention to make arrangements for further engagement with the alliance in the near future.

A number of developments are in progress that directly address pensioner concerns.

First, there has been a significant further lessening of the public service pension reduction, PSPR, which was imposed on pensions under the Financial Emergency Measures in the Public Interest, FEMPI, Acts. When fully in place from January 2020, the PSPR amelioration measures will mean that the vast majority of public service retirees, 97%, will be entirely free from the PSPR.

Second, for the duration of the current wage agreement the Government is committed to a conditions-bound return to the non-statutory pensions increase policy known as pay parity. This means that, in general, individuals who retired after 1 March 2012 will qualify for increases while, as the agreement progresses, a greater proportion of pensioners who retired before that date will also qualify.

**Deputy Bríd Smith:** The Minister has said publicly on a number of occasions that he would

meet representative groups, but he has yet to do so personally. They have been in contact with the Minister recently to seek a meeting prior to the budget. The point, however, is that the right of these groups to be represented should not be based on the grace and favour of the Minister. It is not tea and sympathy they need, but workers' rights and the right to use the industrial relations mechanisms of the State. The protest outside the House today comprised representative groups of teachers, gardaí, fire fighters, local authority workers, workers from the ESB, CIE and so forth, people who served the State for all their adult lives. Some of them were children when they started at 15 or 16 years of age. They have been let down poorly by the Minister. First, they do not have the right to sit at the table when pay negotiations for public servants are taking place. They are often overlooked and sidelined. They are seeking industrial relations rights, recognition that they matter and to be able to explain and negotiate their case at the Workplace Relations Commission, WRC. Their second requirement is for the Financial Services and Pensions Ombudsman to recognise them as a collective, not just as individuals who take individual cases. They need that collective bargaining strength. Will the Minister do something about this?

**Deputy Paschal Donohoe:** I acknowledge the contribution that retired public servants have made to our country. I also acknowledge the fact that if one is a retired public servant, one does not have the options to increase one's income that somebody who is still active and working in the workforce has. Significant changes have already been made to public pension payments during the lifetime of this agreement. The levy or reduction that caused such frustration to so many pensioners is now in the process of being unwound. Depending on when pensioners retired, we have a policy in place, which is a consequence of the wage agreement, to gradually make payment increases available. I believe we are making progress on this matter.

Regarding whether I will seek to include retired public sector workers in the negotiation of collective agreements, that is not a change I plan to make. If we are dealing with public pay policy, it is only appropriate that we engage and work with those who represent people who are in work. However, when we are making decisions in this regard I always bear in mind the effect they will have on those who have retired.

**Deputy Bríd Smith:** The Minister talks about the consequences of the wage agreement. Certainly, the consequences of the wage agreement affected existing workers, but those workers will one day be pensioners too and the index with their work and pay has been broken. Has the index with the Minister's pension and his rights and pay been broken or is that just for the fire fighters, council workers, gardaí, ESB workers and those who served the State for many years of their lives? Consider the systemic nature of how pensioners have been treated in both the public and private sectors. In the public sector, in particular, there was an impression that they all had gold-plated pensions. In fact, it is Ministers and former taoisigh who have gold-plated pensions, rather than the ordinary workers. However, they have been consistently scapegoated, with their pensions and pension rights reduced. A number of measures must be taken. The one in which the Minister can have a key role is unlocking that break in the index with current workers, whereby their pensions are severely suffering as a result.

**Deputy Paschal Donohoe:** I am not scapegoating anybody.

**Deputy Bríd Smith:** I am not saying the Minister did. I said they were scapegoated.

**Deputy Paschal Donohoe:** Given the view the Deputy articulated regarding pensioners being scapegoated, it is only fair to outline my view on it. I recall that when I was dealing with

this issue during the period in which the current wage agreement was being negotiated about two years ago I saw the average pension levels that are available to those who have worked for many decades in our public services. They are a long way from some of the higher value pensions that were the source of public debate and controversy some time ago. I am aware of the issues the Deputy mentioned. I will ensure that my officials meet the alliance in the future when we review where we are with this agreement and what might take its place in the future. I want to hear the views of retired workers with regard to decisions I might make in the future.

### **Office of Public Works Properties**

71. **Deputy Maureen O’Sullivan** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the relationship between a location (details supplied) and the OPW; his views on the location refusing permission for a group to perform there as part of a cultural event while allowing the group to perform in the past; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [39474/19]

**Deputy Maureen O’Sullivan:** My question relates to the Convention Centre Dublin and the relationship between it and the Office of Public Works, OPW. What is the Minister of State’s view of the fact that the location has refused permission to a cultural organisation to perform there? It is a cultural organisation that performed there a couple of years ago.

**Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Kevin Boxer Moran):** The Convention Centre Dublin, CCD, is a public private partnership, PPP, project developed on a design, build, finance, operate and maintain, DBFOM, model. Construction was completed in 2010 when it opened for business. In return for a monthly unitary charge, an independent company operates the CCD under the provisions of a project agreement that will remain in effect until its expiry in 2035. The primary objective in developing a national convention centre, as set out in that project agreement, is: “... to increase Ireland’s share of the international conference market, thereby increasing import tourism revenues. The main measure of the NCC’s success will be the extent to which it succeeds in contributing towards meeting this objective”.

The project agreement sets annual targets for international conference delegates. Failure to achieve targets set under the project agreement results in financial penalties for the operators.

The OPW does not have a role in commercial matters relating to bookings or in the day-to-day operation of the CCD. The property is held by the operator under a legal agreement for an operational period of 25 years and, accordingly, any issues relating to the use of the premises are properly dealt with by the facility operator.

In this regard, it is noted that the chairman of the CCD issued a comprehensive response to the group in July 2019 setting out his reasons for not hosting the event.

**Deputy Maureen O’Sullivan:** I do not know if the Minister of State saw that comprehensive response, but I did and I would not call it comprehensive. I will outline the background to this. In either 2014 or 2015 I attended a performance by the Shen Yun Performing Arts in the convention centre. It was there for two years. It was a stunning and spectacular performance of Chinese classical dance with an orchestra and traditional Chinese costumes. The group applied in March 2018 to have a repeat performance at the convention centre but was turned down. Yet, in February last year the Confucius Institute held a cultural event in the centre and no later

than June last year I attended an event there celebrating 20 years of Chinese-Irish diplomatic relations organised by the Chinese embassy. The Minister for Justice and Equality, Deputy Flanagan, was also in attendance. It was a cultural event with Chinese music and dancing, yet Shen Yun has been refused permission to perform in the centre, even though it had performed there on two previous occasions.

A similar scenario arose at the Palais de Congrès in Paris where Shen Yun was initially turned down under pressure, it seems, from the Chinese Communist authorities. However, the Palais de Congrès told the Chinese authorities that everybody was welcome. The conclusion I come to is that this particular group is being discriminated against at the behest of the Chinese embassy and authorities.

**Deputy Kevin Boxer Moran:** The Deputy is correct in saying that the convention centre previously hosted Shen Yung shows in 2014 and 2015. The operator is now focusing on its core business of attracting international associations and corporate entities to host conferences in Dublin in the centre. I am advised that since January 2016, it has only hosted two ticketed public performance arts shows. This is in line with its contractual obligations and it is a matter for the management of the centre to make judgments in this regard.

**Deputy Maureen O’Sullivan:** The centre also plays host to community groups, as the Minister for Finance, Deputy Donohoe, who represents the same constituency as me, will know. The centre allows community groups to use its facilities. Management is being very selective in the answer it has provided to the Department. The centre is State funded and has an agreement with the Department but it reflects very badly on the Department if one particular group is being discriminated against. This group has performed in over 150 cities around the world in prestigious venues like the Kennedy Centre in Washington, the Lincoln Centre in New York and the ICC in Birmingham as well as theatres in London, Berlin, Milan, Barcelona and Rotterdam. The convention centre in Dublin is an ideal venue for this group, such is the number of performers involved.

There is another agenda at work here. I hate to say it and I hope I am wrong but I cannot come to any other conclusion. This group performed in this venue on two previous occasions. It is not as if the centre is full 365 days a year with conferences. I live nearby and pass the centre twice every day so I know there are times when it is empty. This particular event would bring a lot of people into the area, as it did previously, and would be good for tourism, hotels and so on. I ask the Minister of State to go back to Mr. Dwyer because his answer was not comprehensive.

**Deputy Kevin Boxer Moran:** I will go back to Mr. Dwyer and seek a more detailed answer.

### **Public Procurement Regulations**

73. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the extent to which his Department has issued guidance notes or made provision for the exclusion of economic operators in procurement procedures for public contracts in circumstances in which the economic operator has shown significant or persistent deficiencies or failures in the performance of a prior public contract; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [39623/19]

**Deputy Pearse Doherty:** Our public procurement system is in need of urgent reform. We



need a system that is green, promotes social justice and facilitates local wealth building. We need a procurement model that avoids the spending scandals that we have seen under this Government, most notably in relation to the national children's hospital and the national broadband plan. What provisions has the Department of Finance made, such as guidance notes or systems, to exclude contractors from public contracts if they have shown persistent failures in previous contracts awarded?

**Deputy Paschal Donohoe:** Public procurement in Ireland is governed by EU procurement directives and national legislation. Public bodies are obliged to act in accordance with these rules and must respect the general principles of EU law, including non-discrimination, the free movement of goods and services, equal treatment and proportionality and transparency in awarding public contracts. They must also ensure that procurement transactions and decisions are fair and equitable and deliver value for money.

Public procurement procedures require applicants to meet certain standards when applying for public contracts. The criteria upon which contracting authorities may exclude applicants from the award procedure of public contracts are set out in the directives and in corresponding national legislation. In addition, information on the circumstances in which a contracting authority may exclude applicants can be found in Public Procurement Guidelines for Goods and Services published by the Office of Government Procurement. These guidelines were updated in January 2019.

The circumstances that would lead to exclusion on the grounds of poor past performance are significant or persistent deficiencies in a prior public contract. Deficiencies must be material and have led to termination, damages or other comparable sanctions. A contracting authority cannot be merely dissatisfied; it must have taken steps to deal with the poor performance at the point at which it became evident by applying the provisions of the contract, up to and including termination where necessary. Where a contract has been terminated or damages successfully applied, a contractor may be excluded from subsequent tender competitions for up to three years from the date of the termination or the application of damages unless the contractor can demonstrate that it has taken the steps necessary to remedy its performance.

**Deputy Pearse Doherty:** Earlier this year, a construction firm, Western Building Systems, was awarded a contract to deliver a 60-bed modular ward extension at University Hospital Limerick. The same construction firm was found to be responsible for structural defects in many of the 42 new schools that have been built in recent years. In August, the Minister for Education and Skills, Deputy McHugh, said that structural flaws had been identified in a further 17 school buildings which would require temporary works to be carried out in the following weeks. All of the funding for this is coming from the pocket of the taxpayer. Asked why this firm won the contract for the ward at University Hospital Limerick, the Minister for Health said that Ministers in Departments do not have a role in the procurement process, which has to be run in accordance with very strict national and EU laws. The Minister for Health does not seem to understand EU regulations or the procurement process because section 56, paragraph 8 of the European Union (Award of Public Contracts) Regulation, which was transposed here in 2016, is very clear. It says that a contracting authority may exclude from participation in a procurement procedure any economic operator "where the economic operator has shown significant or persistent deficiencies in the performance of a substantive requirement under a prior public contract". Given the evidence that we have regarding the widespread defects related to this contractor, why under God did the Government not apply this provision and exclude it from bidding for and being awarded a further public contract to build a modular hospital extension?

**Deputy Paschal Donohoe:** The Deputy knows it is not the role of individual Ministers to get involved in determining who gets what work within the State. It is the role of independent authorities to determine the successful applicants in the bidding process and to decide who is best able to carry out the work. If I was determining who gets what work in this State, work that is often very valuable, Deputy Doherty knows it would create a whole other set of challenges and difficulties of which he would be rightly critical. In my answer to Deputy Cowen earlier I said we are examining if it is possible to make a broader assessment of whether work carried out by a company would influence other work it might get in the future. At all times, we must be mindful that companies might have difficulties with one project but might be successful in delivering many others. My recollection of the great difficulties that happened with school projects and school buildings earlier this year is that the Minister for Education and Skills and his Department went to great lengths to ensure the taxpayer was protected in dealing with the issues identified.

**Deputy Pearse Doherty:** This should simply never have happened. We have a company here which was involved in serious deficiencies in building schools where our children are educated. It went on to bid for and was awarded a contract to build a modular extension to University Hospital Limerick. The rules are very clear. I have read them aloud. The European Union (Award of Public Contracts) Regulation, which was transposed here, is clear that we can exclude a company where it has shown “significant or persistent deficiencies” in the performance of a substantive requirement under a prior public contract. A failure to understand a paragraph of the regulation is not an excuse for the Minister failing to implement this. The Government must deal with this promptly. The provisions are there to protect the public purse and to make sure that entities awarded contracts for capital projects can fulfil those contracts and that we learn from past experience. My party has also tabled the Regulation of Tenderers Bill 2019, which would contribute to this end by excluding abnormally low tenders from the procurement process. This reform was introduced by my party in the North and was updated in 2016. All of this is permissible under European law. As the Minister in charge of this area, will the Minister, Deputy Donohoe, ensure that these provisions, which are allowed under European law, are introduced and robustly implemented?

**Deputy Paschal Donohoe:** I referred to this earlier on. I am currently involved in reviewing the public spending code. I am looking at whether a different balance needs to be struck. I assure the Deputy that I am well aware of, and understand, all of the things we need to deliver in procurement policy. While I have acknowledged previously, as I have this afternoon, that which we have got wrong in respect of the national children’s hospital and national broadband plan, many other projects across the country are being delivered on time and on budget. We have many examples of our procurement policy working very well. We are reviewing the public spending code in respect of very big projects. When I publish the public spending code in a few weeks’ time, I will be in a position to update the House further.

### **Cúrsaí Oidhreachta**

72. D’fhiafraigh **Deputy Catherine Connolly** den Aire Caiteachais Phoiblí agus Athchóirithe cén dul chun cinn atá déanta ó thaobh réiteach a fháil maidir leis na fadhbanna páirceála atá ann gar d’Ionad Oidhreachta Dhún Aonghasa, Árainn, Contae na Gaillimhe; agus an ndéanfaidh sé ráiteas ina thaobh. [37932/19]

**Deputy Catherine Connolly:** Gabh mo leithscéal as a bheith déanach.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Bhí an Teachta ag teacht isteach an doras.

**Deputy Catherine Connolly:** Tá ceist dhíreach shimplí agam. Cén dul chun cinn atá déanta ó thaobh réiteach a fháil maidir le fadhbanna páirceála gar don suíomh oidhreacht seo? I have ten seconds, so I will say it again in English. It is a very simple question. What progress has been made in respect of the provision of parking facilities beside Dún Aonghasa on the Aran Islands? I am not sure why it is within the Minister of State's remit, perhaps it relates to the Office of Public Works brief, but I would really like an answer.

**Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach (Deputy Seán Kyne):** Tógfaidh mé an cheist seo ar son an Aire Stáit, Teachta Moran. I lár mí Iúil, dhún úinéir na réadmhaoine an limistéar páirceála ag ionad cuairteoirí Dhún Aonghasa ar feadh cúpla lá, mar gheall ar inní ára-chais, is cosúil. Tar éis roinnt idirbheartaíochta, d'aontaigh Oifig na nOibreacha Poiblí, OPW, téarmaí cheadúnas sealadach leis an úinéir, rud a thug cumas don OPW ceannas a ghlacadh ar an láthair agus é a ath-oscailt le cinntiú go raibh rochtain ag an bpobal le linn tréimhse gnóthach an tsamhraidh déanaigh. Tá sé socraithe freisin ag na buíon go dtabharfaidh siad faoin gceadúnas sealadach seo a aistriú go léas foirmeálta, i ndiadh tuilleadh idirbheartaíochta agus aontú maidir le roinnt ceisteanna áirithe.

Ta sé ar intinn ag an OPW, nuair atá lán-smacht dlíthiúil trí léas fad-téarmach aici, agus le comhaontú an úinéara, oibreacha feabhsúcháin slándála pleanáilte a chur i gcrích laistigh den limistéar páirceála. Tíocfaidh an bóthar isteach, atá i seilbh príobháideach chomh maith - agus áit a bhfuil, dár leis an OPW, roinnt guaiseacha ann faoi láthair - faoi bhráid na n-oibreacha slándála seo chomh maith. Déanfaidh an OPW iarracht, le linn an tógra seo, an inní atá ar roinnt den lucht úsáidte a réiteach agus beartaíonn sí go n-eagrófar comhairliúchán poiblí a thabharfadh deis do chuile pháirtí a dtuaraimí a chur in iúl.

**Deputy Catherine Connolly:** I dtús báire, ba mhaith liom a rá go bhfuil an t-ábhar seo ardaithe go minic ag mo chomhghleacaí, an Teachta Éamon Ó Cuív, freisin. Níl cóip den fhreagra sin agam ach, de réir mar a thuigim, tá beagáinín dul chun cinn déanta. Is é an rud a chuireann inní orm ná nach gcloisim aon dháta. Beidh tús le próiseas comhairliúcháin agus beidh tús le rudaí eile, ach cén t-am? Tá sé ardaithe agam agus ag mo chomhghleacaí cheana anseo. An bhfuil an tAire Stáit ag rá go soiléir go bhfuil dhá rud i gceist? Tá talamh faoi sheilbh Oifig na nOibreacha Poiblí, agus tá réiteach maidir leis sin, ach is talamh príobháideach é an talamh eile. Tá an Roinn i mbun cainte chun an talamh sin a fháil faoi léas nó é a cheannach. An féidir leis an Aire Stáit soiléiriú a thabhairt dom?

**Deputy Seán Kyne:** Gabhaim buíochas leis an Teachta. Tá a fhios agam go bhfuil an-suim aici agus ag na Teachtaí eile sa dháilcheantar, go háirithe an Teachta Ó Cuív, san ábhar seo. Tá a fhios againn an tábhacht a bhaineann leis an ionad cuairteoirí ag Dún Aonghasa. Táimid ag caint faoin talamh príobháideach a fháil ar léas fad-téarmach. Is é sin atá ráite ag an Aire Stáit, an Teachta Moran. Tá géarghá ann aghaidh a thabhairt ar staid an tsuímh faoi láthair. Tá trapanna capall, coisithe agus rothaithe ar fad ag úsáid an bealach isteach agus an spás páirceála céanna gan aon idirdhealú soiléir idir na dreamanna éagsúla. Tá baol sláinte agus sábhailteachta ag baint leis sin. Caithfear ceansú ceart a chur i bhfeidhm. Sin an fáth go bhfuil an idirbheartaíocht seo leis na páirtithe uilig chun teacht ar réiteach ar an bhfadhb seo ag dul ar aghaidh. Is dul chun cinn suntasach atá fógartha inniu ag an Aire Stáit, an Teachta Moran.

**Deputy Catherine Connolly:** Glacaim leis go bhfuil dul chun cinn déanta agus gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire Stáit as sin. Bhí mé ar na hOileáin Árann ar feadh seachtaine i mí Lúnasa. Seo ceann de na hionaid oidhreachta ba mhó tóir air sa domhan. Bhí breis is 130,000 cuairteoirí ann an bhliain seo caite. Tá sé admhaithe ag an Rialtas go bhfuil géarghá ann chun réiteach a fháil. Molaim an tAire Stáit as an dul chun cinn ata déanta ach arís tá easpa spriocdháta ann. Cén uair a bheidh an fhadhb réitithe? Tá an suíomh oidhreachta seo an-tábhachtach. An féidir leis an Aire Stáit dáta a chur leis sin? An mbeidh sé sé mhí eile, nó bliain eile? Cad é an spriocdháta?

**Deputy Seán Kyne:** Nílím ar an eolas faoin dáta sin. Tá súil agam go mbeidh an tAire Stáit, an Teachta Moran, sásta casadh leis na Teachtaí go léir ón dáilcheantar sin chun an cheist sin a phlé chomh luath agus is féidir. Tá a fhios agam go bhfuil an-suim aige san ionad seo. Bhí mé i dteagmháil leis an Teachta agus leis an Teachta Ó Cuív faoi na rudaí seo. Sílim go mbeidh an tAire Stáit sásta cruinniú a eagrú chomh luath agus is féidir chun na rudaí seo a phlé.

### **Public Services Card**

74. **Deputy Jonathan O'Brien** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the consultancy fees paid to date by his Department for the promotion and roll-out of the public services card in the public service; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [39593/19]

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** We move on to the last question, which Deputy Pearse Doherty will ask on behalf of Deputy Jonathan O'Brien. I ask the Deputy to forfeit his initial 20 seconds. The Minister will answer and then the Deputy may ask one question.

**Deputy Paschal Donohoe:** As the Deputy is aware, the public services card is a means of assisting the delivery of public services to the people who need them in a safe and efficient manner. It was brought about to ensure personal data is protected and to ensure people get access to public services safely, securely and efficiently.

In January 2017, my Department launched a public communications campaign for both the public services card and MyGovID. The primary objectives of that campaign were: to improve public awareness, to highlight services, and to let people know about the card itself and the detailed information on it. The campaign was delivered on radio, online and through print channels and the cost across the period was €205,440. This included the design and creation of all the creative content, the media strategy and media-buying aspects of the campaign.

In addition, in February this year, a further communications campaign was undertaken in relation to MyGovID. The aim of this campaign was to drive public awareness of the MyGovID online platform and the many benefits associated with it. The campaign was delivered on radio and online channels and the cost of the campaign was €99,669. These campaigns have been successful as the number of verified MyGovID accounts now exceeds 390,000.

**Deputy Pearse Doherty:** The Minister has been a cheerleader for the public services card. He has encouraged people to avail of it as a means of access to other public services in the areas of transport, passports and many others. We have heard of the willingness to spend public money on promoting that idea. The Minister is, however, in a sticky situation. The Data Protection Commissioner has expressed in three of her main findings that there was no legal basis for persons to be required to obtain a public services card in order to transact with a public body

other than the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection. The commissioner has put the Minister firmly in the dock in that regard. She has also said that the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection was in breach of data retention principles by keeping all data indefinitely and that the Department has been insufficiently transparent with the public in respect of the roll-out of the card. On one hand, the Minister is willing to spend taxpayers' money on challenging the Data Protection Commissioner's findings while on the other hand he will end up funding the commissioner to take this case on the other side.

The new national childcare scheme opens for applications on 29 October. No parent can apply for this scheme without a public services card. This is despite the Data Protection Commissioner's decision that there is no legal basis for this requirement and it being deemed illegal by the commissioner. Parents who do not have a public services card will have no choice but to wait until January when written applications can be made. Why did the Department interject when a secondary method to apply for this scheme was to be provided for parents? At the insistence of the Department, this proposal was dropped by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs. Will the Minister explain this, given that the Data Protection Commissioner has deemed that there is no legal basis for leaving parents with only one option as regards the form of identification they can use to apply for the scheme?

**Deputy Paschal Donohoe:** My good colleague, the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, Deputy Zappone, is working on ways to ensure that families and parents will be able to access the national childcare scheme. The Deputy referred to me being in the dock on this matter. I fully understand the views of the Data Protection Commission, an institution which I take seriously. In each of the budgets that I have introduced, I have made more resources available to the commission because it is an important organisation for the management of information, both for the private sector and Government. I have taken a different view on the role of the public services card following legal advice that has been made available to me. The Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection, Deputy Regina Doherty, and I did not take lightly the decision we made to offer a differing view from that of the Data Protection Commissioner. This was done after we obtained legal advice on where we stood, which left me satisfied that the card has robust legal standing and that the appropriate course was to make clear that we take a different view from the commissioner on this issue. I know the commissioner has spoken to the Oireachtas about the issue and indicated the course of action she is likely to take.

**Deputy Pearse Doherty:** Will the Minister outline why his Department insisted that a second form of access to the national childcare scheme be dropped, leaving parents with only the public services card as a means of accessing this scheme?

**Deputy Paschal Donohoe:** We believe that we are on solid legal foundations in using the public services card as a way to help citizens to access services efficiently. Encouraging greater use of the public services card over time will lead to more convenient and efficient ways in which families and citizens can access public services.

**Deputy Pearse Doherty:** It is not very convenient for parents.

*Written Answers are published on the Oireachtas website.*



## Saincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Debate

### Forestry Sector

**Deputy Jackie Cahill:** I will focus on issues relating to forestry and climate change. I am aware that Private Members' business this evening relates to much the same issue. I have received a number of representations in recent weeks from people who are concerned about forestry. If we are to be serious about climate change, action is required. We are kidding ourselves if we believe that launching Government policy on the matter, with a now familiar fanfare, will result in any meaningful change to current trends. Claiming that there is a climate change crisis will get headlines but without a coherent action plan, nothing will change. Scientists tell us that a single hectare of mature trees absorbs 6.4 tonnes of carbon per annum. Scientists also accept that planting trees is by far the quickest and cheapest way of tackling climate change.

Carbon needs to be removed from the atmosphere. As trees grow, they absorb and store the carbon dioxide emissions that are driving global warming. According to Coillte, wood and wood products are known as climate smart products. They are low energy, renewable and fully sustainable construction materials. When used for construction or furniture, they store carbon for long periods. Coillte also states that wood is a low carbon source of fuel and that using wood and wood products for construction and biomass burning releases much less carbon dioxide back into the atmosphere than conventional fossil fuels.

Coillte has committed to increasing the amount of carbon dioxide stored by our forests by managing our existing forests on a fully sustainable basis and promoting the use of wood and wood products as an alternative to fossil fuels and non-renewable construction materials. Private companies and individual growers also have a significant part to play in this process. This Government has set a target of planting 8,000 ha of forestry per annum. Unfortunately, we are only reaching 50% of that target. The reason is the level of bureaucracy and delays in granting licences for clearing, felling and planting. In 2015, there were delays of up to 522 days in granting a licence. In 2016, there were delays of up to 680 days and in 2017, delays reached a staggering 1,119 days before falling to 959 days in 2018. The effect of this is that growers miss planting deadlines and the whole process is backed up. The Government is ultimately missing very modest targets for forestry planting.

The impact on the businesses involved is also a serious problem. I was speaking with the owner of a clear-felling company in Tipperary this week. He has 12 employees but has no work to do for the first time in many years. I visited a nursery in the Minister of State's part of the country last week and it is also struggling with the amount of planting available. This is seriously affecting the viability of the business. In reply to a parliamentary question recently, the Minister of State told me that vetting applications for licences was a complicated process. I have no doubt that is the case. However, that should not be used as an excuse to allow delays in granting licences to continue. The Minister of State must immediately put in place sufficient manpower to grant licences and significantly reduce waiting times. Without this measure, there will be job losses in the sector and we will continue to fall behind our climate change targets, which will cost the State in carbon credits.

The Forestry Act 2014 is a complicating factor. The in-combination impact assessment being used is unduly bureaucratic and the application of a radius of 15 km to 20 km is completely

impractical. This radius should be set at a maximum of 3 km and there must be an exemption for plantations under 8 ha. More ecologists are required in the Department to interpret reports as they come in. Staff must be provided to reduce this delay.

**Minister of State at the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Andrew Doyle):** I thank Deputy Cahill for raising this issue. I am keenly aware of the importance of the timely issue of approvals by my Department for the planting, thinning and felling of trees, both to achieve our afforestation targets and to ensure a consistent supply of timber for processing and renewable energy. As the Deputy is aware, forestry in Ireland operates within a legal and regulatory framework. This is necessary to protect forests and ensure forestry operations and activities are carried out in compliance with the principles of sustainable forest management. To this end, there are a number of steps to be followed for decisions about proposed forestry operations.

The Department is required to carefully vet all afforestation applications with regard to their potential impact on the surrounding environment, habitats and archaeological monuments and with regard to the social aspects of the proposal, and to ensure that the proposal meets the required silvicultural standards. This detailed examination is carried out by district forestry inspectors supported by experts in archaeology and ecology within the Department. Applications may also be referred externally to an outside agency or a public body, with up to eight weeks provided for a response for these external referrals. Applications often require additional information from the applicant and these take time. For openness and transparency reasons, applications are also open to public consultation, facilitated by the advertisement of applications on the Department's website and by a site notice. Interested parties may make a submission in writing on an application within 30 days of it being advised. The net effect of this is that there is a certain minimum timeframe involved in the decisions.

The Department has received 645 applications for 5,050 ha of afforestation to date in 2019.

Approvals have issued for 3,440 ha of afforestation. In addition, payments have issued for 2,968 ha of new afforestation and 51 km of new forest roads, which are essential for timber harvesting. It is not correct, therefore, to say there is a crisis in issuing licences, although there are challenges. I acknowledge that the requirements in terms of environmental compliance are more challenging than they have been in the past. My officials are dealing with this by means of an enhanced online application system, additional resources and specific training both for departmental foresters and private foresters. We must, of course, meet these environmental requirements to ensure that the public has confidence in the sustainability of our afforestation programme.

We have experienced an upsurge in felling licences in recent years, possibly because they are now valid for up to ten years and may cover several felling events on the same plot. The number of felling licences applied for doubled from 2017 to 2018, from 3,300 to 6,600. We have this year issued 3,700 licences, which is double the number issued in 2018. Furthermore, 82% of tree-felling licences were approved within four months.

We can do better and that is why I commissioned an external review of my Department's forestry applications and approvals process to ensure it is as efficient and effective as possible. Mr. Jim Mackinnon, CBE, former chief planner with the Scottish Government, is currently undertaking this review and will report on it by the year's end. I look forward to his findings. He has met a range of stakeholders right across the industry. We really are anticipating that he will

have some positive comments and constructive suggestions.

As is the case with all of my Government colleagues, I am acutely aware of the climate emergency. Forestry has a very significant role to play in helping meet our mitigation objectives, particularly through carbon sequestration, which is why a target of 8,000 ha is included in the climate action plan. I know only too well that achieving this target will be difficult as recent trends have not delivered planting at this rate, despite the generous grants and premiums offered by my Department.

**Deputy Jackie Cahill:** I thank the Minister of State for his reply. I wish to focus on his statement that there is no crisis in the granting of licences. I have spoken to the nurseries, planting companies and a company involved in clear-felling and thinning and all have concluded there is a crisis. The planting figures for this year will undoubtedly underline that. At most, there will be 4,000 ha of new planting this year. This is only 50% of the target. All those I have spoken to are convinced this is attributable to the bureaucratic system that is in place in the Department owing to the new Act.

An environmental impact assessment on an area of 15 km to 20 km of any area of forestry in the country will undoubtedly cover designated land, special areas of conservation or environmentally protected areas. There would be an impact on wildlife. There is no way that would not occur. A common-sense approach has to be adopted to ensure licences can be granted in a timely fashion. As I said in my opening statement, the first step should be the exemption of plantations smaller than 8 ha under the new Act. For farmer forestry, that would be a great help.

On the ground, farmers have to wait too long to get an answer as to whether their land will be acceptable for planting. They are making other decisions on land use as a consequence. This seriously affects the amount of land that is being planted. This is not coming from me but from the stakeholders in the industry.

**Deputy Andrew Doyle:** As I said, we have commissioned a report from Mr. Jim Mackinnon on the applications and administration process. I hope this will streamline the process even further. The core point is that the applications are down to 5,000 ha. We cannot grant on the basis of applications we do not receive. We need to ascertain the reasons for that. There are competitive factors, such as the surge in dairying, and there is the temptation to enter into long-term tax-free leases. There are many negative connotations about the industry, not to speak of all the other matters. I am not trying to cover over what is going on because a lot of work needs to be done but if the Deputy is talking about adding bureaucracy, he should consider some of the recommendations. We can discuss them later. A fundamental change to forestry policy is recommended, with a move away from shorter rotations to longer ones, agroforestry and semi-wilding. I suggest that the Deputy go back to the people he has talked to and ask them their opinion on what is in the proposal tonight. I would be quite sure that they would be aghast at it. We are talking about trying to mix the commercial good and environmental good, and about biodiversity. We have, on foot of the mid-term review of 2017, implemented in February 2018, seen a marked increase in the number of broadleaves, albeit from a smaller overall figure. There has been an increase from 22% or 23% to 28% in one year. There are signs of this occurring again.

There is a lot of work in progress. I ask the House to accept our bona fides regarding what we are trying to do. I am concerned about what would occur if the policy suggested by the Deputy were to be adopted as Government policy on an afforestation programme. It would

nose-dive completely.

## **Animal Diseases**

**Deputy Michael Healy-Rae:** I thank the Ceann Comhairle for accepting this issue.

The people on whose behalf I am speaking tonight are the salt of the earth. They are predominantly rural people who adore the sport of coursing. Coursing is an integral part of what they are all about. It is part of our history and what we are. I believe passionately in this subject. It is so important to raise it with the Minister, Deputy Madigan. Of the 14 lagomorph carcasses found, 13 of which reputedly tested positive for rabbit haemorrhagic disease virus 2, RHD2, how many were hares? If any was a hare, was it made available for independent testing? Has the National Parks and Wildlife Service, NPWS, mapped the spread of the disease from its original source? It seems ironic to me - I am not going into theories on what did or did not happen - that the disease is jumping not only from county to bordering county but from one end of the country to the other, from north, east, west and south. What is happening is very erratic. I have questions about that.

Why has the Department and the NPWS continuously refused offers of help from those best placed to monitor the overall situation? An example is our excellent Irish Coursing Club, which has an integral network of clubs throughout the country and is recognised worldwide as being a protector of the Irish hare.

I remind the Minister that a licence to net was granted on a Friday and revoked on a Saturday on the strength of a hare being found in Wexford. It was supposed to have been infected. How was it discovered, literally within a couple of hours and without due process and proper independent testing, that the hare was infected? All of a sudden, all hell broke loose. The licence was revoked and our coursing industry is now in dire jeopardy as a result. I am questioning everything that has happened. I want everything to be scrutinised because there is an awful lot riding on this.

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** I too thank the Ceann Comhairle for accepting this matter. Many constituents and I listened to the head vet from the NPWS on "Morning Ireland" recently. The case he made for not issuing the licence for netting hares was absolutely comical. First, the NPWS official said during the programme that the service has been dealing with the disease only for six weeks although, at the beginning, he said his colleagues in the United Kingdom were aware of it for over two years. Why did the NPWS not take action when it was aware two years ago that the disease was so close to our shores? The official also said the disease can be spread by nets and boxes. He said he knew this from his colleagues in England. If so, why did he not advise the Irish Coursing Club last year to disinfect all nets and boxes? Either he was not asked to say that a vaccine is available to stop this disease, or he avoided the question. If this disease is so dangerous to the native Irish hare and can be spread by humans by means of infected grass on their shoes, why did he say that steps have merely been taken to introduce disinfectant foot baths in national parks and on Scatterry Island?

Should a nationwide campaign not have been introduced, as was done in the case of foot and mouth disease, in order to ensure that people who visit farms are disinfected when they arrive and leave? What is going on here? There are too many questions. Is it being suggested that this disease is confined to national parks? Most importantly, why is the NPWS not asking for

a cull - by gassing - of all rabbits within a five-mile radius of the affected areas, as was done with badgers during the bovine TB epidemic? What is going on in the Department? Many people are suspicious. As rabbits are classed as vermin, the obvious reason for not culling, or for not calling for this much-needed cull, is that it would upset greatly those who are involved in the animal rights movement. There are too many unanswered questions here. There is too much subterfuge and deceit. We want answers now. The coursing clubs must be allowed to have their licences so they can bring in the hares, see how healthy they are and vaccinate them if necessary.

**Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Josepha Madigan):** I thank the Deputies for raising this important matter. It is important for the House to be aware of the potentially devastating impact of rabbit haemorrhagic disease. When this disease was first reported in domestic farmed rabbits in China in 1984, it killed millions of animals within one year of its discovery. A new and more virulent strain of this virus, known as RHD2, emerged in France in 2010. It causes death within a few days of infection. Sick animals with RHD2 sometimes exhibit partial paralysis and bleeding from the eyes and mouth. On other occasions, they show no external symptoms whatsoever. Most distressingly, animals that are close to death in the latter stages of the disease often exhibit unusual behaviour, such as emerging from cover into the open and convulsing or fitting before dying. The virus has been detected throughout Europe in wild rabbits and hares. The Irish hare is native to Ireland and is found nowhere else. If this disease proves to be as infectious and lethal in Ireland as it has been elsewhere in Europe, the impact on the hare will be catastrophic.

As the Deputies mentioned, RHD2 has been seen in wild rabbits in the UK for a few years. Brown hares in the UK have also been hit with RHD2. Mortality rates in some areas saw up to 70% of brown hares wiped out completely. RHD2 was first confirmed in the wild here last August, which is not that long ago. The first two records came from rabbits - one in County Wicklow and the other in County Clare. As the Deputies are aware, I issued the licence on 1 August and I had to suspend it on 9 August. The first positive report from an Irish hare came on 9 August and related to an animal that was found dying in the Wexford Slob. Since these initial incidents, a request for public involvement has led to more than 50 reports of dead rabbits and hares around the country. Each report has been followed up by local NPWS rangers. From these incidents, the disease has now been confirmed from counties Cork, Clare, Leitrim, Offaly, Wicklow and Wexford. There is no rhyme or reason for this distribution. I have simply listed the locations where these animals were found. They could have been found in any county. There is no cure for the virus. Although pet rabbits can be vaccinated against the disease, it has not yet been tested on hares.

**Deputy Kevin O’Keeffe:** That is not true.

**Deputy Josepha Madigan:** Clearly, there would be some difficulties with vaccinating animals in the wild. Potentially, there are 233,000 hares and 2 million rabbits in Ireland. The Irish Coursing Club, ICC, has been mentioned. Hare coursing is administered by the ICC, which was set up under the Greyhound Industry Act 1958. Statutory responsibility for the Act resides with the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine. Licences are required by the ICC under the terms of the Wildlife Acts on behalf of affiliated clubs in order to facilitate the netting and tagging of hares for closed park meetings. As stated, I issued the licence for the 2019-2020 season to the ICC in late July to allow affiliated clubs to net hares for the purpose of hare coursing over the season.



The disease is density dependent, which means that the higher the density of animals, the higher the incidence of the disease. The virus is extremely resistant and remains viable for up to two months in the environment. It can be passed on by direct contact. Deputy Mattie McGrath mentioned that it can be carried on people's shoes. It can be passed on in faeces and urine. Infected carcasses can harbour infective virus for several months post mortem. The virus can also be transported on soil, shoes and clothing.

**Deputy Michael Healy-Rae:** I was shocked to learn that the only criterion for being informed by the Minister as part of a briefing session she held last week was to be a representative of Fine Gael. It was very disappointing. It was very disrespectful to the people in Fianna Fáil who are keeping the Minister in power that a spokesperson was not chosen from that party. What was wrong with Sinn Féin? Why was a spokesman not chosen from that party? Why was a spokesperson not chosen from the Rural Independent Group? Why was our Whip not called to that meeting? It is as if a cosy Fine Gael cartel was getting information. This is a very serious national issue. People who are involved in coursing were not happy to hear that anyone who wanted to get the information that was there to be given out had to be wearing a blue shirt in order to go in and be briefed by the Minister. That was extremely unfair and disrespectful to the other Members, including the people who are keeping the Minister and her colleagues in power. They should not forget that the only reason they are in power as Ministers is that Fianna Fáil wants them to be there. It was disgraceful of them to keep Fianna Fáil out of a room last week. This is a very serious issue and the Minister is handling it very badly. I am disappointed.

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** I am disappointed with the Minister's reply. Is it a fact that a vaccine to stop this disease from spreading is now available? I am told that it is. I am also told that vaccination against this disease is taking place in Italy. I am very concerned about the Minister's impartiality. She made it known on national radio recently that she wants to see an end to hare coursing. Having expressed this opinion nationally, she is hardly impartial when she deals with the observations of the NPWS, which has shown itself to be incompetent in all matters relating to this virus. It knew about this two years ago, but it did not start to deal with it until the last six weeks. A good number of staff have been hanging around since they were political appointees in John Gormley's day. They have a vested interest in stopping rural pursuits and stopping coursing in Ireland. As far as I am concerned, all of this is blackguarding. The blackguarding must stop. I would have enjoyed a briefing last week as it would have allowed me to get answers from the Minister. Instead, we have had to raise the matter in the House as a Topical Issue. I thank the Ceann Comhairle for facilitating that. This is not going to be hidden and brushed under the carpet to suit the Minister and her Dublin-centric Cabinet colleagues who want to banish a tradition that has gone on in rural Ireland for centuries. It will go on. If the Minister drives it underground, it will be dangerous altogether. I want honesty, truth and upfront answers.

**Deputy Josepha Madigan:** Deputy Mattie McGrath accused me of the same bias when he spoke about a rural-urban split during a Topical Issue debate last week.

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** It is obvious.

**Deputy Josepha Madigan:** No Minister in my shoes in these circumstances would have been in a position to make any other decision than that which I made. I am disappointed that Deputy Michael Healy-Rae is being political about this matter because my assistant secretary spoke to him and gave him some details about this matter.

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** The Minister is being political.

**Deputy Josepha Madigan:** People from Fine Gael asked to meet me. We have also met people from Fianna Fáil. We are open to meeting any public representative who wants information on this matter. There is no conspiracy. I regret that having issued the licence, I had no option other than to row back on it, based on the scientific evidence.

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** What about the Minister's personal views?

**Deputy Josepha Madigan:** As a Minister, I will not have it on my conscience that I could be responsible for exterminating - for want of a better word - the entire hare population. I understand the ICC's concerns. We have worked with the ICC and we are working with it now. When officials from the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine and the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine meet representatives of the NPWS and the ICC on Thursday, it will be possible to consider many of the proposals that have been mentioned by the Deputies to see what can be done to get back on track.

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** Time is running out.

**Deputy Josepha Madigan:** Another few hares are already with the laboratories. They are being tested. It is a very expensive test. We are waiting to hear the results. We are also looking at another three or four hares that have been found. This is something that has the potential to wipe out the hare population completely. I am not going to stand over that, despite any issues. It is my own party, so out of self-interest I would like to see coursing starting again.

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** That is not what the Minister said on the radio.

**Deputy Josepha Madigan:** There are people in my party who want to see that happen. In all good conscience, I cannot do that, based on the scientific evidence. What Dr. Ferdia Marnell, head of animal ecology at the National Parks and Wildlife Service-----

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** What about a vaccine?

**Deputy Josepha Madigan:** I take this very seriously, but my hands are tied at the moment and I regret that is the case from the Deputies' perspective. That is how it is.

**Deputy Michael Healy-Rae:** I asked how many hares were affected and I never got an answer. We did not get an answer, which I would like to put on the record of the Dáil. Can the Minister please tell us how many hares were affected? There are people around the country who want to hear how many hares have been affected. Can I please put that on the record of the Dáil?

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Deputy, you have had your opportunity. We are moving on to the third item.

### **Emergency Departments**

**Deputy Maurice Quinlivan:** I thank the Ceann Comhairle for selecting this Topical Issue matter, which is an important and urgent issue. It is not important to the Minister for Health, Deputy Simon Harris, because, once again, he has not bothered to turn up. I know he does not turn up to Topical Issue debates and I do not know how to get him to turn up. I have been

elected to the Dáil for over three years. I have tabled a number of Topical Issue matters on this issue and the Minister has never once turned up. The Ministers of State, Deputies Finian McGrath, Catherine Byrne and Jim Daly, have come to the House, but never the Minister, Deputy Harris. He does not respond to the letters we send, requests to meet Oireachtas Members or letters signed by a number of Oireachtas Members from across the mid-west region.

This is a crisis. The Minister should be ashamed of himself, not just for not turning up to address my Topical Issue matter, which I can live with, but because he allows what is happening in the emergency department in University Hospital Limerick to continue day after day. Today 81 people were on trolleys and 1,400 were recorded as being on trolleys during September, the highest number ever recorded in any month since records began. It is an increase on last year, despite the Government spin. I wish the Minister of State, Deputy Finian McGrath, and the other Minister of State would stop laughing while I am speaking. There was a 57% increase in trolley numbers for September this year on last year. This is an ongoing crisis. There is a story in the *Irish Independent* today about a woman was left on a trolley for 105 hours. These stories happen every single day of the week.

The Minister does not have the decency to come to the House to answer questions. It is not just that he is missing the debate today; he has missed every debate for which this has been selected as a Topical Issue matter. He has never been here once. He was at a Fine Gael gig when the party was electing its party leader. Obviously, that was more important to him than talking about the hospital in Limerick which is at crisis point. People in Limerick deserve better than what they are getting from the Government. There is no proper intervention.

The Government talks about plans. The Minister of State read out a list of statistics. The statistic is that the hospital in Limerick is at crisis point. People in the hospital are dying unnecessarily. They should not be on trolleys but there are no beds available for them. The Government should be ashamed of itself. The fact that the Minister has not bothered to come to the Chamber is shocking. The Minister of State will read out a script. I will quote from a previous reply in May 2017, when concern was expressed by a nursing union that at least 24 people would be on trolleys from the get go, a concern we shared. He rubbished the union and what I said. At the time he said, "The CEO of the UL hospital has confirmed that there is no basis for any suggestion that 24 patients will be accommodated on trolleys in the new emergency department." We would almost wish the figure was just 24. There were 81 people on trolleys today and on three separate days in recent weeks. In September, 1,400 people were on trolleys.

The Government has not intervened. There are no proper step-down or primary care facilities. General practitioners are not being funded. The Government has spoken about building extensions, but the 60-bed extension will not be in place for at least a year. The winter months will, unfortunately, result in more overcrowding than during the summer months. There are historic numbers of people on trolleys. I know older people who will not go to hospital and families who are stressed. When they get access to hospital the service they get is very good, but the problem is entering the hospital in the first place.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** On the problem you raised about the Minister for Health not being present, it is entirely in order for a Minister of State from the relevant Department to take a Topical Issue matter. However, if a Deputy is unhappy, he or she can make contact with my office and we will always try to arrange for the Minister and Deputy concerned-----

**Deputy Maurice Quinlivan:** I appreciate that, but it is frustrating that the Minister has not

come to the House on this issue for three years.

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Finian McGrath):** I welcome the opportunity to address the House on the issues raised by Deputy Quinlivan. I want to stress that I never rubbished anyone's arguments about Limerick hospital. I understand the issue and apologise on behalf of the Minister, Deputy Harris, who was unable to attend this debate.

I wish to acknowledge the distress overcrowded emergency departments cause to patients, their families and front-line staff working in very challenging conditions in hospitals throughout the country. The number of patients attending emergency departments continues to increase year-on-year. For the first eight months of 2019, the number of patients attending hospital emergency departments increased by 2.9% and the number of emergency department admissions increased by 1.7% compared to the same period last year. The emergency department at University Hospital Limerick, UHL, is one of the busiest in the country. As such, the hospital and CHO mid west were identified as one of the nine focus sites requiring additional investment, focus and support last winter.

According to provisional HSE TrolleyGAR data, there was a 70% increase in patients waiting on trolleys to date in the UHL emergency department in September 2019 compared to the same period last year. In September 2019, there were 897 patients counted on trolleys in UHL, a 28% increase compared to the previous month. It is acknowledged that this is unacceptably high and the HSE is actively working with the UHL group to ease congestion in the hospital, with a focus on facilitating transfers to level II hospitals, assistance from rehab units and community health organisation services and the prioritisation of diagnostics to aid inpatient discharges.

The health service capacity review published last year highlighted the need for a major investment in additional capacity. Progress has been made on increasing capacity in UHL. The average number of open inpatient beds increased by 4% between 2017 and March 2019. Since 2017, an additional 25 beds have been opened in UHL, including eight as part of last year's winter plan. A capital budget of €19.5 million has been approved for the provision of a modular 60-bed inpatient ward block at UHL, with funding of €10 million allocated in 2019. The new modular ward will include three wards comprising 20 single occupancy rooms with en suite facilities, two of which will be full isolation facilities and will provide care and treatment for patients from admission to discharge. The HSE has advised that the enabling works are complete and the main contractor is commencing work. In addition, the national development plan includes a 96-bed replacement ward block in UHL and capital funding was provided in 2018 to progress the design phase of the project.

Planning for winter 2019-2020 has also commenced. The Department has engaged extensively with the HSE in regard to planning for this. In that respect, the HSE has been asked to consider actions and initiatives over and above non-funded actions and to look at the building capacity and options available to them to alleviate the expected overcrowding. The Department expects to receive a draft winter plan in the coming weeks. In the context of planning and preparing for the challenges of the winter period, the Department and HSE have been considering a comprehensive approach to the current high level of delayed transfers of care. However, recognising the urgency of the situation, approval was provided to the HSE to begin actions immediately to the value of €5 million in 2019. As part of these measures, the HSE released a significant number of funding approvals with the NHSS this month, bringing the waiting time for the release of funding back to four weeks.

**Deputy Maurice Quinlivan:** The Minister of State read the same thing he read to me before. The 96-bed unit to which he referred has been talked about for a number of years. There is no update on that, apart from what he said. We are all well aware of the project. It will not alleviate the current problem. The 60-bed modular unit is very welcome, but it will be more than a year before it can be used by patients. What immediate action will the Government take? That has not been addressed. What will it do for the 81 people who are on trolleys today? There will probably be a similar number on trolleys tomorrow and every other day in October. I hope that is not the case, but it seems likely.

I hope the Minister of State will pass on my concerns to the Minister for Health, Deputy Harris, as he stated he would. The Minister should come to the House to apologise to the people of Limerick and the thousands of patients who suffered on a trolley in the past year. This year, there will be a record number of patients on trolleys. The 2018 levels have already been exceeded. The Minister should also apologise to the nurses and other hospital staff who daily run up and down corridors apologising to patients for the way they are treated in emergency departments. It should not be the role of hospital staff, who deliver the best care they can, to apologise to people. Rather, the Government should do so. The Minister should be in the Chamber to address this issue, as I have requested on several occasions, and to apologise to the people of Limerick. I hope he will take that step.

I do not know what are the plans of the Government. I have not heard anything about extra funding for step-down facilities, homecare packages or immediate access. The Minister of State referred to the modular unit. As I pointed out, it will not be ready for a year, while the 96-bed unit is so far into the stratosphere that we will probably never see it being built. It was supposed to be constructed several years ago but it was not delivered.

I believe the Government has no interest in the hospital. Fianna Fáil decided to merge the three hospitals in the mid-west region in spite of being told that these problems would arise. In fairness, nobody expected the scale of the increase in admissions to the hospital, but that is what happened and the Government has not intervened. Ministerial intervention is needed on this issue. If the Minister is not up to it, he should go.

**Deputy Finian McGrath:** It must be acknowledged that attendances at emergency departments are growing year on year and that the health service capacity review indicates that Ireland has among the highest rates of acute bed occupancy in the developed world.

It is widely agreed that additional beds are a key part of the solution for Limerick. Over the past two winters, an additional 25 beds were opened in Limerick, including eight beds as part of the winter plan 2018-19. The new emergency department which opened in May 2017 provides modern, safe and fit-for-purpose facilities that meet the expectations of patients and their families while providing high quality accommodation that better protects privacy and dignity. In addition, the new 60-bed ward was established to provide a rapid-build interim solution to the bed capacity issue at University Hospital Limerick and in response to the health service capacity review by the Department. The UL Hospitals Group welcomed the commitment in Project Ireland 2040 to build a 96-bed ward block over the current emergency department. A design team has been appointed to the project.

Improving timely access for patients is at the heart of Sláintecare. Building upon the progress made in this area in recent years, the Sláintecare action plan 2019 published by the Department includes a specific work stream on access and waiting lists. In addition, many of the



other service reforms and enhancements in the action plan will support timely access to care for patients in the coming years. Progress has been made in implementing the Sláintecare action plan this year.

All Members acknowledge that the challenges faced in this area are significant. However, it is my firm belief that we all want patient-centred, evidence-based, results-focused and sustainable solutions to the challenges currently facing our health services.

### **Animal Diseases**

**Deputy Declan Breathnach:** This very important issue was brought to my attention by the Dundalk and District Brown Trout and Salmon Anglers Association. It is also of great concern to many others who are interested in their environment. All Members know that the number of Atlantic salmon entering our rivers has declined in numbers in recent years. There are similar causes for concern in all European countries. In spite of the catch and release programme introduced in recent years by Inland Fisheries Ireland, IFI, our stocks continue to be depleted and are at risk of reaching zero.

This issue concerns what some believe to be an unknown disease affecting salmon and sea trout in the Castletown, Fayne, Dee and Boyne rivers in County Louth. Anglers in the north east rightly brought this issue to my attention. Fish are being caught in very poor condition, with welts on their backs and lots of scarring. The initial response received by the anglers was to catch and retain live sick fish and that the IFI would collect them. The anglers were of the view that that was a very ambitious proposal as they had no means of retaining the fish and worried that the fish were in such a poor condition that they would not survive long enough to be collected. The anglers are also worried about health matters such as the possible spread of disease through handling the fish. They reported that sea trout are displaying the same symptoms. They reported this to IFI inspectors on several occasions and sent photographs of the diseased fish, but did not receive a satisfactory response. I contacted IFI on the matter yesterday, but have not received a response.

In the international year of the salmon, is the Minister of State aware of this recent disease outbreak in the rivers to which I referred? What actions is the Department taking or willing to take to identify the disease? Does the Minister of State have a plan of action to deal with this situation? Can he find out whether the problem will, as suspected, cause cross-species infection? Does he plan to implement bio-security measures to stop the spread of the disease? Is he of the view that bio-security measures are not necessary in this case? These are the questions to which people want answers. The concerned fishing clubs in the north east wish to know whether the disease is harmful to humans. Does the Minister of State have information on the spread of disease from salmon farms on the west coast of Scotland to the wild stocks in rivers on our east coast?

It is no coincidence that Deputies Michael Healy-Rae and Mattie McGrath tabled a Topical Issue on rabbit haemorrhagic disease. My suspicion from researching the matter is that the disease about which the fishermen are concerned is ulcerative dermal necrosis. I am familiar with necrosis, which is rotting of the flesh. I cannot help but speculate on the phytosanitary concerns in regard to the movement of animals that may have to be addressed post Brexit. The well-known RTÉ programme “To the Waters and the Wild” was produced by Gerrit van Gelderen and Éamon de Buitléar. Our wildlife and our waters know no bounds. I have serious

concerns arising from this issue, and the issue of rabbit haemorrhagic disease as raised by other Members, regarding the need to protect our wildlife and waters.

**Minister of State at the Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment (Deputy Seán Canney):** I thank the Deputy for raising this important issue. Following reports of salmon returning to Norway and Scotland with a red rash skin disease in spring 2019, Inland Fisheries Ireland has been proactive on this issue in respect of Irish rivers and waters. All possible action has been taken by IFI since that time. Any suggestion that no measures have yet been undertaken does not accurately reflect the situation on the ground. IFI immediately issued a statement on 17 June 2019 to inform anglers that a small number of salmon showing signs of bleeding and skin ulceration had been observed returning to Irish rivers. It appealed to anglers and fishery owners to report any incidences of affected salmon with rash-like symptoms to help determine the scale of the problem nationally. I am advised by IFI that salmon with these symptoms began appearing in Irish rivers in early June. By mid-June, there were reports of fish with ulceration in at least six rivers on the east and west coasts of Ireland.

The affected salmon show signs of bleeding, ulceration and haemorrhaging, mainly along the area on the belly of the fish, as well as on the head and tail. Secondary fungal infection usually sets in and can result in death. IFI advised that until the cause of the disease was determined and the risk of spreading the disease established, affected salmon should not be removed from the water. Any anglers who captured salmon with these symptoms were advised to follow normal biosecurity procedures and disinfect tackle, waders and equipment. IFI set up a dedicated email address, *salmon.symptoms@fisheriesireland.ie*, for anglers to report any incidence of diseased salmon encountered in rivers and provide photographs. Anglers were also advised to contact IFI's 24 hour confidential hotline, 1890 347424 or 1890 FISH 24, in this regard. The dedicated email received approximately 25 reports of diseased salmon with red skin rash symptoms from 15 Irish rivers. Photographs were also received of diseased fish from the majority of rivers.

IFI collaborated with the fish health unit in the Marine Institute in Galway and provided, for disease testing, a live salmon with symptoms of the disease captured in the upstream trap from the national salmonid index catchment on the River Erriff. A freshly caught salmon with disease symptoms was also provided from the River Lee for disease testing. Salmon were also collected from the River Boyne by IFI staff and given to a specialist fish veterinary group in Galway for examination. No responsible disease was identified in any of these samples tested that could explain the red rash symptoms observed in Irish salmon. The vast majority of reports of diseased salmon were from June and July with small numbers of reported incidences since that time. Information also suggests that the number of fish which died from the disease was small, with east coast rivers such as the Boyne, the Dee, the Castletown and the Fane appearing to be worst affected.

Given the international dimension to the issue, IFI scientists consulted their colleagues in Norway and Scotland since early June in an effort to establish the cause of the disease. To date, no laboratory in Europe has definitively identified the cause of the disease symptoms observed although it is thought that there may be some link to a change in salmon diet at sea and a related vitamin deficiency that is being investigated further as a possible contributing factor. In this context, an IFI scientist will attend an international workshop in Norway shortly and present the available information on the disease outbreak in Ireland. The workshop will cover exchange of observations and knowledge about the disease between countries, results of disease testing and the identification of knowledge gaps and potential future collaboration.

**Deputy Declan Breathnach:** The experience of anglers, certainly those in the north east, has not been as the Minister of State describes in terms of IFI being proactive. He mentioned the River Boyne but, to my knowledge, that has not been the experience of anglers with respect to the other rivers I mentioned. Anglers have been asked to deal with the issue but the IFI has trained staff. It would have been expected its staff should have either netted the river or extracted live samples using electro-stunning, of which I am sure the Minister of State is aware.

I wish to place on record the fact that, as far back as 25 June, emails containing photographs were sent to local inspectors and that the replies received indicated that no formal action was being taken by IFI, which was trying to capture diseased fish in Galway nearer to its testing laboratory. Other emails were sent on 9 and 12 July and on 5 and 19 August containing photographs of diseased fish. On 13 Sept, a video was sent to the local IFI inspector showing diseased fish in the Castletown river.

I ask that priority be given to what is considered to be an environmental disaster in the rivers to which I referred. Effectively, no fish are to be found in them or those that found in them give rise to serious concern with respect to this disease. The Minister of State has not confirmed whether the disease found in the fish is ulcerative dermal necrosis. From what I have read, that is what it appears to be. However, I am not a scientist. More importantly, we need to get to the bottom of the matter. If the Minister of State checks the record of these disease trends, I am advised that disease almost wiped out the stock in 1877. He referred to the period from 1960s through to the 1990s. This issue will become much more serious if we do not address it immediately.

**Deputy Seán Canney:** I am treating this issue with all the seriousness it deserves. Our rivers are a natural resource and an amenity that we must protect. The Deputy mentioned that telephone calls have been made and videos and photographs have been submitted. I assure him that if there is any failure in terms of communication, it will be rectified. I will bring that issue to the attention of the IFI.

The local IFI inspector has been in regular contact with members of one angling club, namely, the Castletown Angling Club, regarding this matter. The regular contact has been by way of telephone calls to the inspector. There have been calls from anglers for IFI to electro-fish the river to ascertain how many diseased fish were present. However, I am advised this is not a practical measure in the circumstances. Rather the priority is to get the live infected fish for sampling and the local fisheries team had been proactive in developing a plan to fish for salmon on the Castletown river and to try to obtain a live sample of infected fish to provide to the Marine Institute for virology and pathology testing. The team has also set up a holding station isolated from the water body for any infected live fish which are caught.

As already stated, a dedicated email address was set up and the IFI received a number of communications to this address, some of which included photographs. This is a reporting mechanism and it would not be the usual practice to respond individually to reporting emails to a notification type address but rather to concentrate on the intelligence gathered in same. The majority of communications locally appear to have been by telephone. I will be happy to have the IFI liaise directly with the Deputy on this matter. From a personal point of view, the local anglers are the people who have the local knowledge and that is what will help us solve this problem, but it is a worry.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** That concludes today's consideration of Topical Issue matters.

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## Status of History in the Framework for Junior Cycle: Statements

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I expect that the Minister will receive widespread congratulations for his initiative. I suspect so but it is not something he will always be getting.

**Deputy Thomas Byrne:** We always welcome a U-turn.

**Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh):** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Our appetite to learn more about our past has grown since the decade of centenaries. A new interest has been awoken in people of all ages across the country in the struggle for Home Rule, the 1913 Lockout, the tens of thousands of Irish people who marched off to fight in the First World War, the events of Easter 1916 and the aftermath that led to the War of Independence and the Civil War. Deputies will be well aware of my strong interest in this matter, and how I feel that history offers an important window on our past. I also know from the many conversations that I have had over the past year with Oireachtas Members from all political shades across the Dáil and Seanad that I am not alone in this viewpoint.

I thank the Deputy Maureen O’Sullivan, an Independent Member, who helped organise an initial meeting with Deirdre Mac Mathúna and Mary O’Dubháin of the History Teachers’ Association of Ireland who are in attendance here this evening. Bhí Sean Delappe ag an chruinniú céanna ag an am sin. Tugaim aitheantas dó, agus gabhaim buíochas leis, as an chomhairle agus as an eolas a tugadh dom.

It is vital that we check in the rear-view mirror from time to time, so that we can learn how to avoid the mistakes of the past. I strongly believe that an understanding of history is vitally important for future generations, and failure to understand the past, or being misled about it, is a central factor in current controversies such as Brexit and rise of paranoid nationalism across the globe. There is a danger that history can be misused to provide a justification for words and actions that would otherwise be unacceptable.

In November of last year I asked the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, NCCA, to carry out a review of the optional nature of history under the new framework for junior cycle. I also asked the NCCA to identify how we can best promote the study of history in our schools. Around this time I met a young man from St Michael’s college in Enniskillen at a cross-Border event in Ballyshannon. He approached me with one question: “Why have you downgraded history in your schools?” The significance of this was not lost on me. This came from a fellow Ulsterman from a town still coming to terms with the IRA’s 1987 Remembrance Day bombing and who was born after the signing of the Good Friday Agreement in 1998.

I received the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment’s advisory report in July of this year. It is a detailed analysis and I am deeply grateful to the council for the work it has done. I gave careful consideration to the report, as well as taking on board the views of many people I meet every day who dedicate their lives and careers to education and to nurturing the minds of young people. The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment report, published today, makes it clear that the new history specification under the framework for junior cycle offers a much better way to teach and learn history than in the past. The approach underpinning the framework allows for new ways of learning and a broader range of skills to be properly assessed. It can make the subject more engaging for young people and will allow it to move beyond chalk and talk. I also acknowledge the members of the Men’s Shed I met in Limerick last year who told me how involved they were with junior certificate students in Limerick. The

opportunity to engage at local level, be it through historical societies or Men's Sheds, is good. My desire is for all students to learn about history and to achieve this without losing the good progress made to date on the reform of the junior cycle. While I am aware the subject was due to be reviewed in two years' time, I am keen to do something now.

The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment report, along with the wider public debate and the discussions I have had on the issue, led me to believe that it is not enough just to speak about history at junior cycle. We must look at promoting an interest in history at primary level where the love of a subject is born, as well as at senior level and beyond where the real in-depth study of any subject takes place. Having history as an optional subject in junior cycle puts this in doubt. Every student should be learning history. Exactly what form that takes and how that is taught will be determined in the coming months.

The education system is responsive and progressive enough to allow for the junior cycle framework to be structured in such a way that history can have a special core status. Accordingly, I have requested history is given this special core status. I will be requesting the support of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment in working out how best this can be achieved. I also asked it last November, as part of its work, to identify measures to promote the study of history at both primary and post-primary levels.

The report contains some useful recommendations in this regard and I am keen to take these forward over the coming months. I have already expressed the need for a young historian competition to be developed. I am seeking the support of the education partners with others to establish this, along with a range of other initiatives, including introducing more supports to allow more schools visit historic sites such as Glasnevin Cemetery, Islandbridge, Béal na mBláth or Rathmullan, site of the Flight of the Earls in 1607. I saw the full benefit of students seeing their past in Arlington National Cemetery in Virginia. There they are encouraged to see the graves of soldiers from every war in which the US fought and the Kennedy family plot. It leaves a visual and emotional impact on young people.

We also have an obligation to teach our young people about the dark side of our history, including the mistreatment of women, including those confined to Magdalen laundries, our State's discrimination against those who did not fit in because they were Travellers, gay, non-religious or unionist, as well as the shameful physical and sexual abuse of children and vulnerable adults and the cover-ups.

Knowledge of how we have brought our planet to a tipping point and plunged our climate into crisis may hold the key to finding a solution. This is a subject that excites the interest of an entire generation of young people and we cannot ignore it. In fact, we have a duty to engage with it.

Our island's journey from conflict to peace is a turbulent one that must be understood. An entire generation has grown up now in an Ireland at peace. We must ensure this generation knows the truth about the conflict and the road to peace to ensure it is not misled into believing the lies of sinister groups thirsting for a return to the violence of the past. During the weeks ahead, it is important to remind ourselves that the peace achieved these past 21 years is still fragile, in its infancy and one we have a duty to take care of.

As someone who returned to learning our language as an adult, I was captivated by the rich and vibrant history of our language and how it has helped shape our history and the his-



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tory of the spoken word in many countries. Ar an ábhar sin, tugaim aitheantas do na daoine, eagraíochtaí agus dreamanna uilig atá ag coimeád ár dteanga, ár gcultúr, agus ár n-oidhreacht beo. Dá mbeadh aon athrú eile maidir leis an bealach ina múintear an stair, bheadh an teanga Ghaeilge ceangailte leis an ábhar sin.

By seeking special core status for history and the associated promotion, my aim is to achieve three ultimate goals, namely, to increase the number of history students at senior cycle, to see every junior cycle student learn about history and to awaken a love of history at primary level. My ambition is to guarantee future generations of well-informed, active citizens, including future Deputies and Ministers, who understand the importance of history in shaping the future.

Gabhaim buíochas leis an gCeann Comhairle agus leis an Teach as an díospóireacht anocht. Tugaim aitheantas do gach aon duine as an tiomantas tras-pháirtí. Tugaim aitheantas do cheannairí na bpáirtithe ach go háirithe as an tiomantas i leith na rudaí sin. Táim ag súil go mór leis an díospóireacht anocht.

**Deputy Thomas Byrne:** I will be sharing time with Deputies Fiona O'Loughlin and Éamon Ó Cuív.

I welcome the Fine Gael Government's U-turn on the status of history at junior cycle. It is a late but welcome U-turn. As the Minister for Education and Skills is aware, Fianna Fáil has consistently raised this issue since changes to history's status in the junior cycle were announced by the previous Fine Gael-Labour Party Government. These changes were defended to the hilt by the previous Government and the Minister's predecessor, Deputy Bruton, for many years causing disquiet among the educational community until this Minister took the initiative to change matters. The leader of our party, Deputy Micheál Martin, was one of the first to see the dangers the downgrading of the subject would hold for our young people and called for it to be changed. He was joined by many of our leading historians, Diarmaid Ferriter most prominent among them, and even the President, as well as history teachers who have fought a long and often lonely battle on this issue over many years. I pay tribute to the many history teachers and societies who have been in contact with me over the past several years on this matter.

I raised this issue with the Minister of the day on several occasions when the changes were announced. Fianna Fáil has consistently stated the position of history should be maintained. Arguably, if the Government had been willing to protect the subject, this debate would not have been necessary and such a regressive step would never have been taken. I have seen in some of the new secondary schools that history was not compulsory, despite various commentators telling us that students would study it. It was starting to lose its place in the education system at junior cycle.

History teaches vital skills in information literacy and critical evaluation of the past. In an era when these skills have never been more important, to downgrade the importance of history was a retrograde step that has, thankfully, been changed. The President, Michael D. Higgins, stated that history is essential to understanding who we are today and necessary to debunk the myths, challenge inaccuracies and expose deliberate amnesia or invented versions of the past.

There is no doubt that an examination of the past is essential to our understanding of the present. We need only to look at the current debate surrounding Brexit and the backstop for the lessons of history to make themselves clear. The conversations around the Good Friday Agreement, infrastructure and the Border all require a broader conversation defined by our shared

history and shared knowledge of history. A broad agreement which exists in the House and in civil society is based on that shared understanding of history. Diarmaid Ferriter stated earlier this week, “Surely if we have learnt anything over the last three years it is that contemporary crises demand a proper knowledge of the history of statecraft, constitutional questions and the roads that lead to a dangerous level of political, economic and cultural dysfunction.”

While the progress made today by the Minister’s announcement is positive - I welcome the U-turn - the exact nature of the changes which will take place on the subject have not been made clear, even in the Minister’s speech tonight. If he has an opportunity at the end of the debate, it would be welcome if he stated exactly what “special core status” means. He referred to increasing the number of history students at senior cycle.

That was certainly one of the big dangers of downgrading history at junior cycle. The Minister wants “to see every junior cycle student learn about history”. The NCCA stated all junior cycle students would already do that. The Minister also said he wants “to awaken a love of history at primary level.” While my party supports that view, what does it actually mean for junior cycle students who started last year or last month? How will this affect their curriculum? What are the detailed plans? A welcome announcement has been made but the details have not been fleshed out in any way. The question the Minister posed to the NCCA today to work out how these changes would happen may well have been better posed last November instead of this review. While I certainly acknowledge the work the NCCA has done, the review it produced in many ways restates what it has been saying for some time in other documents. It was certainly what its representatives told me when I met them to put forward the Fianna Fáil view during this process.

Special core status for the subject cannot mean that the downgrade continues in practice but that we are now paying lip-service. We need to flesh out exactly what is meant by “special core status”. For Fianna Fáil, it means the full restoration of the subject of history to its former position and beyond because, technically, history was never compulsory in some of our schools. This fact was used to make an argument against restoring history or making it compulsory. It was never a strong argument because it was based on an outdated view of what vocational education was about.

While we understand that there is work to be done to make this change at junior cycle, it is incumbent on the Minister to provide clarity on what the actual change will be. We would, as I stated, welcome clarity from the Minister regarding students who started last year and this year.

Tá muidne ag fáiltiú roimh an méid atá ráite ag an Aire. Táimid ag lorg níos mó sonraí maidir leis. Tá súil agam gur míniú an fhógra seo ná go mbeidh an stair curtha ar ais mar ábhar atá ag croílár an churaclaim atá ag na scoileanna ag an teastas sóisearach agus ag an tsraith sóisearach

**Deputy Fiona O’Loughlin:** Gabhaim buíochas leis an Teachta Thomas Byrne.

I speak from the perspective of somebody who did not have the opportunity to learn history at leaving certificate level but went on to take it up in college for my degree. The world that was opened to me by taking up history was incredible, not only in terms of learning about this country and its place in the world but also in learning about inequalities in the world, human rights violations, power and people. These are the worlds that are opened to us when we have the opportunity to study history and learn more.

As mayor of Kildare, I became chair of the decade of commemorations committee and again the world opened to me, not only in terms of learning about my home county of Kildare but also in learning about where this country was 100 years ago. That was around the time talk about history being dropped from the junior certificate entered the ether. I thought it was incredibly ironic that we would even consider that possibility just as we were learning more about what happened 100 years ago and how formative those events were for the nation. Consider the popularity of the television programme “Who do you think you are?”. I hear people talking about individuals, some of whom are well known, who feature on that series. We get to learn much more about the history of our country and the world.

As we discuss Brexit and the Good Friday Agreement and think about our young people who are sitting State examinations, junior certificate and leaving certificate, and were not born when the agreement was signed, we must realise how important history is to us. When President Higgins spoke of his “deep and profound concern” about history being demoted, he also spoke about history being the “inheritance of all our people” because we stand on the shoulders of those who went before us. At a time of fake news and global turmoil, our young people need to have the skills they acquire through learning history, including perspective, empathy and wisdom about what went on before us. We need to have a better understanding of the world, its traditions and the decisions that were made.

I welcome the Minister’s announcement that history is to be given special status at junior cycle but, as Deputy Thomas Byrne stated, we need further clarity about the nature of this special status. I am glad that while the Government of which he is a member stated that history would be demoted, the Minister has shown the courage of his convictions by saying that decision was wrong and the position of history in the curriculum will be restored.

**Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív:** Ní bheidh agam ach soundbite. Caithfidh mé a rá go bhfuil mé buartha faoin bhfoclaíocht mar nuair a thagann foclaíocht chun cinn atá faighte againn, bíonn amhras orainn mar gheall ar chéard atá ar bun. An bhfuil cleasaíocht ar bun? An bhfuil imeartas focal ar bun? Creidim go bhfuil oideachas, ag bailiú eolais agus oiliúint a chur ar dhaoine thar a bheith tábhachtach. Tá sé tábhachtach go bhfaigheadh daoine eolas ar stair an domhain agus stair a dtíre agus go dtuigfeadh siad carb as díobh. Cén chaoi gur féidir pleanáil don todhchaí muna dtuigtear an rud atá tarlaithe cheana féin? Caithfidh mé a rá go molaim an tAire as ucht dul in aghaidh na comhairle ach tá faitíos orm go bhfuil lúb ar lár éigin sa mhéid atá ráite aige. Sílim go mbeadh sé thar a bheith tábhachtach sa Teach anseo anocht go ndéanfadh sé soiléiriú beacht an mbeidh ar gach uile dalta staidéar a dhéanamh ar stair suas go leibhéal an teastais shóisearaigh. Sin í an cheist atá ag cur as do gach uile duine anseo anocht.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Beidh an Teachta Ó Laoghaire ag caint anois agus beidh seisean ag roinnt a chuid ama leis an Teachta Ó Snodaigh.

**Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire:** Ignorance of history, whether national or international, has real consequences. It leads to poor judgment and understanding and, as we have seen sadly too often in recent years in neighbouring countries and across the world, to flawed political decisions. The study of history is crucial to our sense of self, to understanding our history and who we are as a people, as well as to understanding the history of Europe and the world. History informs our judgment, values and ability to consider the world. At its basic level, history is part of a broad education about wisdom and understanding, one that goes far beyond education being merely a means of preparing children for industry and employment, which is often the emphasis in this day and age. While such preparation has a role, education must always be

much broader than that.

Part of the NCCA's thinking is that history as the mere imparting of knowledge, which is the way it was sometimes taught in the past, is not what we need. History, properly taught, involves questioning and critically analysing our past and the past of other nations of the world and recognising the blemishes in our history as well as our achievements and how our nation and the world have changed.

Ba mhaith liom fáilte a chur roimh an ráiteas atá tugtha ag an Aire go pointe áirithe. Is maith an rud é go bhfuil sé tar éis éisteacht. Tá go leor daoine tar éis a bheith glórach ar an ábhar seo agus atá tar éis aird a tharraingt air, Uachtarán na hÉireann, Cumann Múinteoirí Staire na hÉireann agus cuid mhaith de na múinteoirí agus staraithe éagsúla ar fud na tíre ina measc. The public in general was very supportive of the idea and the campaign to ensure that history was retained as a core subject.

What is special core status? That question has been asked by other Deputies already. I suppose there are two possibilities. It might be as good as core status and a special title is required to distinguish history from English, Irish and Mathematics, or it might not be a core subject at all. It could be either one of those possibilities, although perhaps there is a third possibility. Perhaps the Minister will outline the position. We could go away from here and the new cycle will move on and we might find out later that special core status does not amount to a hill of beans. I am interested to hear what the Minister has to say on that.

Lessons need to be learned from this. The voice of the public, students and teachers was not properly heard until it was too late. The NCCA is looking at the senior cycle before we are fully finished with the reform of the junior cycle. Is it soon enough to know how the junior cycle has worked out or to start adjusting the senior cycle on foot of that? I have had conversations with teachers who are concerned that some of the consultations and questions seem to point in particular directions. Teachers have felt a bit led by some of the consultations. We need to be watchful for that and take it into consideration.

Any time the curriculum is discussed, the status of the Irish language comes up, at leaving certificate and junior certificate level. I want to state very clearly that I and my party believe it is essential that it remains core. In the same way as history, it is intrinsic to our sense of self and our understanding of ourselves and our history. It is closely tied in with our history but is much more than that. It is a form of communication and a living language. When future decisions are made and the process by which we reach such decisions is critically analysed, we need to take stock of how we arrive at those decisions. I hope that lessons will be learned from this.

Críochnóidh mé leis an méid sin. Tá súil agam go soiléireoidh an tAire cad atá i gceist leis an stádas core speisialta seo. Aontaím leis an tiomantas atá ag an Aire ó thaobh na staire agus an tábhacht atá léi, ach tá sé tábhachtach go mbeidh an próiseas agus an curaclam soiléir.

**Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh:** Tréaslaím leis an Aire faoin gcinneadh seo. Tá an chéim cheart tógtha aige, cé go bhfuil soiléiriú ag teastáil, mar a dúirt mo chomhghleacaí. Tréaslaím leis gur sheas sé suas ar son na staire sa chás seo. De réir an méid atá léite agam go dtí seo, is léir go mbeidh gá do pháistí atá ag déanamh an teastas sóisearaigh staidéar a dhéanamh ar an stair, rud atá ríthábhachtach.

Táim sáite leis an stair ó rugadh mé. D'oibrigh m'athair sa mhúsaem agus bhí máistreacht staire aige féin agus ag mo mháthair. Tógadh mé le leabhair agus stair timpeall orm. Staráí

a bhí i mo sheanathair i Luimneach chomh maith. Is féidir staidéar a dhéanamh ar ghnéithe difriúla den saol sa stair, mar stair pholaitiúil nó stair áitiúil. Ní thuigeann daoine a bhíonn ag gearáin faoin stair go bhfuil réimse mór leathan i gceist. Caithfidh tuiscint éigin a bheith ag daoine ar an stair chun tuiscint cheart a bheith acu ar eolaíocht, ar theangacha difriúla, ar chultúir difriúil timpeall an domhain, nó fiú ar an ríomhaireacht. Tuigfidh siad cárbh as ar tháinig gach uile ghné den ábhar sin. Tá fréamhacha na staire i mbeagnach gach uile ábhar eile atá á mhúineadh ar scoil. Tá gach uile ábhar eile a theastóidh ó dhaoine agus iad ag plé leis an domhan mór nuair a fhágann siad an scoil gafa sa stair.

Is gá an t-ábhar a mhúineadh i gceart, áfach. Sa lá atá inniu ann, tá sé i bhfad níos éasca stair a mhúineadh i slí amháin nó slí eile toisc go bhfuil na foinsí beagnach ag barr na méara ag na múinteoirí agus ag na mic léinn. Tá sé i bhfad níos éasca féachaint ar phictiúir den ábhar atá i gceist ná mar a bhí nuair a bhí mise ar scoil. Bhraith na glúine a bhí romhainn ar théacsleabhar amháin, agus bhí orthu dátaí a fhoghlaim de ghlanmheabhair, gan tuiscint iomlán acu ar an ábhar. Tréaslaim leis an Aire faoin gcinneadh seo, agus faoi na cinntí eile a ghlac sé le déanaí maidir le Gaelscoileanna. D'fhéadfaí níos mó cinntí a ghlacadh ach tá an obair cheart á déanamh ag an Aire faoi láthair. Molaim sin.

Deirtear mura bhfuil fios ag daoine ar an stair, go ndéanfaidh siad athrá ar na botúin atá sa stair sin. Má thuigeann muid é, beimid in ann foghlaim ón stair. Ar ndóigh, tarlaíonn díospóireacht bhríomhar idir staraithe agus bíonn léamh difriúil ag daoine ar an stair. Ní gá ach féachaint timpeall an Tí seo chun tuiscint cé chomh tábhachtach atá an stair, fiú in Éirinn. Insíonn an stair dúinn cén fáth go bhfuil na páirtithe difriúla polaitiúla anseo, cárbh as ar tháinig muid, na polasaithe ar son a seasaimid, agus na daoine agus fáthanna a bhí leis na páirtithe sin ar an gcéad dul síos. Feictear aineolas sa Teach seo faoi stair na bpáirtithe ó am go ham. Ní thuigeann daoine cad as ar tháinig siad, nó an stair atá gafa leis na páirtithe sin.

An méid sin ráite, tá an cinneadh ceart déanta ag an Aire. Tá gá dúinn cinntiú anois nach dtarlaíonn aon íosghrádú sa stair, mar atá tarlaithe le blianta agus atá fós ag tarlú leis an Ghaeilge. Tugtar díolúintí do pháistí sa chaoi nach gá dóibh na scrúduithe a dhéanamh ar fháth amháin nó fáth eile. Caithfidh díriú isteach ar sin agus cinntiú nach dtarlóidh sé leis an stair chomh maith de bharr fadhb éigin a bheith ag duine. Ba chóir go mbeadh an stair múinte do gach uile pháiste, cuma má tháinig siad isteach sa tír i mbliana nó anuraidh. Má tá fadhbanna ann ó thaobh cur i láthair, déileálfaimid leo. Ba chóir go mbeadh na háiseanna ag gach uile scoil chun stair a mhúineadh sa treo ceart chun go dtiocfaidh mic léinn amach ón scoil le tuiscint acu ar an timpeallacht timpeall orthu, cárbh as ar tháinig siad féin, an baile, agus a gelann. Tuigfidh siad todhchaí na tíre seo agus a dtodhchaí féin de bharr an méid eolais atá acu ar a gcuid staire féin ar an gcéad dul síos.

**Deputy Maureen O'Sullivan:** I am sharing time with Deputy Broughan. It is strange having this debate this evening because up until this morning, we thought we would be bemoaning the continued demise, relegation or optional nature of the subject of history at junior cycle level.

Cuirim fáilte roimh an gcinneadh a chuala mé ar maidin. D'éist mé leis an agallamh a thug an tAire ar an raidió faoin ábhar seo inné, agus is cinnte go raibh áthas ar a lán daoine faoi, go háirithe múinteoirí staire. Tá Deirdre Mac Mathúna agus Mary O'Dubháin ón History Teachers' Association of Ireland linn sa Teach anocht.

It is rather ironic that history became an optional subject at the same time that we were commemorating so many historical events which had a profound impact on Ireland. It is very



sad to imagine that young people could come out of our secondary schools without knowledge, insight and understanding of their country's history or that of Europe and the world. Certainly, as it was previously taught at junior cycle, history was also about European and world events. If ever we have proof of the importance of history as a core subject in our schools, we have seen it due to Brexit in the utter ignorance of Irish history, Irish-British history, the Troubles, the Good Friday Agreement, colonialism and imperialism on the part of so many British politicians and the British public. There will be serious questions around the teaching of history in British schools. That was certainly brought home to me when I met some master's students over from a university in England. I was quite incredulous when I listened to the kind of history they were being taught in British schools.

The question is always, why study history? I liked the Minister's analogy of looking in the rear-view mirror. How can we know where we are going or where we want to go unless we know where we have come from? Studying history gives us that insight into our country, into events, why they happened, what exactly happened and what those events led to, the causes and the consequences. It is a wonderful window into so much of what makes us who we are. It has to be taught warts and all, as the Minister said. We have to learn about our dark moments, the home-grown injustices and atrocities. We cannot be afraid of doing this. All of it comes from the way history is taught. I acknowledge the different methodologies that are now in use compared to when I was being taught history, a long time ago.

From my own teaching of history, the great moments were those where young people were connecting the past and the present. Two examples really brought this home to me. One was teaching about the Industrial Revolution and the child labour used in those times, as well as the conditions in the factories and the mines, and then relating that to what goes on in our world today, where we have child labour and terrible conditions in factories and mines in other countries. The second was where students were being taught about the Holocaust and the barbarity of man to man, and we linked that to what is happening today in so many places in the world. History is about getting young people to think and to become more aware of what is going on in the world around them, and they get that from what they learn about the past.

History is about analysis, prioritising information and decision making. It brings an awareness of bias because students have to learn how to question the sources they are using. It is also about encouraging independent and critical thinking. It is helping us to learn from the past, those of us who are open to learning from the past. It is about diversity and also about understanding diversity and different cultures. All that adds up to life skills and transferable skills.

The Minister's words were that we learn about history and we learn from history. Of course, we are coming to the commemoration of one of those dark moments in our history, the Civil War. Young people need the opportunity to learn about this in an informed way. What is great today is that we have so much more source material available to us.

The bottom line is that history cannot be taught as a short course or as a learning experience. I would like to throw a spanner in the works by saying there is probably a need to look at geography as a core subject as well, because it is such a wide subject. When the junior cycle was being revamped, there was a danger that while the new broom swept clean, and that is fair enough, it also cleaned out a lot of what was very important. I know from my teaching friends that there are questions around the content of the English course and questions around science, for example, questions as to whether the content is sufficient and stimulating enough for young people. While there were things amiss with the previous system, there were also things that

were very good and positive.

The decision the Minister has taken is very brave and is also building on that renewed interest in history that we see today. I acknowledge those local history groups that do so much work throughout the country. I also support the point the Minister made about the importance of visits to places of historical interest. With my students, I was at the Anne Frank Museum, Auschwitz and Dachau, the Coliseum in Rome, as well as Ferrycarrig, Lough Gur and Kilmainham here in Ireland. The list is endless and we have so many sites that we can visit, which makes such a difference.

The decision of the Minister is the start. I believe goodwill will sort out the details.

**Deputy Thomas P. Broughan:** I welcome the Minister, Deputy McHugh's decision to give history special core status in the junior cycle following the review of whether history should remain an optional subject. I am aware that the NCCA had warned that making history mandatory for study at junior level could undermine recent junior cycle curriculum developments. We know that while history was not a mandatory subject in secondary school, up to now, more than 90% of pupils at junior cycle studied history.

The Minister's decision seems a reasonable response to the strong case made by historians and history teachers that the subject should remain a core element of the curriculum up to junior certificate at least. There is clearly great pressure on secondary schools to present the most useful and modern range of subjects to each cohort of Irish children. I have supported the call in the past to strengthen the STEM subjects throughout the second level curriculum. Science, technology, engineering and maths are vital subjects to support a modern economy and it is impressive that more children are now successfully taking higher maths at leaving certificate. I was also one of those who called for coding to become part of the junior and senior curricula at second level, given the great success of informal CoderDojo projects in communities around the country. Obviously, the promotion of Gaeilge, our native language, and English and some European languages is also central to equipping young people with the deep cultural background of our nation and the written and spoken fluency necessary for modern life. It was always striking that, up to recent years, musical education, especially the study and learning of instruments, was deficient across primary and second level schools. While Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann and other organisations have tried to fill that void, it is an area we need to work on.

Despite all these pressures and caveats in regard to curriculum development, history is a uniquely valuable subject which deserves a key role in Irish education up to at least junior certificate level and beyond. It was James Joyce who wrote that history was a nightmare from which he was trying to awaken. Certainly, the history of the 20th century, with far more than 100 million people killed by wars and oppressive regimes, and the long suffering of ordinary families and people from social conditions under slavery, serfdom and brutal, unbridled capitalism, is generally very depressing. However, the long-standing development which seeks to research and document the lives of most people in the past, rather than learning the litany of emperors, popes, kings and plutocrats, and the machinations of European power politics, has been a very positive development in the education system. Every human being, family and community has a place in history and the huge interest among citizens in researching their own ancestors and how they lived in the past is testament to a great interest in the subject, and this should be cultivated at primary and secondary school.

It is certainly important to study the past as everything about ourselves and society has been

influenced and determined by past events. The subject of history, therefore, helps children and adults to get a sense of their own place in time and the key influences which have shaped their lives. Studying history also helps greatly to develop analytical and writing skills as children research and assemble information, led by their teachers, and then present their findings and views in essays, projects and presentations. The Minister and Deputy Maureen O'Sullivan are right that visiting historic places is also vital in the education of children.

The rigorous study of history at third and fourth levels often profoundly enhances our understanding of the past and casts light on how modern societies address key modern problems from their historical development. In my own case, studying the work of G.R. Elton on the Tudor period, and Lewis Namier and A.J.P. Taylor on the 19th and 20th centuries, under the guidance of great historians like Professor Maureen Wall and Professor Art Cosgrove, gave me a powerful insight into the past. Historians, such as Herodotus, Tacitus and Livy, all the way down to Edward Gibbon and David Hume in modern Britain, have helped us understand the past since ancient times. Our own pre-colonial and medieval history was documented in the *Annala Uladh*, the great annals of our nation, and in the later works of Mícheál Ó Cléirigh and the Four Masters. Studying such works gives us a great insight into how we became what we are today.

I welcome the Minister's decision and commend him for it.

**Deputy Michael Harty:** Very rarely has the Minister received so many compliments in one Dáil sitting, but I believe his decision to restore history to special core status in the junior cycle is correct and that the decision to remove it as a core subject was a mistake. The Minister has been very courageous in going against the advice and restoring it as a core subject.

The study of history is essential to understanding the world around us. It gives context to what we are and where we have come from, not only in our own history but world history. To paraphrase Diarmaid Ferriter's profound statement, to make sense of the present, we must know and respect the past. It is essential that children understand the evolution of nations and peoples, the flaws of history and its successes, in order that they understand their own origins, nationally, culturally, politically and economically. How else are children to understand the current intricacies of the Brexit debate, the significance of the backstop, the importance of the Good Friday Agreement, the background to the conflict in Northern Ireland and the foundation of the State coming out of the 1916 Rising, the War of Independence and the Civil War? It is extremely important that children understand that context, and that is just our national history. They must also understand the intricacies and the interaction of religion and politics, and the interaction of race and geography.

Knowledge of history allows children to be analytical and informed and to determine what is real news and what is fake news. That is important in our current era of digital history and digital news. A case in point is the denial of the Holocaust, which was a black mark on Europe. It occurred only 80 years ago, yet there are now people who deny that it happened. We therefore need to give children the ability to be analytical and to identify what is real and what is not. History is about far more than dates, battles and names, or tweets or Facebook; it is far more about human development, which was driven by philosophical thought and the evolution of civilisation and civilisations. History gives a sense of citizenship, perspective, belonging and identity. Today we in Ireland see ourselves as Irish but also European. We have decided to see our future as part of a supportive, inclusive European ideal rather than an isolationist, exclusive, inward-looking country. Knowledge of history has informed this enlightened way of thinking,

and without that knowledge we would be diminished.

I thank the Minister for his decision to restore history to the core curriculum.

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** I, too, am delighted to speak about this important matter. I am aware that last November the Minister met officials from the NCCA and asked that it undertake a review of the optional nature of history in the junior cycle. The NCCA decided, as we know, that history be kept as an optional subject. The Minister has decided to go against that recommendation and has chosen instead to assign history “special core status” in the junior cycle, so maith an tAire. It is a wise step. I applaud the Minister on the decision but, of course, his former Government colleagues, some of whom I think are here, supported Ruairí Quinn in his crusade to get rid of the junior certificate.

As the Minister pointed out, 90% of students across all school types choose to study history. This shows a degree of interest in and curiosity about the subject that needed to be reflected in the retention of its core status, which, thankfully, he has kept. There has been much criticism of the idea of making any subject, including history, compulsory. This criticism is misguided and fails to appreciate adequately the importance of opening up children to the rich historical legacy we are proud to have in this country. The Minister’s decision is a good one, and now he needs to ensure that sufficient provision is made to support the teaching of the subject in schools in a creative and imaginative way and to engage children and young people.

There is a sea change coming into the curriculum. I have grandchildren going to school and I am quite horrified by what they tell me and by the push to get rid of much of the ethos we had and believed in, whether conservative or Catholic. This must be dealt with sensibly in some way and we must have a pushback. I kept telling the former Minister, Ruairí Quinn, and his colleagues on the liberal left that they would not feed the people out there on this liberal agenda. That is why they have been consigned to history. Seven of them were elected back here. That is what they pushed and pushed, and they have left a legacy with Department officials, whom the Minister has stood up to. I appreciate him and applaud him for that because our history is vital. Without it we do not know where we came from or where we are going. I do not want to be backward-looking or anything, but we need a slowing down of this total push going on in education. I will talk to the Minister further about it. Some of the legislation coming forward here has been instigated by George Soros and other people from outside our State. What is going on is shameful. I do not know what we are turning ourselves into but it is not a good place.

**Deputy Danny Healy-Rae:** I am glad to get the opportunity to talk about this very important subject. I thank the Minister for restoring history as a core subject on the junior curriculum. When will this happen? When will it be reintroduced? Will geography be restored as a core subject as well? This is a very important matter because, as many have said, if we do not know our history or how we got here, how do we know who we are? Then we need to know geography to find out where we are going. It is very important. The removal of history as a core subject would have been a very sinister move because it would have broken up our heritage, our culture and our identity. We have a great history, and our forefathers were great people. I refer to the people who got us to where we are today and all the generations since, as well as all the people who fought and died for our freedom and the people who tried over the centuries and ages to rid us of the shackles of another country. We fought for 800 years.

That is all nice for the young people coming up to know: how we arrived here and how we got our democracy and our freedom. It is also nice for other youngsters to know. We now have

children of many denominations coming into our country. They need to know the country they are in and how we got to where we are. This is important for them as well. Likewise, it is very important our children know about European and international history. That is a great starting point. I know that the NCCA set up this initiative under the Minister's colleague, the former Minister for Education and Skills, Deputy Bruton, but it was absolutely ridiculous to suggest that history should not be a core subject. Why would we educate teachers to teach history if they would not have classes to teach? It was absolutely ridiculous to listen to anyone calling for it not to be a core subject anymore. This is a forward step back to what we had. History was on the curriculum for years and years. It did not make any sense to remove it. I applaud the Minister for not doing so. I hope he does not meet any resistance from his Cabinet colleagues-----

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

**Deputy Danny Healy-Rae:** -----because history is very important. I ask him again, when will it be back as a core subject?

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Deputy, let us be fair to other Members.

**Deputy Danny Healy-Rae:** I also ask him to ensure geography is a core subject as well.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Every Member must abide by the time slots.

**Deputy Catherine Martin:** Bhí mé sásta a léamh inniu go bhfuil sé i gceist ag an Aire an stair a chaomhnú mar ábhar. I welcome his decision to give history special core status as a subject for the junior certificate. I must ask, however, as other Members have, what exactly is special core status? I am sure the Minister will take this opportunity to clarify that. He said in his statement that one of his three ultimate goals is to see every junior cycle student learn about history. What exactly does that mean? Will history be a module that students learn in first and second years but not third year? Will it be protected and given the same number of hours as every other core subject in the junior cycle? I am looking for clarity on that before he gets the full céad míle fáilte from An Comhaontas Glas on his decision.

In this decade of commemorations, when we look back on the rich tapestry of our national history, I cannot think of any better time to confirm this subject as a core part of the junior cycle curriculum. This decision by the Minister will give every child the opportunity to learn about our shared past and the richness of human experience. It has been said that history is not only a doorway to the past but also a gateway to the future. Anyone who takes even a cursory look at what is happening now with Brexit on our island and the concerns we have will know the power of our past to influence our present. They will also know how vital a knowledge of our history can be in healing the wounds of the past and allowing the scars to fade. We owe it to our children to ensure they have an understanding of our past. History as a discipline is more than just a study of the past; it equips students with the skills to analyse critically and synthesise information from multiple sources and to develop their own robust opinions from the evidence available. It has never been easier for us to access information; at every moment we have an enormous amount of knowledge at our fingertips. However, every source has a bias and every blog and website is infused with the perspectives and prejudices of the author who created it. History trains students to cast a critical eye on everything they read, to see the perspective from which information is being provided and to weigh it accordingly. This type of epistemology should be considered a basic foundation of the education system and it is why history deserves core status. I commend the Minister on making the decision to protect history, but I seek clarity



on exactly what the special core status is.

I urge the Minister to re-examine the status of geography in the junior cycle. I understand that before he was elected to the Dáil he was a geography teacher in Donegal, so he does not need me to tell him that geography gives us an understanding not just of the physical, natural world around us but of the myriad people, cultures and ways of life across the globe. Geography is crucial to educating students on climate change, one of the most urgent issues facing us, although I am delighted that students across the world are educating many governments on climate change and urging them to act.

History and geography are at the core of our understanding of the world around us and both subjects should be core subjects in the junior cycle.

**Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach (Deputy Seán Kyne):** I am sharing time with Deputy Rock. Cuirim fáilte roimh an gcinneadh ón Aire Oideachais agus Scileanna inniu go mbeidh stair ina ábhar éigeantach ag leibhéal an teastais shóisearaigh. Tá an cinneadh ceart déanta aige agus déanaim comhghairdeas leis. Is dea-scéal é dóibh siúd a bhfuil suim acu sa stair mar ábhar. Is dea-scéal é do thodhchaí na tíre go mbeidh daoine óga ar an eolas faoi stair na tíre, stair na hEorpa agus stair an domhain.

When I was studying for the leaving certificate, my former religion teacher, Mr. Lyons, used to ask, when commenting on the low uptake of history at leaving certificate level, “How can one understand the present if one does not understand the past?”. That is very true. History has a very important role in our lives and if it does not, it should have. That is why the decision by the Minister today is very welcome. At a time when the term “fake news” is used so often, our history should be fact and should not be in dispute. That is why it is important that all our people study and understand it. In the debate across the water about Brexit and what has happened, there was an absolute lack of understanding of the relationship between our two islands, the Border, the plantations and all that goes with that. I do not believe it is taught at any level in the UK. That is very important as it would give a greater understanding of the complexities we face at present with Brexit.

We are currently going through the decade of centenaries. They are important and the events are commemorated on a proud and factual basis. As we approach the centenary of a more difficult period of time, the War of Independence and the Civil War, it is even more important that we remember and have knowledge of the facts of that period on the island of Ireland. Therefore, I very much welcome this decision. It was the right one. I understand the pressures on students with all the other subjects they may be asked to study or may consider studying, but history enriches people’s lives and gives them a good solid basis should they go on to study myriad subjects in universities or institutes of technology. It prepares them for life and grounds them in respect of where we are, how we got here and the complexities in this country, the European Union and throughout the world. I welcome this and, arís, déanaim comhghairdeas leis an Aire.

**Deputy Noel Rock:** Everything has history and in this building and Chamber we are surrounded by it. We are surrounded by people who are passionate about history and by the urgent, pressing need to find the lessons from it for the challenges we face today. Like Deputy Thomas Byrne, I pay tribute to the many history teachers who raised this issue with me, including my former history teacher, Ms Brennan. Like Ms Brennan in St. Aidan’s, there are many teachers who are as knowledgeable of history as they are passionate that it should be taught and be com-

pulsory. I welcome this move by the Minister. He has shown leadership on this which should be noted and commended. Technically, of course, history was never strictly compulsory, so this is a welcome move in terms of enshrining its status and ensuring that everybody has the opportunity to learn our history and study it further in the leaving certificate, as I did.

Mark Twain said: “History doesn’t repeat itself but it often rhymes”. There is a great need, particularly today, to understand nuance and welcome critical thinking. History teaches us many things, not least of which is the ability to do that. As many Deputies have stated, it gives us a type of literacy, an ability to analyse, detect bias and divine truths from seemingly conflicting facts. In this era of fake news the ability to divine truths from seemingly conflicting facts is an important skill. I noted one of the recommendations in the report regarding promoting history in schools and society. While the Minister bravely deviated from the ultimate recommendation of the report and decided to make the subject compulsory, which I welcome, there are some things in the report that are worth considering, particularly on the possibility of involving other stakeholders, such as a decade of commemorations President’s award or medal, a festival of history learning and third level history departments’ outreach programmes to schools. These are useful suggestions which the Minister could implement to further enliven the course and make it more modern.

Speaking as somebody from an education-focused household - my other half works in higher education - I am of the view that education is never solely an economic good. It is a good in itself. It is an economic good but is also a societal and civic good. It is a good for the fulfilment of our ideals as a republic. Today’s announcement and its implementation will be a welcome step forward. I am glad the Minister did it and I am glad to be part of the Government that did it. It will serve us well in the future.

**Deputy Dara Calleary:** I welcome the Minister’s decision and I commend Deputy Thomas Byrne on keeping the pressure on him. It is essential. Students of history will know who Sir Humphrey is. “Special core status” sounds very Sir Humphrey-esque, but it is either core or it is not. The Minister must clarify for once and for all whether it is core. If it is core, we welcome that, but if it is not, the Minister should be honest, upfront, learn from history and spell it out. It has to be core because of the interest that exists. All Deputies toured national schools in 2016 and saw the interest of younger pupils. Once they were motivated by a topic they engaged with it online and with the multimedia aspect.

If we are to assume that it is core, the new curriculum must not just be wedged into the current course but embedded in it. It must not be an add-on, but timetabled properly. The content must be relevant. There must be core issues of content for every school in terms of our national history, European history and world history so that people will learn lessons from it and from the mistakes of history. There must also be local history. Students need to get an understanding of local history, local placenames and local legends. That will provide variety and generate an interest. It will give students a stake in the history of their communities, their families’ history and the history of their settlement.

This is a very important decision. History is a foundation subject. It grounds all of us and the lack of an understanding of history and the lessons of history is a key reason for much of the discourse in politics around the world today. History teaches us a great deal, so this decision is welcome. I welcome the fact that the Minister stood up for it, but he should be upfront and straight about whether it is core or not.

**Deputy James Lawless:** I welcome the decision to reverse the previous decision to remove history as a core subject from the junior certificate curriculum. We know that those who fail to learn from the mistakes of history are doomed to repeat them. Indeed, we are seeing that happen in many countries, not least in latest round of happenings relating to the protracted Brexit saga. Many reasons have been eloquently articulated in the House over the last hour or more as to why it is key that we learn from history, that we learn history and are aware of it. We know that multiple versions of events can be put forward and that history is often written by the victors. This is very relevant in this country in the context of the decade of centenaries. While it has been an excellent programme to date, we know that we have difficult times ahead. There are differing versions of history and historical events but I am sure we will manage that in the sense of having a much more rounded and fuller understanding of it. In the USA, issues with the confederacy, on one hand, and the slave trade, on the other, are coming to a head. Differing view points are being contested head on but there is an understanding to be gained from that. Those who understand history are better placed to understand the current world.

The importance of history has been well ventilated tonight. What has been less obvious in this debate is the importance of an analytical subject and the ability to digest a body of information. We can all access a phenomenal amount of information on our smart phones and online via Google and so on. In that context, it is very important that we learn how to process information, apply hypotheses, weigh up competing accounts and draw our own conclusions. That is what history at second and third level enables us to do. It is important that all students have that basic grounding because that is a skill that will stand to them in many positions and walks of life and not just in the traditional arts and cultural disciplines.

**Deputy John Brassil:** I welcome the opportunity to make a brief contribution to this debate. I welcome the Minister's decision. Fianna Fáil has consistently campaigned for the downgrading of history to be reversed. My daughter will sit her leaving certificate examination this year and history is the subject into which she puts most time and effort. Her history teacher, Ms Barry in Presentation secondary school in Tralee, has been very vocal in requesting a reversal of this decision. She is, along with all of the other history teachers throughout the country, delighted with the Minister's decision.

I take this opportunity to mention geography, which is also a very important subject. Given the importance of climate change, migration, studies of population, ice caps, glaciers melting and so on, which are central to the geography syllabus, the Minister should seek to reverse the decision to remove geography as a core subject. There is an old saying in politics that every good deed deserves the appropriate punishment. The Minister will be punished for today's decision. Many times I have approached him looking for an extra teacher or SNA or have called for the retention of a teacher who is in danger of being lost to a school and he has stated that he cannot go against the recommendation of the Department because it is not within his remit to do so. Today, the Minister has gone against the recommendation of the NCCA. As a result, I will be reminding him tomorrow of the three teachers that are needed in Kerry and will be giving him the details forthwith.

**Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin:** Cuirim fáilte roimh an gcinneadh an stair a choinneáil mar ábhar lárnach sa teastas sóisearach. Is mar gheall ar bhrú ón bpobal a tharla an t-athrú seo.

While I welcome the news that history is to be a designated core subject for the junior certificate, I want to commend the efforts of the many individuals and groups who campaigned to reverse the original decision. The importance of history and an understanding of our past

was underscored by the wide variety of people who came forward in that regard. It was not only teachers and lecturers who called for a rethink but politicians, business and community leaders, as well as many of our older population who were keen to ensure that this and future generations are aware of the story of our past and of our place in this world and the stories and experiences of all peoples across the globe.

One need only look at the ridiculous suggestion that emerged last night regarding the imposition of a hard border in Ireland to see how a lack of historical perspective leads to awful policy decisions at the highest levels. It was very clear from several media interviews of British Tory politicians earlier today that they have no grasp of the painful and protracted imposition of the Border in Ireland, the work of the Boundary Commission and all the associated British duplicity.

We await more detail on what form this core subject status will take. Any core status must not mean a watered down or condensed course. History and the study of the past should nurture key skills such as questioning sources, evaluating evidence and placing all of this in the context of momentous contemporary changes in society, changes to which every citizen should be a party, whatever his or her stance or view.

Again, I welcome this decision and hope that it guarantees that the status of history and its role in the development of students is assured forever more.

**Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh):** Gabhaim buíochas leis na Teachtaí as a gcuid teachtaireachtaí éagsúla tábhachtacha anocht. Chuir Baill na Dála an-bhrú orm thar an bhliain seo thart maidir leis an gcinneadh seo. Ba mhaith liom mo aitheantas a thabhairt do na dreamanna agus na heagrais uilig as a dtiomantas thar na blianta. Labhair go leor Teachtaí anocht faoi na múinteoirí staire a bhí acu sna scoileanna éagsúla.

Let me be clear on the question of special core status. Prior to my announcement today the study of history at junior certificate level was optional but that is no longer the case. I have made the decision to remove the optional aspect and to give it core subject status to ensure that history is a subject for every single student entering the junior cycle. It will not be a watered down version of the subject. I take the point made by Deputy Ó Caoláin that there was a fear in that regard. People were afraid that history would be a short course but it will be a core subject. As Deputies will be aware, for English, Irish and mathematics, there is a minimum of 240 hours which will also now apply to history but schools will have discretion and can increase that if they wish, as they can with the existing core subjects.

I want to be really clear about a particular matter because Deputies posed very important questions about it.

**Deputy Thomas Byrne:** The media was briefed otherwise last night which was why I asked the question.

**Deputy Joe McHugh:** Core status means core status. It means ensuring the importance of history as students progress and transition from primary to secondary school. It also means looking at more creative and innovative ways of ensuring that the percentage take up of history after the junior certificate increases. At the moment, nine out of ten students study history at junior certificate level and while that is a good statistic, we are going to work to ensure it improves. I made this decision because there was a worry that the figure would decrease. The statistic for junior certificate to leaving certificate is two out of nine. There is an acceptance by

all involved in this debate that we can do more to ensure that we move to that level.

Deputy O'Loughlin spoke about how she studied history for her junior certificate, or perhaps it was her intermediate certificate - I do not want to get into controversy about when she studied it - but she did not study it for her leaving certificate. She went on to study it at third level and it opened a window for her.

I started learning Irish in 2014 and that gave me a window to the appreciation of history, a connection to culture, to heritage and to local places, as was raised here tonight, and to local history. Is é sin an comhthéacs ábhartha agus tábhachtach i gcás aon teanga nó aon ábhar. Any subject or any language has to have context. I am seeking, with this issue, to allow the NCCA to develop the new recognition that we are giving this and to give it space to come up with a formula. Deputy Danny Healy-Rae asked when this will come in. I want it to come in in September next year. Students who are in the junior cycle this year and who were in it last year will continue to complete their junior cycle. I note 97% of schools still offer history at junior certificate level. In the past couple of months, I have come across education and training board, ETB, schools that have seen natural progression into that sphere.

Ba mhaith liom m'aitheantas agus mo bhuíochas a ghabháil chuig gach aon duine as na moltaí agus na focail dearfacha - the positive words. I look forward to working with Deputies with regard to how this is designed in the future. I do not yet have the detail of that because the NCCA will be working on it. I will task the NCCA, in conjunction with my officials, to look at how we give history the special core status that it deserves, which means that it is on a par with English, Irish and mathematics.

### **Defence Forces (Evidence) Bill 2019: Order for Second Stage**

Bill entitled an Act to amend the law to authorise the taking of bodily samples from military persons suspected of certain offences under military law for forensic testing; to provide for the taking of certain bodily samples from military persons or other persons who volunteer to have such samples taken from them for the purpose of the investigation of offences or incidents that may have involved the commission of offences under military law; to provide for the establishment and operation by Forensic Science Ireland of the Department of Justice and Equality of a DNA (Military Police) Database System; to provide for the purposes of that System; to provide for the taking of certain bodily samples from persons suspected of certain offences under military law for the purpose of generating DNA profiles in respect of those persons to be entered in the DNA (Military Police) Database System; to provide for the taking of certain bodily samples from certain persons for elimination purposes and, where appropriate, the entry of their DNA profiles in the DNA (Military Police) Database System; to provide for the taking of bodily samples from military persons, or samples from things, for the purpose of generating DNA profiles to be entered in the DNA (Military Police) Database System; to provide for the collection and analysis of other evidence; to provide, in certain circumstances, for the destruction of evidence and samples taken under this Act and the destruction, or removal from the DNA (Military Police) Database System, of any DNA profiles generated from those samples; to amend the Defence Act 1954, the Courts-Martial Appeals Act 1983 and the Criminal Justice (Forensic Evidence and DNA Database System) Act 2014; and to provide for related matters.



**Minister of State at the Department of Defence (Deputy Paul Kehoe):** I move: “That Second Stage be taken now.”

Question put and agreed to.

### **Defence Forces (Evidence) Bill 2019: Second Stage**

**Minister of State at the Department of Defence (Deputy Paul Kehoe):** I move: “That the Bill be now read a Second Time.”

I am pleased to present this Bill to the House this evening. This is technical but important legislation which will be of major assistance to the Military Police Corps in its investigations. The Military Police Corps, a service corps within the Defence Forces headed by the provost marshal, conducts criminal investigations concerning persons subject to military law. These investigations can arise both within the State and in other jurisdictions where Defence Forces personnel are deployed overseas. The principal purpose of this Bill is to provide for members of the military police to take and use DNA samples and other evidence for the purposes of their investigations. It will provide for the establishment of a military police DNA database system, to be administered by Forensic Science Ireland, to hold DNA profiles generated from DNA samples taken from persons under this Act.

The investigative capabilities of the military police, which may need to be exercised outside the jurisdiction of the State when military personnel are on overseas service or on State ships, are currently compromised by the lack of a comprehensive statutory basis for the taking of evidential samples. This Bill will remedy this situation and will enhance the capability of the Military Police Corps to carry out its investigations of serious offences. The Bill mirrors the Criminal Justice (Forensic Evidence and DNA Database System) Act 2014, referred to as the Act of 2014, which provides for the taking of DNA samples by An Garda Síochána and for the establishment of a DNA database system with a view to assisting An Garda Síochána in its investigation of crime. Deputies will recall that the Act of 2014 was the subject of detailed consideration during its passage through the Houses of the Oireachtas. That Act, which drew on a Law Reform Commission report from 2005 on the establishment of a DNA database, strikes a careful balance between ensuring there is an effective statutory basis for the operation of a DNA database system along with the need to take account of the rights of individuals whose DNA profiles are placed on the database.

This Bill closely follows the provisions outlined in the Act of 2014 but with adaptations, where required, to take account of the military environment. For example, there was no requirement in this Bill to include the detailed provisions in the Act of 2014 relating to the taking of samples from child suspects. However, the safeguards provided for in the Act of 2014 regarding the taking of samples from persons have been incorporated in this Bill. The Bill also includes some consequential amendments to the Criminal Justice (Forensic Evidence and DNA Database System) Act 2014, the Defence Act 1954 and the Courts-Martial Appeals Act 1983, arising from the provisions of this Bill. The military police will be responsible for the collection of evidence as provided for in this Bill, including samples from which DNA profiles may be generated. The relevant personnel performing these duties will have completed the same course of training as undertaken by Garda Síochána crime scene investigators who perform

similar duties.

I now come to the detailed provisions of the Bill. The Bill is divided into 12 parts. Part 1, the preliminary and general part, includes standard provisions relating to the Short Title, sets out the necessary definitions and deals with the application of the Bill to persons subject to military law. In this regard, section 3 of the Bill provides that the application of the Bill to a person subject to military law shall not be affected if any such person is for the time being outside the State or on board a ship or aircraft. This is to clarify that the provisions of the Bill apply to military personnel serving overseas. Similar wording is included in the Defence Act 1954. This Part also includes a number of supplementary provisions relating to the taking of samples and the generation of DNA profiles. Section 5 of the Bill provides for the making of orders and regulations under the Bill.

Part 2 deals with the taking of samples from persons in the custody of the military police for entry onto the military police DNA database system, as well as the taking of intimate and non-intimate samples from such persons. Any samples taken under this Part may only be taken in connection with the investigation of a relevant offence. For the purposes of this Bill, this means an offence for which a person subject to military law may be punished by imprisonment for a term of five years or more, for example for serious assault or murder. Accordingly, I envisage that the powers arising under this Part of the Bill will only be exercised by the military police relatively infrequently. A sample taken under section 9 of the Bill will be for the purpose of generating a DNA profile, in respect of a person from whom the sample was taken, to be entered on the military police DNA database system. It will not be used for evidential purposes.

Section 10 provides for the taking of an intimate sample, while section 11 provides for the taking of a non-intimate sample. The results of the forensic testing of a sample taken under these sections, and a DNA profile generated from any such sample, may be used in court-martial proceedings. The definitions of an “intimate sample” and “non-intimate sample” mirror the equivalent definitions in the Act of 2014. Provision is also made in this Part for the retaking of samples in certain circumstances. This scenario might arise, for example, where the original sample proves to be insufficient or is inadequately labelled. I also wish to draw attention to certain other provisions in this Part regarding the taking of intimate samples. Section 12 specifies the persons who are authorised to take intimate samples, for example medical practitioners or nurses in the case of blood samples or a dentist or medical practitioner in the case of a dental impression. The section also provides that, with the exception of a sample of blood or a dental impression, an intimate sample shall, insofar as practicable, only be taken by a person who is of the same sex as the person from whom the sample is being taken. In addition, and due to the nature of an intimate sample, the consent of the person in service custody must be obtained before any such sample is taken. Section 13 of the Bill deals with the inferences that a court martial may draw from a refusal to consent or a withdrawal of consent to the taking of an intimate sample. There are similar provisions in the Act of 2014.

Section 15 allows for the use of reasonable force in the taking of a non-intimate sample. However, the use of this power is subject to a number of safeguards as specified in this section. Specifically, the use of reasonable force must be authorised by a member of the military police not below the rank of commandant. In addition, the taking of a sample pursuant to this section must be recorded by electronic or similar means. All of the provisions of this Part are similar to the equivalent provisions in the Criminal Justice (Forensic Evidence and DNA Database System) Act 2014.

Part 3 provides for the taking, by the military police, of samples from Defence Forces personnel and other persons to ascertain whether such persons have contaminated a crime scene sample. This is a necessary power to ensure that the military police can carry out investigations in an effective manner. Again, the wording of this Part is based on similar provisions in the Act of 2014.

Part 4 provides that the military police may request a person to allow a DNA sample to be taken from him or her for the purpose of generating a DNA profile with regard to the investigation of a particular offence against military law. In this context, a volunteer may include a person who is a victim, or reasonably considered to be a victim, of the alleged offence which is being investigated by the military police. The taking of a sample under this Part is subject to a number of safeguards, including a requirement to obtain the written consent of the volunteer. In addition, where a person subject to military law refuses to give consent to the taking of a sample, that refusal shall not of itself constitute reasonable cause for a member of the military police to suspect that person of committing the offence concerned for the purpose of arresting and placing that person in service custody. As before, the provisions in this Part of the Bill are similar to equivalent provisions contained in the Act of 2014.

Part 5 provides for the establishment by the director of Forensic Science Ireland, FSI, of a DNA database system. The system, which will be similar to the DNA database system established under the Act of 2014, will be used to contain DNA profiles generated from DNA samples taken under this Bill. The Part details the structure of the DNA database system, such as the various indexes which will be contained within the system. Section 26 specifies the purposes for which the DNA database system may be used. These are the investigation and prosecution of offences against military law, whether committed within or outside the State. Section 30 sets out in detail the functions of the director of the FSI arising under this Part. Finally, as regards this Part, section 32 outlines the various comparisons that may be carried out by the director of the FSI using DNA profiles entered onto the DNA database system, including comparisons with DNA profiles entered on the DNA database system established under the Act of 2014. This is an important provision which will be of major assistance to the military police in its investigations.

Part 6 outlines the powers of members of military police in respect of the collection of evidence other than evidence collected under Part 2 of this Bill for the purposes of DNA testing, from a person arrested by the military police and placed in service custody. Section 34 sets out the powers that may be exercised by a member of the military police under this Part when a person is placed in service custody. However, with the exception of the power to demand a person's official details and to search him or her, the other powers may only be exercised on the authorisation of a member of the military police not below the rank of captain. The section also provides that a member of the military police may seize and retain for testing anything that the arrested person has in his or her possession.

Debate adjourned.

### **Forestry Sector: Motion [Private Members]**

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** I move:

That Dáil Éireann:

acknowledges:

— that Ireland has the second lowest forest cover in the European Union (EU) at 11 per cent, compared to a European average of 30 per cent and that the majority of the forests are monocultures;

— that the State forestry policy has been predominantly based on a rotation, clear-fell and replant cycle using monoculture;

— that the extent of hedgerows declined massively during the 20th century but has since recovered slightly;

— that having started from a forest cover of 1 per cent in 1923, the State and the forestry industry has grown substantially, and afforestation has brought major positive benefits including the development of a forestry sector and forest products industry that currently employs 12,000 people;

— that aspects of the current afforestation model, in particular the emphasis on largescale monoculture have, in some cases, had negative impacts on local communities, biodiversity, water quality and landscapes;

— that in the light of the need to address the challenges of the climate and biodiversity emergency, now is the time to move to the next stage in Irish forestry;

— that it is desirable for the forestry system to provide a range of services in a way which strengthens local communities, provides employment for a new generation of foresters and access for the public to more varied woodlands, which are rich in biodiversity;

— that there is a potential for higher value, higher quality wood products from Irish forests, including a potential for long-lasting products as low carbon inputs for construction and other sectors and as stores of sequestered carbon for the lifetime of the buildings and products;

— the declining populations in certain rural areas, the high average age of farmers, and the developing crisis in Irish agriculture; and

— the inappropriate nature of current land use in many parts of Ireland, including the inability to make a living from current farming models and the difficulty for young people who might want to work on the land to get access to land which they do not directly inherit;

notes:

— the impacts of biodiversity loss and the loss of ecosystem services, and the consequent economic losses and risks we face globally and in Ireland;

— the gravity of the global biodiversity crisis, including the loss of species, the loss of important populations of species and the undermining of ecosystem services;

— the vital role of land use in the hydrological cycle, managing flooding and

drought, maintaining water quality and dealing with pollution and the role which changed land use practices must play in meeting the objectives of improving water quality in line with the EU Water Framework Directive;

— the vulnerability of even-aged monoculture plantations, e.g. to disease, fire and windthrow, especially given the increasing dangers of climate change;

— the role which changed land use practices must play in reducing greenhouse gas emissions in sequestering and storing carbon, and in providing resilience to the effects of climate change;

— the essential role that afforestation, land use and soil carbon management must play in Ireland's National Energy and Climate Plan (NECP) 2021-2030, which is to be drafted by the end of this year; and

— the commitments Ireland has entered into, in the context of the Natura 2000 network and the EU Birds and Habitats Directives to protect habitats and species, and the fact that Ireland is failing to meet those commitments and that biodiversity loss is continuing, as demonstrated in Ireland's reports under Article 16 of the EU Birds and Habitats Directive;

agrees:

— that Ireland was once covered by great forests and that our mild climate and the influence of the Gulf Stream make for one of the best habitats for trees in the world;

— that the Irish population wants to spend more time in nature and the public health benefits of enabling them to do so;

— the economic value of ecotourism and associated economic activities; and

— that the success of rewilding initiatives in other countries, and the plans for a recognised wilderness area in the Nephin range, as well as Coillte's recent recognition of the amenity value of forestry in the Dublin and Wicklow mountains; and

calls on the Government to:

— make a fundamental change in forestry policy away from a narrow vision of 30 year cycle to a permanent woodland approach that would provide greater and more diverse social, environmental and economic benefits to society as a whole;

— move away from large-scale monoculture of fast-growing species such as Sitka spruce on 'marginal land' towards mixed, diverse forestry, with a wider range of forest types (short rotation, longer rotations, agroforestry, semi-wild) delivering a range of services and benefits and forest products;

— rebalance the premiums and payments made for planting and thinning to support this strategic change in Irish forestry;

— start the restoration of large areas of natural woodlands, formerly the dominant terrestrial ecosystems of Ireland, including the productive use of much of them through a system of continuous cover and close to nature forestry;



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— begin a national programme of transformation of existing young, even-aged monoculture forests to continuous cover forestry;

— implement the recommendation of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Climate Action, accepted and endorsed by the Dáil on 9th May, for a review of land use to inform a national land use plan;

— establish a system of local forestry plans, developed in an open participative process including all parts of civil society, in each county, informed by the national land-use plan, which would form the framework for Government support for small-scale afforestation in the county;

— use Strategic Environmental Assessment to develop these local forestry plans, to ensure the meeting of objectives, including carbon sequestration, water quality and hydrology, biodiversity protection and restoration, landscape and public amenity;

— provide for these local forestry plans to include financial support for small-scale afforestation with mixed woodland with a high proportion of native species in all parts of the country;

— provide budgetary support to enable every registered farm holding to plant a hectare of natural woodland on their land within the next five years, on agreed sites within the farm which minimise the effect on farm operations and maximise the biodiversity and ecosystem service benefits;

— develop opportunities for community ownership of and community investment in afforestation within national forestry policy and local forestry plans;

— reorient national supports and incentives for afforestation in line with the local forestry plans in the direction of forestry closer to nature;

— provide better support for the restoration and planting of new hedgerows to provide biodiversity corridors, carbon shelters and nutrients in our agricultural system;

— engage local authorities and local communities in a radical expansion of urban tree planting and neighbourhood and community forests and for urban trees and forests;

— resource the National Parks and Wildlife Service, the National Council for Forest Research and Development (COFORD) and forestry non-governmental organisations (NGOs) at a level appropriate for them to carry out all of their functions and develop new areas of responsibility;

— review the objectives and legal structure of Coillte to establish a new mandate for the company which delivers multiple benefits from forestry, including environmental and community objectives as well as the production of high-quality timber;

— establish better educational infrastructure and funding to support apprenticeship programmes in forest management in line with the new forestry policy;

— increase investment in higher and further education and training as well as for the modernisation of equipment available for craft apprenticeship provision to conduct such a transformation of existing strands; and

— promote the use of high-quality wood materials in new building construction, including by amending building regulations, and to encourage Irish enterprise agencies to further support the development of local enterprises which develop a wide range of products to use natural wood material.

I will share time with Deputy Catherine Martin after 15 minutes. This motion is introduced as part of what I believe our response should be to the climate and biodiversity crisis this House declared before the summer break. Completely changing, upgrading, modernising and reinventing the model for forestry in Irish woodlands is the biggest way in which we can tackle the climate crisis. We need to suck carbon out of the atmosphere and the best solution technologically, economically and in a variety of ways is the planting and growing of trees. As we see in reports under Article 12 of the birds directive and Article 17 of the habitats directive - not Article 16, as cited in the motion - we are also in the middle of a biodiversity crisis. Changing the model of forestry is one of the best ways to address that crisis. I will set out the reasons for that view in my opening contribution.

I move this motion while holding in high regard everyone in Irish forestry down through the years. They have achieved a transition in our country. At the foundation of the State only 1% of the country was covered in native forestry, mostly in very inaccessible locations. We have increased that to approximately 11%. That, however, is a fraction of the covered area in most European countries. The average European forest cover is approximately 30% of land area. We have significant room, particularly as a country with some of the best growing conditions for trees in the world, to increase that cover to help us tackle the climate crisis. How this is done will be critical in tackling the biodiversity crisis.

I recognise the foresters who have worked in this industry over the years. They have done so with real intent and with proper motivation. They were engaged in a proper public service. We need to recognise a number of things, however. First, the level of afforestation carried on in the country has been declining dramatically for the last 25 years or so. In 1993 we were planting in the region of 23,000 ha of forest. Last year that was down to approximately 4,000 ha. There has been a continuous downward spiral over that 25-year period.

There are 12,000 people working in this sector and they are critical to our rural areas and the country in general. While I recognise and appreciate the work of everyone who has been involved in the forestry sector I believe that, looking back, we do need to change. We have already changed but we should recognise that the change was a mistake. Much of our initial forestry, particularly State-planted forestry, was carried out on marginal uplands. These could be got at a low price, which may explain why they were chosen. These were not the right places to afforest. This choice had massive consequences with regard to the drainage of our soils, often in wet peatlands, and with regard to biodiversity loss in those areas. We often created forests that are relatively inaccessible, difficult to harvest, and not in the right place to gain the full benefit from them.

The second thing we need to recognise is that the emphasis on plantations, particularly monocultural plantations, was also a mistake. I hope the Government recognises this but I fear its reported opposition to this motion shows it still does not. It was a mistake for a variety of

reasons. The first is the loss of biodiversity it entailed. This is a complex issue. The science in this regard is interesting. It is very interesting to read, “The role of planted forests in the provision of habitat: an Irish perspective” by Cormac J. O’Callaghan, Sandra Irwin, Kenneth Byrne and John O’Halloran of University College Cork and University College Dublin. It sets out in great detail the complex interactions in these plantations. In some of these monoculture plantations some species have thrived. The red squirrel survives at the top of conifers in a way the grey squirrels cannot. That has helped them to come back. It is the same with the pine martin. The monocultural forests we have planted may have been good for midges or aphids, but they have been really poor for other insects, including spiders, and for birdlife. We want that biodiversity back in our forestry model. Even where we have made changes, requiring a mix with 10% native trees or hardwood trees with conifers, the analysis from the academics is that the monoculture plantation system is still not rich in biodiversity. At the heart of the change we make in forestry must be putting nature first and returning to close to nature forestry management that restores biodiversity in every way possible.

The recent study of the UCD department of forestry and others examined the socio-economic impact of forestry in Leitrim. Some of the statistics on the current model were particularly interesting. All our attention is on lumber and producing timber, but if we ask how much carbon storage occurs, we learn that half the timber is effectively turned into sawdust, woodchip or bark. The latter products are used immediately, meaning they have no carbon storage potential. Of the wood that is processed, about 22% is used for fencing and 24% for pallets. Only one quarter of the wood we are growing is for timber products used in the construction of buildings or in other areas where the carbon is stored for a period. Other forestry systems around Europe, which have more continuous cover and are long term, achieve much higher value and get much better wood products. That is the third reason I believe we need to change.

That is what this motion is about. It is not about criticising those currently involved in forestry. It states it is now time for us to make an evolutionary leap. I want to set out how I believe that could take place. First, we need to move away from monoculture plantations with short rotations whereby we chop down the trees every 35 or 40 years in a clear-felling system and plant again, having left the land devastated. We need to move to multi-age and multi-species forestry. Continuous cover forestry, rather than being marginal, could be central. It is complex and the forestry management skills are very sophisticated. One of the advantages of this system is that it will require a generation of foresters to be very skilled such that they can look at a forest as it is developing and say a certain tree is the one with the best prospect of growing, requiring the removal of the surrounding trees to create light within the forest. It is light management as much as anything else in the new forestry systems that deliver very high-quality, long-term timber and biodiverse natural forest. This represents the leap and change we need to make. That will provide a lot of employment because it involves skill and is very labour intensive. It will provide a continuous stream of thinnings. It would also provide a more natural forest that is actually a joy to walk through rather than the current forests, which tend to be very dark and dense do not have a bottom canopy. Every 35 years, the latter are chopped down, with consequences for water run-off and soil retention. A range of other biodiversity losses come with it.

Second, there is a considerable and immediate role for the massive expansion of agroforestry. We should, as set out in the motion, tell all of the 120,000 Irish farmers that we want to give them a special premium, especially in this difficult time when we are facing all sorts of difficulties over Brexit and uncertainty over what we are going to do to the land. We should ask them to find, with their local advisers, those spots of the farms that could be converted to

native woodland. It would not involve taking from the core farming system but would involve using the corner of the field. We do not want the farmers using the wetlands areas of their farms because we want to restore them for birds and for rich habitat reasons. We want the farmers to add to the hedgerows and connect them with the pockets of woodland in our farm system, particularly using native trees of local progeny. By doing this, we are connecting up the remaining 100,000 ha of native woodland, only 20,000 ha of which is really historic and ancient. It can be connected by using our farms and paying our farmers properly to engage in this sort of agroforestry. It provides shelter and nutrients that help the fields. It gives the farmers a wood supply, an energy source and a natural landscape that is very valuable and beneficial to us as human beings.

It is vital that this also be regarded as an urban issue. It was very interesting to note that there was a special meeting called by the Pembroke residents association in Dublin last Sunday. One could not get more urban than that. At the meeting, the botany experts from Trinity and UCD made the case that urban trees have a significant role to play. Large trees with a large canopy on a street act as an air filter. They take a lot of the particulate matter from traffic and other air pollution sources and filter it before the air gets to the house, just as with sand. They restore streets to being places that comprise a natural environment in their own right. We are not building our streets around the trees.

We just carried out a massive expansion of the docklands. The academics from UCD and Trinity showed shocking maps of where trees are. They are pretty much in the wealthy, leafy suburbs, and that is it. The Phoenix Park is an example. In the docklands, which we have just redeveloped, there is hardly a tree. The poorer areas across the city, which may suffer worse from air pollution and need and deserve a rich environment, have been left bereft of a green canopy. Dublin and every other city in Ireland is relatively low down the international scale in terms of trees. The canopy proportion is about 10% compared with Helsinki, where it is about 46%. That is what we should be aiming to have.

It was very interesting to listen to Pádraic Fogarty of the Irish Wildlife Trust giving a presentation in the audiovisual room earlier today. There is an increasing realisation across the world and in the modern, very advanced leading forestry systems that, rather than opting for a very expensive and intrusive system using pesticides, glyphosates and all sorts of interventions, including the plastic wrappers we put around new trees to help them grow, we can let trees seed themselves. A canopy of scrub or brush is allowed to develop low down and out of that native trees grow on their own. They will be well suited to their location because, over hundreds of thousands of years, they will have become more resistant to diseases such as ash dieback than the imported trees that caused such a problem in recent years. Rewilding will be one of the most significant ways to meet our carbon sequestration targets and restore a landscape of which people are proud and that is rich in biodiversity.

The Minister is smiling.

**Deputy Michael Creed:** It is my disposition. I cannot help it.

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** Fair enough. I hope it is not because the Minister believes rewilding is not a serious proposition and a serious part of what we need to do, because it is central to our future forestry plans.

Our legacy from the past 50 years comprises all the plantations that will give our mills and

all the industry we have set up a supply, but we must move away from the monoculture plantation system. We must be especially wary about the prospect of bioenergy providing a viable long-term solution because it does not result in the effective storage of carbon. I am coming back to the same argument I have had with the Minister on a number of occasions. We need a national land use plan to map out the new change, the new future, for Irish woodlands. Beneath that, we need county and local area plans to work out the best applications in various types of lands and various types of farms and woodland that go hand in hand with the rewilding we are to engage in. We need to change the premiums we pay to support this change in the whole model. We need to use Common Agricultural Policy reform to pay farmers properly for some of the rewilding we are going to do. First and foremost, we need to fund the National Biodiversity Data Centre, which is hanging on a thread because it does not have proper funding from the Government. We need to expand the National Parks and Wildlife Service and COFORD to make sure we have the scientific expertise to help local communities to develop the new forestry model. We need to change the mandate for Coillte and Bord na Móna. Coillte, in particular, must move away from being a company that is mandated to maximise commercial returns from lumber production. It must be charged again with planting all over this country. It should be helping communities to plant for biodiversity and for better water quality. It should see forestry as a natural resource for our people and as something that helps our tourism industry. Coillte should be looking at the production of food and the provision of a whole range of services out of forestry. This is the change that needs to happen. There needs to be a fundamental reappraisal of what we are doing in forestry. If we move towards supporting nature, it will bring us closer to nature and will give us a natural landscape that we cherish and our children and grandchildren will cherish. That is where we want to go with this motion. That is why we have tabled it. We think it is very significant for our climate crisis, for our biodiversity crisis and for the revival of rural Ireland. More than anything else, the land use plan must start with people. Foresters, woodworkers and others who will benefit from this forestry system are willing to make the massive change that is needed.

**Deputy Catherine Martin:** Tá an Comhaontas Glas sásta an rún seo a thabhairt os comhair na Dála anocht. As Deputy Ryan has outlined, the motion before us follows on from the Joint Committee on Climate Action's recommendation that a review of land use should lead to a national land use plan. This recommendation was accepted and endorsed by the Dáil earlier this year. The exploitation of nature and of the earth is at the root of climate change. In pre-neolithic times, forest cover across this island was more than 80%. When this State was founded almost 100 years ago, forest cover on the island was just 1%. While we have made progress in restoring that - we are now at approximately 11% - we have a long way to go. Rather than focusing on the number of trees, we need to make sure the tree cover we have is appropriate to the area. The motion before the House seeks a fundamental shift to a style of forestry that restores nature. This total change will bring more light, more wildlife and greater diversity of life to our woodlands.

Our motion calls for a more diverse forestry and a more intense style of forestry management, which will help to create steady jobs in the forestry sector while managing continuous native woodlands. These new jobs will need to be supported by educational infrastructure and funding to support apprenticeship programmes in forest management, alongside the modernisation of equipment available for craft apprenticeship provision. If this fundamental shift in forestry is to work, we need to bring communities and farmers along with us. In the past, some farmers have had negative experiences with forestry. If farmers are to come with us on this journey, we need to pay them properly. We need to ensure they receive steady and sustainable



incomes for using their lands in the most sustainable manner. We must help them to diversify and enable them to be the leaders on climate action that they can be, given that they are natural caretakers of the land. It is only then that we can develop the best system of land use for our communities, local economies and natural ecosystems. The current system is not serving our farmers, our wildlife, our island or our planet. We need substantial reform of the Common Agricultural Policy to ensure farmers can be paid for rewilding or planting their land.

There are many positive opportunities for local communities and economies in this context. There are employment opportunities for people with an expertise in forestry. Continuous cover forestry is more labour-intensive than clear-fell forestry. This means it can create further employment. When it comes to moving away from a narrow vision of forestry towards a different model, nature is our greatest ally. Self-seeding and rewilding allow nature to do the heavy lifting and to restore itself. This is essential not only for rural areas but also for urban areas. Trees have a role in tackling air pollution in urban areas, increasing quality of life and health and creating streetscapes that keep us closer to nature. This motion is very important for our trees and our wildlife, for protecting the biodiversity of our country and our natural ecosystems and for the quality of life in urban and rural areas. Tackling climate change will require an overhaul of how we do everything, including how we move, how we eat, how we live and how we care for each other and for the planet. By fixing these issues in their entirety, we will have an opportunity to create a fairer, more equal and more sustainable society and global economy. Things as they stand are broken for farmers and for our biodiversity. That is why we need to change radically how we do things. We need to have a radical ambition when it comes to how we use our land. It is time for a different kind of forestry that will lead to a better quality of soil and a better quality of water, is rich in biodiversity, protects our biodiversity and our ecosystems, and puts nature first. It is time to change our relationship with nature to create a better quality of life for all.

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Creed):** I move amendment No. 1:

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

“notes:

— the extent of forestry development achieved over the last number of decades, through the combination of State funding and participation of the private landowners in the State’s afforestation programmes;

— the findings from the third cycle of the National Forest Inventory, that the national forest estate is still expanding and has now reached 11 per cent of the total land area, with a wide variety of forest types present and that share of broadleaf species in the national forest estate is 29 per cent;

— the multi-functional benefits of forestry including environmental, social and economic;

— the contribution which the sector makes to the rural economy through the provision of 12,000 jobs;

— the Government’s commitment to tackling climate change as contained in the ‘Climate Action Plan 2019 To Tackle Climate Breakdown’, and the ambitious targets set

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for the agriculture, forestry and land use sector therein, including an afforestation target of 8,000 hectares per annum;

— that meeting the afforestation target is challenging and that it will require a collaborative response from Government, private land owners, public bodies and local communities;

— that the enhancements following the 2018 Midterm Review (MTR) of the Government's Forestry Programme 2014 – 2020, including increased grant and premium rates, have directly led to an increase in the proportion of broadleaf trees planted in Ireland, including a 25 per cent increase last year compared to the previous year;

— that significant increases for planting of agro-forestry were introduced in the MTR with premium rates trebled;

— that initiatives by the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine include the introduction, in January 2019, of three new support measures to further support biodiversity in Irish forests, including a scheme to support Continuous Cover Forestry, and changes to the Woodland Improvement Scheme to introduce grant aid to carry out a second thinning intervention for broadleaf forests;

— that afforestation applications are subject to detailed scrutiny regarding environmental suitability, including site inspections, statutory referrals, public consultation, and the application of procedures around Appropriate Assessment and Environmental Impact Assessment;

— that the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine operates a range of afforestation-related protocols in the context of the Natura 2000 network and the European Union Birds and Habitats Directive to protect habitats and species; and

— that the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine provides support, through schemes such as the Green Low-Carbon Agri-Environment Scheme (GLAS) and under the Forestry Programme 2014 – 2020, to landowners to undertake actions and measures which support and enhance biodiversity; and

recognises:

— the role that hedgerows play in nature-based solutions to both mitigate climate change (carbon sequestration and storage) and help in the creation of landscape resilience in the face of climate change, and notes that 6,758 kilometres of new hedgerows have been established since the introduction of agri-environmental schemes in 1994;

— the funding provided under the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine NeighbourWood Scheme to local authorities and other landowners, both public and private, to create 'close-to-home' woodland amenities in partnership with communities, for local people to use and enjoy;

— the growing interest in planting native woodlands under the Forestry Programme 2014 – 2020 is increasing steadily year on year with 374 hectares of native woodlands planted in 2018, an increase of 38 per cent compared to 2017, and this upward trend has continued into 2019 which is ahead of the 2018 planting figure year to date;

— that under the Woodland Improvement Scheme which promotes active management of broadleaf forest, almost 680 hectares of woodlands received support under this scheme this year, this represents a 76 per cent increase in activity when compared to the same time in 2018;

— that support for Continuous Cover Forestry was introduced for the first time in the MTR of the Forestry Programme 2014 – 2020, where funding was allocated for 30 projects up until the end of 2020;

— the establishment by Coillte of a specific entity ‘Coillte Nature’ within the company to focus on the environment and recreational forests, with Coillte Nature to target the delivery of new woodlands facilitating species diversity, biodiversity and carbon sequestration as part of the Forestry Programme 2014 – 2020;

— that Coillte Nature will be undertaking large discrete projects with a separate noncommercial focus, with the intention of increasing the national forest estate but with a strong emphasis on carbon sequestration, species diversification, biodiversity and the development of outdoor recreation and tourism amenities;

— that the National Council for Forest Research and Development (COFORD) proposes to track the implementation of the recommendations in ‘Forests, products and people – Ireland’s forest policy – a renewed vision’ and to monitor and report on progress in implementing the stated strategic actions and to engage and influence stakeholders in relation to policy changes and developments focusing on afforestation and the promotion of forestry; and

— that the continued support of members of the House will be required for the ongoing development of forestry in order to maximise the range of benefits for the economy, society and the environment.”

I acknowledge the commitment of successive Governments to afforestation in Ireland. Having started at a low of 1% at the turn of the 20th century, forest cover has grown substantially to the current level of 11%, or 770,000 ha. This is a real economic, social and environmental success story. The State’s investment of €3 billion since 1990 has created thousands of jobs across the supply chain from tree nurseries to timber processors. Approximately 23,000 private forest owners, most of whom are farmers, have voluntarily converted their land to tree plantations. This has allowed them to diversify their farm incomes, which in turn has had a positive effect on the rural economy. Forestry is a very productive land use. It can complement farming activity and be the difference in making a farm viable. While forestry benefits the rural economy, it also delivers other benefits to society. It makes a critical contribution to mitigating climate change. It is part of the response to climate breakdown of the agriculture and land use sector. While this sector remains the single largest contributor to overall greenhouse gas emissions, at 33% of the total, it should be seen as part of the solution.

The Government’s climate action plan has identified a series of actions to make Ireland a leader in responding to climate breakdown. It is the most ambitious environmental strategy ever developed by an Irish Government. Its ambition is matched only by our determination to ensure its full implementation. It sets out our vision and pathway to achieve reductions in greenhouse gas emissions and to make Ireland a better place for us now and for generations to come. The climate action plan includes a commitment to efficiency gains, as well as carbon

removals through forestry and appropriate management of organic soils. It identifies opportunities for making a contribution to energy production and efficiency. When it comes to absorbing and storing carbon, there is no more effective land use than forestry. In the 2021-27 accounting period, afforestation is expected to contribute 20 million tonnes of carbon dioxide to the national emissions reduction target.

The Government has set an ambitious target of 8,000 ha of new trees to be planted each year under the climate action plan. This level of planting is needed if we are to maintain a consistent rate of sequestration in the post-2030 period. I will put this ambition into context. As a country, we have untapped afforestation potential. Ireland's 11% level of forest cover is the second lowest in the EU - only Malta has a lower rate of afforestation - and compares unfavourably with the EU average of 43%. While this leaves ample room to grow, there is much work to be done in realising our target. This will need to be a shared endeavour. Action will be required from the Government, private land owners, public bodies and local communities. Given that recent trends have shown a declining interest in planting among private land owners, it is clear that this is going to be challenging. We need farmers, in particular, to plant trees. I believe there is a way forward. An attractive farm forestry model, with options to suit every farm, is available. My Department is aiming to engage actively with farmers and their advisers to promote this model. They need to know they can plant trees which suit their own circumstances and allow them to continue extensive livestock farming, but with an additional source of farm income. Surrounding issues such as competing land uses, land availability and integration with other agricultural schemes are being examined with a view to removing any barriers to planting.

The public debate on productive forestry is concerning because it does not reflect current planting systems, which are more cognisant than ever of landscape, diversity and environmental sensitivities. This is a message we must communicate better. It is more important than ever that this debate is based on evidence and reflects the true science of forestry and land use. While private landowners are key to increasing planting levels, public bodies must also play their part. Coillte is mentioned in the motion and it has an important role to play. In recent years, it has concentrated on managing 445,000 ha of the national forest estate and has successfully transformed the company from economic vulnerability to one that is on a sound financial footing. Now, more than ever, it is needed to contribute to the State's goals, in particular the implementation of the climate action plan and the national biodiversity strategy. It recently announced the conversion of forest adjacent to urban centres into recreational amenities as part of its Coillte Nature initiative. This is a not-for-profit venture with a strong emphasis on the environmental and recreational aspects of forests. It is now turning its focus to afforestation, which is a welcome development. I will encourage other public bodies with available land banks to follow this lead and be part of the national drive towards the 8,000 ha target. Local communities can also contribute by signing up to our successful NeighbourWood scheme, which creates recreational woodland for people to use and enjoy.

We have a climate emergency, which we must address, but we also have a biodiversity emergency. Biodiversity loss is a serious challenge and is inextricably linked to climate change. What is not widely known is that the forest estate in Ireland is very diverse, with 29% of forest cover comprising broadleaves and native woodlands. The proportion of broadleaves has grown year-on-year and last year saw a 25% increase in broadleaf trees planted compared to the previous year. This is a direct result of the measures taken by my Department, under the aegis of the Minister of State, Deputy Andrew Doyle, under the mid-term review of the current forestry programme. Current forestry policy will continue to support this upward trend through

generous grants and premiums and a minimum threshold of 15% broadleaf planting in all new plantations.

Our aim is to increase the uptake of the native woodland conservation scheme fivefold during the lifetime of the current forestry programme. The restoration of these woodlands is a matter of national pride and a vitally important part of the national forestry programme. In the move to a low-carbon circular bioeconomy, forestry has an important role to play in providing products which act as a carbon store. The motion mentions the use of high-quality wood material in new building construction. This is being examined under a collaborative three-year project between NUIG and Edinburgh Napier University, known as the WoodProps programme. This project is funded by my Department and aims to provide evidence and expertise related to the performance of wood-based products and building systems.

Of course, no discussion on issues of national importance can ignore the impact of Brexit. The vast bulk of our timber exports, currently valued at €420 million, are to the United Kingdom and the future growth of the sector is dependent on access to that market. The uncertainty we face means that we must be vigilant in supporting the sector. We have taken all necessary steps to help the sector prepare for the consequences of the UK's withdrawal from the European Union, including a recent series of seminars for agritrade businesses throughout the country.

In conclusion, I welcome the debate and thank Deputies Ryan and Martin for tabling the motion as it gives the Government an opportunity to outline its continued commitment to afforestation in accordance with the targets set in the climate action plan and other related strategies. I reiterate that the current forestry programme promotes a balanced approach to sustainability. It offers a range of planting options suitable for adoption by private individuals, community groups and public bodies. The alternative proposed risks limiting the options available to landowners. I, therefore, seek the continued support of colleagues in the House for the ongoing development of forestry to maximise the range of benefits for the economy, society and environment.

**Deputy Catherine Connolly:** Has the Minister's script been circulated?

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** It was circulated. We will get the Deputy a copy.

**Deputy Jackie Cahill:** I wish to share time.

I tabled a Topical Issue matter on forestry today. One issue those involved in the industry are concerned about is the fact that we are only reaching 50% of the targets set by the Government. The viability of the enterprises of those involved in nurseries, planting and harvesting crops is under pressure. There are various reasons for this, but the bureaucracy involved in getting licences for planting must be eased.

The Minister said we have to get farmers to plant trees, and I fully agree with this aspiration. However, farmers dread bureaucracy and it has to be financially viable and attractive for them to plant trees. Decisions have to be made to make planting economically viable, and farmers will respond to those decisions. Any plantation under 8 ha should be exempt from all of the current bureaucracy involved in obtaining a licence for planting. That would go a long way towards making farmers enthusiastic about planting portions of their farms.

In areas where there is commercial planting, wildlife is an issue, and Coillte has a lot to answer for in this regard. It has not maintained boundary fences on its plantations, which has



left a sour taste in farming communities. Wildlife in these areas is causing difficulties. Deer are trespassing onto farmers' lands, and the owners of commercial forestry have to bear responsibility for maintaining boundary fences.

Other issues that need to be addressed are designated and unenclosed land. The restrictions placed on designated land, in particular on hen harrier land, have to be re-examined. There is scientific evidence to show that different stages of afforestation in hen harrier areas is good for biodiversity. Changes in that regard would help us to meet the targets we must attain to meet the challenges of climate change.

**Deputy Timmy Dooley:** It is shameful that while Ireland's polluting emissions have been rocketing upwards for years, the Government knowingly failed to put an adequate climate strategy in place, including any sort of effective strategy on forestry. Effective afforestation is important not just for climate action, but also for climate resilience. In terms of preventing erosion and land degradation, the severe impacts of climate change on land simply cannot be overstated, as most recently clarified by the IPCC.

We also have to remember that forestry offers major benefits for tourism, biodiversity and water quality. Fianna Fáil has led the way in this regard, with ambitious planting provided for under the 2007-13 national development plan. More recently, we have been clear that the Government should support new income streams for farmers and planting native Irish trees is one such approach that would make considerable sense on many farms from climate, biodiversity and economic perspectives.

The joint committee report noted that there are problems with the planting and clear felling of Sitka spruce plantations and responded to the Citizens' Assembly recommendation that supports for afforestation be reviewed. We, therefore, called for a reformed national forestry policy that will provide strong incentives over the long term for the planting of native broadleaf species.

We also noted that there has been opposition in areas where there have been high planting rates and, therefore, the committee made it clear that community development and engagement must be a key component of afforestation policy. It is essential that the new forestry programme rectifies the failure to meet national targets and incorporates the committee's recommendations. Current afforestation rates are only 4,000 ha per year. The Government is significantly behind its Food Wise 2025 afforestation targets and we have no clarity on how it will reach its latest target of 10,000 ha per year by 2030. The climate advisory committee recently emphasised the serious challenges of reaching this target based on current trends.

I am deeply concerned by recent reports that the staff of the National Biodiversity Data Centre have only three months left on their contracts, with no assurance of extensions. This is a clear example of the Government's deprioritisation of environmental action and I hope it is something to which the Government will respond as quickly as possible. Ultimately, sustainable forestry, backed by State leadership and community engagement, is a no-brainer. We have the tools to transform the forestry sector and put it at the forefront of action on climate change and biodiversity protection. While we are talking about afforestation in Ireland today, we have to be mindful of the direction the House gave in July regarding the events in Brazil and the potential impact of the Mercosur agreement. We need an analysis of the potential environmental impact of that deal which should be backed by rigorous enforcement of international obligations under the Paris Agreement and an end to deforestation in the Amazon.

**Deputy Charlie McConalogue:** I support the motion tabled by the Green Party. The performance of the Government on forestry has in no way lived up to the targets set in Food Wise 2025 or the annual targets set out in the forestry programme. Food Wise 2025 indicated a target of 15,000 ha to be planted per year. The annual target has since been reduced to 6,000 ha to 8,000 ha. There is no doubt that we must look at the mix of forestry. There must be additional incentives for native broadleaves and ensuring forestry contributes to habitat development, biodiversity and the protection of species.

I call on the Minister to immediately address the clause in the CAP basic payment scheme which requires scrubland and other areas rich in biodiversity to be brought back into grazing in order to qualify for payments. The Government is pursuing the diametrically opposed objectives of trying to improve biodiversity and forcing farmers who wish to continue to claim payments for certain areas of land to remove vegetation, trees and scrub from it. That is the current position. We should encourage farmers, through the CAP, to protect such areas and reward them for so doing.

**Deputy Michael Moynihan:** I welcome the opportunity to speak about this issue. There are several issues regarding forestry, afforestation and how they are approached. Afforestation is a significant challenge for many communities. If we accept that trees and the entire green agenda are part of how we contribute to proper biodiversity, we must recognise that planting in some parts of the country but not others, with significant urban sprawl in certain areas, will not lead to balanced development. We need a proper debate on balanced development.

On the motion, as a result of the designation of the hen harrier and other issues, many tracts of land which farmers are willing to plant with forestry are not being afforested. If the Government is serious about afforestation, it must consider these issues and the reports from the National Parks and Wildlife Service which have not been addressed. Such issues should be brought to the fore.

The line is that farmers should be encouraged to plant. Many farmers would consider planting small portions of their land for various reasons. The Department and Coillte must consider providing financial incentives for farmers to plant smaller portions of their land. Our grandfathers planted shelter beds and scrubland which provided biodiversity. They dealt with these issues in a very serious way. We then moved to blanket plantations of conifers such as Sitka spruce. That ticks a box in other areas, but we must go back to the planting of native trees.

The NeighbourWood scheme is very welcome, but it involves a significant amount of bureaucracy. That matter should be addressed such that even communities with small parcels of community land could utilise it. As the Minister of State, Deputy Doyle, who is present, is aware, there have been many difficulties with land that was afforested and clear felled but on which no premiums had been drawn. It is very difficult to get such land through the system so that the Department approves it under the NeighbourWood scheme. We need to look at streamlining the scheme. We must be vocal in encouraging people to plant a small number of trees. Our grandparents and great-grandparents were very good at planting native trees on their farmyard or beyond. We must go back to such practices because those trees are very valuable and add to communities and the green agenda.

On bureaucracy, several objections lodged with the Department are causing significant problems. A particular individual has lodged a large number of objections to schemes in counties from Donegal to Cork which is causing serious problems for the forestry industry. We must

rethink the entire forestry agenda.

**Deputy Mary Butler:** If we are serious about climate change, we must be serious about our forests. Forests help to reduce the effects of climate change by reducing the amount of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere. Carbon dioxide is the main greenhouse gas responsible for climate change and emissions of it from man-made sources have been increasing year on year since the 1950s. Trees absorb carbon dioxide from the atmosphere for growth, convert it to sugars and wood and release pure oxygen back into the atmosphere.

In Ireland young forests grow quickly and absorb large amounts of carbon dioxide. Harvesting trees before they die naturally locks the carbon into the wood and wood products. Replanting trees immediately restarts the cycle of carbon storage. Forests cover 11% of the country's land area. The EU average is 38%, which shows the substantial progress that needs to be made.

Wood and wood products are known as climate-smart products. They are low energy, renewable and fully sustainable construction materials. When used for construction or furniture, they store carbon for long periods.

I recently visited the Medite Smartply factory at Waterford Port during National Tree Week. I was delighted to support the "plant for our planet" initiative. By doing something as simple as planting a tree, everyone can play a role in combating climate change. Trees are one of our most important assets in the fight against climate change and National Tree Week is about people coming together and planting in their local communities. I encourage everyone to learn more about the wonderful benefits of these natural resources and consider planting trees on an ongoing basis, not just for tree week.

We need to start with green school committees. Young people are leading the way on climate change. If they are encouraged to plant trees on their school grounds, in their gardens and community, they will learn that trees play a significant role in our climate change strategy by soaking up carbon emissions and providing a renewable and sustainable building resource through their timber.

It is important to recognise that the forestry sector supports 12,000 rural-based jobs, contributes approximately €2.3 billion to the economy each year and has the potential to double in size in the next ten years. It is time for us to get serious. This is one approach that would allow us to reap dividends very quickly.

**Deputy Marc MacSharry:** I support the motion before the House. I am fully committed personally and as a public representative to achieving the target of 18% cover by 2050. We are currently at a figure of 11%. I agree with Deputy Eamon Ryan's assertion that we need a diversity of broadleaf and native species, rather than the route on which we are currently.

I am from the north west of the country, where many local communities are concerned about over-afforestation, particularly in counties Leitrim and Donegal and parts of County Cavan, as the Minister of State is well aware. I ask him to engage with the Save Leitrim organisation on a continuing basis. Progress can be made on this issue. In the context of stripping out the bureaucracy in dealing with felling licences and other issues referred to by Deputy Cahill, we need to ensure local communities are consulted. They do not want to be left in the dark, which is what is happening to some small communities. I do not want this to be misinterpreted as me being against forestry, but the people of County Leitrim matter and we must be cognisant of the needs of such areas. People have a right to light which needs to be protected.

On sustainable farming methods, farmers are happy to get involved in forestry in areas which are not over-afforested. However, the payment or incentivisation method needs to be addressed. Planting a smallholding or a part thereof in the north west of the country may provide a windfall for the farmer's grandchildren or great-grandchildren in 35 years's time but it will not pay for the education of the farmer's children. We need to rethink our approach to the matter in order to give people viable alternatives. There are 80,000 struggling suckler cow farmers. If the Government wants them to engage in forestry in areas that are not over-afforested, they will have to be incentivised in the form of an annual income.

I would like the Government to consider introducing regulations to address a practice that is not being done, either by Coillte or private operators in forestry, and to ask those people to engage and facilitate a sweeping for ticks on an annual basis and the assessing of those ticks for infection in terms of carrying *Borrelia* bacteria, which are at the root of much Lyme disease that we hear about in our constituencies.

We all need to get with the programme for forestry. We need to diversify what we are planting in the way Deputy Eamon Ryan set out by stripping out the bureaucracy and including local communities' views in terms of those areas that are over-afforested. We need to rethink financing to incentivise people and to do what we can to sweep for ticks annually to get accurate data on *Borrelia* bacteria-carrying infected ticks throughout the country.

**Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív:** I support the motion. I have always been fascinated by forests. They offer a major attraction in that as well as providing timber, they have been an important source of recreation for people. I compliment, in particular, the work done by Coillte during the past 15 years in using the forests in a multifaceted way and ensuring they have been available for many leisure purposes.

It is important we recognise forestry cover and that native broadleaf trees are important but we must not forget the forestry industry and its requirements. The forests, mill companies and so on provide employment in parts of the country that do not have other major sources of employment. In my small area, 200 jobs are directly associated with timber milling. Many towns would like to have that number of jobs. It is a very small community and that employment can be seen the numbers in the schools, the parish, the football teams and so on. The difference it has made can be seen when one compares the demographics with other equivalent areas. It is important we ensure in future that we can keep supplying the mills. We can also help them with something they have done during the past 15 to 20 years, which is to ensure they keep going up the food chain in terms of market quality to ensure they realise the full value for the product they provide.

In the few minutes I have remaining, I will make a few points. I agree with what Deputy McConalogue said and it is vital. We see what I would call incidental natural forestry, particularly hazel and sally, growing on many farms and it is quite common in areas of poor land but the minute it grows it removes a farmer's qualification for the basic payment scheme or the areas of natural constraint payment. There is much talk about carbon sequestration. Natural forestry will sequester carbon just as much as planted forestry established on a scheme with the payment of grants. All we are asking is that provision be made where natural forestry is growing. If one looks across at the valleys in my area, one would see many good trees that have grown during the past 20 to 30 years but farmers are being penalised for allowing that to happen. The Government takes money from them for that, but that issue needs to be tackled.

Another point, which goes to the heart of the Leitrim problem, is that we have become too reliant on large corporate entities for everything. Addressing that would lend itself to farmer participation and keeping the land in farmers' ownership and control. The forestry grants and premia should be front-loaded. In other words, they should be larger and higher for the farmer planter than for the big corporate planter. When the farmer does so he is much more likely to be sensitive to other local needs. He is much less likely to buy up acre after acre causing major disruption in the community. It would also ensure the money is kept local. The Green Party would resonate with me on this as its members would say we should think global and act local. It is important we examine the ownership model and ask ourselves what we really want to happen. Do we want it owned locally and to have dispersed and diffused ownership or do we want to concentrate all the ownership, as happens in many other industries, in a few hands?

**An Ceann Comhairle:** The next speaker is Deputy Cullinane who is sharing time with Deputies Stanley and Martin Kenny.

**Deputy David Cullinane:** We will divide the time on the basis of four minutes, three minutes and three minutes, respectively.

I commend the Green Party on bringing forward this motion. I understand I do not need to move the Sinn Féin amendment to the motion but if I am required to do so, I will do that. Sinn Féin is committed to a sustainable afforestation strategy and we recognise the importance of increasing the percentage of land under forestry in the mitigation of carbon emissions, as alluded to by a number of previous speakers, but we must be honest and say that not all plantations are beneficial to the environment and not all species of trees are beneficial to local habitats. We have grave concerns regarding the future afforestation policy given the failures we have seen in the past. While investment in fast-growing conifers has proven commercially popular, such planting has limited, if any, impact on carbon capture and the intensive plantation of invasive species such as Sitka spruce has had a detrimental and ecological impact which has not been good.

The Government's afforestation programme is fixated with the planting of the Sitka spruce, an approach that is having a detrimental effect in terms of biodiversity. We also heard this week that the National Biodiversity Data Centre, which is based in Waterford, may not get funding next year. It is an organisation that collects data on biodiversity. This is a matter that the Minister and the Government need to address.

The issue of monoculture afforestation is one that has unduly affected Leitrim, which my colleague will cover later. The rate of afforestation there between 2015 and 2018 was just over 24 times the level in Donegal, the vast majority of which was monoculture Sitka spruce. The use of this tree has been criticised by farmers, environmental groups and the EU, yet Fine Gael still continues with this policy.

We in Sinn Féin have proposed alternatives to the Minister. We want the immediate discontinuation of financial inducements for monoculture afforestation. We want the immediate introduction of grant schemes and tax incentives that favour the planting and maintenance of continuance cover, sustainable broadleaf forestry and hedgerows. We want the protection of mature trees in public locations from destruction. We want an island-wide solution to address climate change. That would mean the establishment by the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine and the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs in the North of a joint working group plan and for them to work with all the relevant stakeholders. We also



want to provide for planning permission for all forestry development over 5 ha.

There is a great deal we need to do to reach our climate change targets set to reduce emissions. Many mitigation measures have to be put in place in terms of retrofitting homes, investment in public transport and in reaching renewable energy targets but we also must recognise that planting more trees and allowing them to act as a carbon sink is a very good way for this State to be able to become carbon-neutral. For that and many other reasons we support the planting of more trees, and we support the intent and logic behind this motion.

**Deputy Brian Stanley:** I welcome the opportunity to speak on this important motion. Its introduction is timely. We support the planting of more trees and the sustainable expansion of the timber industry whereby the additional forestry can act as a carbon store, provide income for farmers and enhance natural habitats and biodiversity.

Unfortunately, the current forestry scheme, as it is structured, simply does not work for farmers. The first problem with the current scheme is that it is tailored towards farmers in their 50s and 60s who are taking up the scheme as a retirement plan. One might ask why is that the case? It is because the premiums in general last for 15 years. Why would a younger farmer in their 30s or 40s convert his or her land into forestry when it will not bring in any income after 15 years? What Sinn Féin and many young farmers seek is a forestry scheme that is committed to long-term strategic thinking and planning. They want to be able to commit to agroforestry schemes over 30 to 40 years throughout the planting, thinning and management process, and rightly so, and they want to receive premium grants for undertaking such action.

The current scheme is having a detrimental impact on many rural locations. We are witnessing the depopulation of sustainable farms and the increase of corporate forestry, which is having a serious impact on local economies and on the environment. That can be seen on the Laois side, as well as the Offaly side, of the foothills of the Slieve Bloom Mountains.

We need a forestry policy that does not replace farmers but complements farming with forestry. That is where agroforestry works best. This involves unfarmed forestry, which would be in addition to livestock and tillage and not a replacement for it. It would provide farmers with a more sustainable farming model with increased production and other sources of income, as well as increasing carbon sequestration, which is urgently needed.

The fact we have the second lowest acreage of forestry in the EU shows how critical it is that we do this. Only Malta surpasses us in this regard. Given the country's climate, we should be nearer the top.

Farmers should not be penalised for protecting hedgerows, which is currently happening under Common Agricultural Policy rules. That needs to change in the forthcoming Common Agricultural Policy negotiations. We must also put in place schemes to protect hedgerows. Livestock farmers are incentivised to remove hedgerows to increase their farm sizes. That needs to change.

When the Common Agricultural Policy reforms come through, the necessary changes must be made to bring about a positive environmental impact in order that forestry can act as carbon storage and provide natural land drainage. Overall, we want a forestry scheme which works for farmers and the environment, along with long-term thinking and planning to allow a sustainable forestry and timber industry.

**Deputy Martin Kenny:** I welcome the Green Party's motion. I have spoken to the Minister of State on many occasions about the issue of forestry, particularly in County Leitrim where I live. The county has a significant problem, which has been acknowledged to some extent by the Government in its report on forestry. It highlighted many of the problems we have. Many people in Leitrim do not want to live beside a forest. There is something wrong when they do not want to. In Leitrim, it is because it blocks out their light and diverts all wildlife. The trees are like the microphones in the Chamber, bare all the way up with a small canopy on top. They are like lollipops. People describe these types of forest plantations as evergreen but they are not. The needles fall off and are replaced, resulting in a bed of needles a foot deep at the bottom of the forest. As a result, nothing can grow meaning there is nothing to feed any other wildlife. The Minister said 15% of these plantations are native trees. They are planted in two rows around the edge of the forest with none in the middle.

This particular forestry model may work well for the timber industry. I understand that it makes much money out of it. It also works for some farmers who have gone down that route. No one is condemning them for it because that is the set-up. This motion tries to recognise a different way forward that will create more employment in the local community, better biodiversity and ensures communities can live and breathe again.

I have been informed by Leitrim County Council that it has more problems with pollution from forestry, not farming. Afforestation often poisons rivers and lakes. The views of a mountain and a beautiful lake on one road I know in Leitrim are blocked by a forestry plantation. If planning permission was required for such a plantation, somebody could have objected ensuring it was planted two fields back to ensure the scenery could remain visible. That type of planting happens all over the country. Our amendment to the motion, which I hope will be supported by all parties, provides that planning permission should be mandatory for afforestation over 5 ha. That means a small farmer planting a small area will not have to get planning permission. The average farm in County Leitrim is 25 acres. A full farm would, on the other hand, require planning permission. In those circumstances, the local authority would have the opportunity to assess it and recommend what kind of trees should be planted. That ties in with the motion's reference to having a local plan that would comply with planning permission. People living in the area could put in submissions or objections if they felt their light or roadway was going to be blocked because of the type of trees, such as Sitka spruce, that might be planted.

I acknowledge that those involved in forestry make much money from this. The way this can be resolved is by coming up with an alternative model and an alternative way of delivering money into local communities. The level of grant aid and premiums available are the same for farmers as they are for investors. Investors need to be taken out of this and it needs to be given back to local communities. It is ridiculous that farms and land in County Leitrim are owned by people in Brazil and other countries through investment companies. Local farmers cannot even buy that land because they cannot compete for it.

**Deputy Sean Sherlock:** I am sharing time with Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice. The Labour Party supports the motion. There is nothing injurious to anybody's interests in this good and broad motion. Anybody with any shred of common sense would support what it seeks to address. Across the party-political spectrum, it is clear the issue of forestry is at the forefront of the political agenda and there are various ways in which we can maximise the potential of the industry. We must be cognisant of the fact that it supports more than 12,000 jobs across the country and it is a sequester of carbon but it is not a perfect model and more work needs to be done.

The motion could be strengthened if the Minister looked at the forestry implementation group because it is probably top heavy with forestry industry stakeholders and there are not enough voices from the environmental pillar. That is not to any way diminish those on it. However, if we are to have a serious conversation about future forestry policy, ensuring there is an increase in forestry schemes with greater broadleaf cover, conservation measures and rewilding, we need to find a mechanism to ensure views, as expressed by the Green Party's motion, find some articulation. This must continue to a policy that involves rural dwellers, key stakeholders and not just the usual suspects.

I do not use that latter term in any derogatory way. However, the conversation on forestry policy has always been through the prism of Coillte and the timber industry. That needs to be broadened. There is a clear call for that in the House tonight. Will the Minister give serious consideration to ensure the forestry implementation group is broadened to hear more voices and proactively works with the Government to change forestry policy?

I had the good fortune to visit Glennon Brothers, the timber product manufacturers, recently with other Cork Deputies and the Minister. I went in with some prejudices about the timber industry before that meeting. I certainly came out of the meeting very much assured by the fact that there are people in the industry like Glennon Brothers who want to engage with all stakeholders, the NGOs and the environmental pillar on what our forestry policy should look like in the future. If there are proactive and progressive people within the timber industry – IBEC is doing some work on this - who are willing to engage in a meaningful way, and not just being at the table for the sake of it, and ensure people's voices heard, we need to grasp that nettle.

I support the motion but the conversation needs to be broadened. The Government needs to take seriously the recommendations of the Joint Committee on Climate Action's report in respect of forestry and afforestation measures because that is a cross-party report with more than 40 recommendations arising from the Citizens' Assembly. To date, if I am being objective about it, the recommendations of that all-party report are quickly gathering dust.

**Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice:** I thank Deputy Sherlock for sharing his time. We need to acknowledge and tackle the 6% between hedgerows. There are whitethorns and blackthorns around this country that are not being allowed for one bit of carbon sequestration. That is evident on many farms, and indeed around cities in this country. It needs to be sorted.

Deputy Eamon Ryan might get a shock to hear that I agree with the motion. I was a contractor and used go around mowing fields. At one time, we had so-called shelter belts in the corners, and on a hot day, cattle lay under them, or on a wet day, they sheltered at them. Then the great EU - it came out today that we are losing 1,000 farmers per day in the EU - told us to knock every ditch and hedge in the place and even gave us grants for it.

Every farmer around the country - there are 130,000 or 140,000 of them - can sow one acre of trees with no difficulty provided the Minister gives them an establishment grant and gives them a path forward. We may need a two-tier approach. We may need an environmental system for ten, 15 or 20 years so that farmers can see a future in it. The Minister should not stop areas of natural constraints, ANC, or basic payment scheme, BPS, from them because there is a tree in a corner. The farmers have done well. If we get that done, we can get 130,000 acres planted in one year if the Government has the funding to do it. Is the funding there? Furthermore, the larger the farm, the more that should be sown. That is the way to do it fairly.

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As Deputy Sherlock said, I was in Connemara lately, at Earraí Coillte Chonnacht, ECC, Teoranta, and it is giving work as well.

We need to bring in schemes for the ordinary-size farmers with fewer than 5 ha who can plant a forest, but not for the big conglomerates that are coming in and bullying people in different counties around this country. Many farmers would be willing to sow an acre or two or three acres in what I would call a middling bit of ground, but the Department has to wake up to facilitating that, because if a person is under a certain threshold, it is not allowed. That can be done in every part of the country.

We have also to look at the following idea. I remember cutting timber in Glenhest in Mayo. A person could not sow the trees there again because the standard has risen for the type of land. What do we want? Do we want to make sure that trees grow or do we want to be putting land to one side? As was pointed out, there are designated lands in different areas. There is also paperwork that must be filled in.

Let us call a spade a spade. The Minister talked about the great achievements. We have no achievements. At present, a person could go for a licence to fell timber and he or she will not get it. That person could also go for authority to sow trees. There is one individual in this country blocking everything. They are going over to Europe. They are bringing Ireland to court. They are trying to block every bit of forestry in this country. That type of stuff has to be cut out. We must make sure that the small farmer, up to a certain threshold, is looked after. I am not talking about 20, 30 or 50 acres.

The Minister also needs to make sure of the roads, as Deputy Martin Kenny pointed out. We must think of wintertime as well. There are roads where there is forestry on both sides on which a person could go skating in wintertime and where there is a need to plant 100 m back from the edge of a road, and from houses as well, to make sure people are facilitated. If we do this right, it can work and it can be successful.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** I thank the Green Party for bringing forward this motion on forestry, which People Before Profit will be supporting. The forests are important because they produce the air that we breathe. They clean the air. They clean the water. They hold the soil together. They prevent flooding. They produce products that can be useful for society for creating employment. They assist in this country in advancing tourism and bringing people to visit. At every level, they benefit our society and our environment. Of course, crucially, they help maintain the biodiversity that is necessary for us to exist. To put it simply, we would not be able to exist without the forests. That truth, which we may not have thought about or which we ignored, has now come home to roost when one looks at the climate emergency that the planet is facing and when one considers that 15% to 20% of all emissions are as a result of deforestation globally. When we cut down the trees, when we deforest, when we do not understand the critical importance of forestry to our existence on this planet, we endanger our future. There are very few things more important than getting forestry right and recognising its importance.

For us in People Before Profit, it is a critical issue. Something I am most proud of in our record in our years in this Dáil is the role we played in the campaign to stop the selling off of the harvesting rights of Coillte that was being demanded by the troika and agreed by the Government until thousands of people took to marching and protesting throughout the country and forced the Government to do a U-turn on that extraordinarily foolish idea that we would sell off the forests to investors to pay off the debts of bankers. I am also proud that probably - I have

not studied everybody's pre-budget submissions - every budget submission we have made since we got in here has allocated hundreds of millions more in funds than the Government has allocated for an afforestation programme, and we have repeatedly questioned the Government on its failure to advance an afforestation programme in this country.

The Government amendment is a bit rich. When I put forward a motion on forestry in 2013, the percentage forest cover was exactly as it is now. Nothing has changed. We have not advanced. In fact, the targets for afforestation have been halved. The Council for Forest Research and Development, COFORD, way back then stated we needed to be planting at least 15,000 ha a year to get up to 18% forest cover, which is still well below the European average of 30% to 35%, but we have failed spectacularly to meet those targets. We have reduced those targets.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Deputy-----

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** I have seven and a half minutes.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I am afraid the clock has stopped.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** Is the Ceann Comhairle telling me I have spoken for seven and a half minutes?

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Not quite, but the Deputy is nearly there.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** Can we see the clock?

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Deputy Boyd Barrett started at 54 minutes and he is at 46.27 minutes now. Anyway, carry on.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** How many minutes have I got?

**An Ceann Comhairle:** The Deputy has seven and a half minutes.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** How many have I left?

**An Ceann Comhairle:** The Deputy has none left but, anyway, go on. The Deputy might wrap up.

**Deputy Charlie McConalogue:** Time flies when you are having fun.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** Is there any chance we could get the clock back so that I would know where I am?

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I did not turn it off.

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** You broke it.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** In fact, we have not got anywhere near even meeting those inadequate targets that we have set. Indeed, I was talking to some people from one of the biggest nurseries in the country today and they say that the afforestation programme could grind to a halt by the end of this year because we do not have enough ecologists and archaeologists in the forest service to process the afforestation applications from farmers. That seems an incredible fact. We have one ecologist in the forest service processing applications. As a result they are taking forever and farmers are losing interest. The other key problem is the role of Coillte in all of this. Coillte has not advanced the afforestation programme in any serious way. It has been



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overly focused on the monocultural Sitka spruce approach to forestry, which has caused problems in Leitrim and does very little for biodiversity. Coillte has not played the role it should play, which is acting as the guardian of the forest estate and advancing a sustainable form of forestry.

I do not know if I am out of time, a Ceann Comhairle.

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** Five minutes ago.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** If the Deputy wraps up now, he will be grand.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** It is a bit disconcerting not knowing where I am in the time.

**Deputy Jackie Cahill:** It is not that easy to put the Deputy off.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** It is, actually. I want to conclude by saying that we need to change the mandate of Coillte completely. It needs to move away from a commercial for-profit approach to one that is about sustainable afforestation, using its land and resources to encourage community woodlands, co-ops and so on. Some of the unused Coillte land that the McCarthy report identified - hundreds of thousands of acres which it did not consider viable for forestry - should be given over to local communities and co-ops to develop native woodlands and broadleaf forests, rather than the current approach.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** My apologies about the clock. I am sure it was not the Deputy's dulcet tones that turned it off. It appears to have returned.

**Deputy Catherine Connolly:** Ba mhaith liom mo thacaíocht iomlán a chur leis an rún seo. I thank the Green Party for bringing the motion. It is very comprehensive. The Minister has left the Chamber. It strikes me, although it probably sounds a bit flippant, that he cannot see the woods for the trees in respect of the amendment he has tabled and the speech that was made. In his speech, the Minister referred to "evidence-based" and then did not show any evidence whatsoever. He actually ignored the evidence that has been brought to our attention, mostly by non-governmental organisations, which is always very difficult. They have to operate on very little money and educate us politicians. I want to pay tribute to them. I make these comments, as I have on many occasions since 2006, in the context of the climate change that is facing us. In *The New Yorker* recently, Bill McKibben put it very succinctly: "Climate change is a timed test, one of the first that our civilization has faced, [and probably the last] and with each scientific report the window narrows."

We see with the most recent report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change how the window has narrowed even more in respect of our oceans. It sets this out in a stark fashion in a special report on the ocean and the cryosphere in a changing climate. We had the biodiversity report earlier in May. In each of these reports, the writers make it easy for us because they do a summary entitled "Summary for Policymakers" - that is us. I do not like the word but it is like the dumb guide to the various issues. I include myself in that. The report on biodiversity earlier this year told us that the diversity within species, between species and in ecosystems, is declining faster than at any time in human history. The Minister, Deputy Madigan, totally agreed with this in a speech on 29 May. I found that heartwarming. She actually said that we are losing biodiversity around the globe at a rate unprecedented in human history. She went on in her speech to say that there are five main drivers of biodiversity loss in Ireland. She listed

them and the first one was intensive agriculture and forestry practices. She actually accepted that forestry practices are one of the main driving forces in biodiversity loss. I would have thought that tonight, instead of coming in with an amendment that makes no sense and a speech that leaves out scientific evidence, for a Government that has been forced to declare a climate emergency, perhaps at this point the Minister's speech might have been based on facts just to give us a little hope. It might have been based on learning. All of us have made mistakes in our lives and certainly the policy on forestation has been a mistake.

Like all other speakers, I want to pay tribute to Coillte and to the number of jobs it creates, over 12,000 direct and indirect involved, and of course the experts going to England and all that Brexit entails. I have only a few minutes and I cannot go into all of that. What I want to go into is the absence of evidence on the part of the Minister. I remember being in the audiovisual room when Science Foundation Ireland came in with other groups and told us the importance of politicians leading by developing policy based on evidence. Where is it tonight? I would have thought the Minister who has left would have come in and told us what change has been made since Ireland's report to the EU Commission on habitats and species listed in the annex of the habitats directory. They said forestry ranked as the second greatest pressure and threat on designated habitats and species in Ireland after agriculture. That is evidence based. Perhaps the Minister of State, Deputy Doyle, might be able to tell us what the up-to-date position is.

Then I asked myself how this is happening. Social Justice Ireland captured it in its policy document, which refers to policy incoherence in the Government's pursuing policies such as Food Harvest 2020 and Food Wise 2025, and the increase in emissions that these will yield, while simultaneously committing to national targets for sustainable development and emissions reduction. There is total incoherence in policies. That is what is happening here. Incoherence in policy is very evident in our approach to forestry and the Government's forestry programme from 2014 to 2020. Nowhere is that brought home more than in the mid-term review. It very sensibly carried out a mid-term review of that policy, which is welcome. Quite depressingly, the authors of the review go out of their way to tell us it was not a review of policy. Imagine not doing a policy review of something that started in 2014. They are reviewing it simply in respect of measures and targets but not policy, despite the increasingly urgent information coming to us on climate change and the importance of forestry in mitigating climate change. Even though the report does not review the policy and continues on as is, the review is a very significant document because it tells us that the Government was completely behind target. This was in February 2018. There was an underspend and an absence of monitoring. In the speech tonight we seem to have jumped up, like in a fairytale, to have a forest of broadleaf trees. As I understand it, we have barely 13% of our land surface in forestry - almost 11% - and of that, less than 2% is broadleaf trees. If the Minister of State is telling me, as the speech did, that it has gone up to 69%-----

**Deputy Andrew Doyle:** It is 29%.

**Deputy Catherine Connolly:** That is wonderful. I would love to know how the Government has achieved that between February 2018 and now, which is a year and a half.

**Deputy Andrew Doyle:** We did not.

**Deputy Catherine Connolly:** I am open to listening to the Minister of State when he comes back in. Unfortunately I will not be in the Chamber as I have another commitment but I will be listening to his speech. That policy review for me was a complete missed opportunity. It was

published in February 2018, and leading into that was the time, if we were seriously interested in climate change, to actually look at the policy and ask if it was right to go down the road of monoculture. In submissions made to that review, it was pointed out that even though the forestation of Ireland was very small, it had a detrimental effect because of where it was planted. Is my time up?

**An Ceann Comhairle:** The clock is really working fast now. We cannot win. Cuir críoch leis más maith leat.

**Deputy Catherine Connolly:** Cuirfidh mé críoch leis mar seo.

The submission made in the review stated:

Despite the comparatively low level of forest cover in Ireland the concentration of afforestation in areas of high biodiversity value magnifies its negative impact as a threat and pressure on biodiversity. The environmental impact of Irish forestry is further exacerbated by its intensive management. Common practices such as drainage during ground preparation, the use of pesticides and clear-felling result in many negative impacts on water quality and freshwater ecosystems.

I do not wish to be negative. What I want to see is a policy that ensures the afforestation of Ireland in a sustainable manner in keeping with our obligations under EU directives.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Deputy Mattie McGrath is sharing with Deputies Michael Healy-Rae and Danny Healy-Rae.

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** I am happy to speak to the motion. While it may not have my full agreement, we need to reconsider our approach to forestry and how it can be used to maximise a return, both financially and ecologically, for landowners, farmers and the people. I thank Deputies Eamon Ryan and Catherine Martin for the briefing today in Leinster House which was most informative.

Forestry production plays a key role within the State, yet it does not receive a fraction of the attention it deserves at Government level. I know that the Minister of State knows that the area of forest cover in the State is estimated to be 731,650 ha, or 10.5% of the total land area of Ireland. That alone speaks to the enormous importance of the sector, not to mention the employment of well over 10,000 people, generating €2.2 billion of output per annum. We know that hurley making is worth an estimated €5 million per annum to the economy. I hate to mention hurling when there is no one from Kilkenny present. While we laid claim to the all-Ireland title again this year, I sympathise with the vanquished.

I am aware that we need to examine how forest owners could benefit from carbon credits attached to their forests. As the Minister of State will be aware, last year agriculture committee MEPs tabled proposals to make it easier to use forests to offset carbon emissions under the EU draft 2030 climate and energy rules. In their report MEPs asked that forest management which involves conservation, rather than the planting of new trees, be factored in to EU rules and voted to hike available carbon credits for forests and grasslands from 280 million tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub> equivalent to 450 million tonnes. I am also aware, however, that when the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine, Deputy Creed, was asked if a carbon credit could be claimed against forestry, he replied that the removal of greenhouse gases by forests in Ireland were not linked with meeting our emissions reduction targets up to 2020. I am aghast at this. However,

he went on to say in October last year that, in addition, greenhouse gas removals from Irish forests were not included in the emissions trading scheme. That is bizarre and shows that the lunatics are really running the asylum. Therefore, there are no carbon credits associated with forestry that could be traded formally, either within Ireland or the European Union as a whole.

I support the call made in the motion for the State to make a fundamental change in forestry policy away from a narrow vision of a 30-year cycle to a permanent woodland approach that would provide greater and more diverse social, environmental and economic benefits for society as a whole.

**Deputy Michael Healy-Rae:** I thank the Green Party, with which I do not agree all of the time or even half of the time, for bringing forward this very important motion. The planting of forestry is something I believe in passionately. On this side of the House, Deputies Mattie McGrath and Danny Healy-Rae and I have served our time in forestry. Whether it was sodding or opening drains, or working under new or older directives, we worked in forestry for many years. I would like to think that at this stage we know what we are talking about.

The one thing I want to see, as I have said in the House before, is a situation where it would again become attractive for farmers to plant land - not all of their land, of course, but a part of it - because having an income from forestry can sometimes help to sustain the rest of a family farm. However, the period within which premiums are paid has gone from 20 years to 15 and the grant in many cases does not cover the total cost of maintaining the plantation. These are issues that need to be addressed in the new afforestation programme. Whether it is in negotiations with people in the European Union or the Government, whoever it will be at the time, it is important to bring the period back to 20 years. It is important to incentivise farmers, particularly young farmers.

Something Deputy Michael Moynihan said stuck in my head. He talked about how smart people were long ago and said that, before there was any talk of biodiversity, they knew that it was the right thing to do to plant a grove here or there on a family farm. They were ahead of their time. They were smarter than the Green Party or any other party; they were a green party on their own and did not need anyone to tell them how to mind the environment. The most important person in the whole equation, the person who cares for the land passionately and wants what is best for it, is the man, woman, boy or girl who owns the land. They do not need anybody in this House to tell them how to mind their land.

**Deputy Danny Healy-Rae:** I am glad to have the opportunity to talk about this topic. I have no grudge against anyone in farms being planted with a grove or a hedge. Indeed, I have done it myself. As has been said, farmers have always been doing it. Where I come from, everywhere anyone looks there are too many trees and bushes and they are growing. There are plenty of them in our neck of the woods. Despite talk about paying farmers to do it, everyone in this House knows that that is not going to happen any time soon. For years we have been asking for a grant for the planting of trees on marginal land, but it has been refused. The Government has refused it and there is no hope it will change its mind any time soon. That is the truth of the matter.

It is galling to think farmers are not getting a fair price for their cattle. There was a lot of talk about Mercosur and we know what is happening in South America, where trees are being cut down. We have been asked by the man in Europe, Mr. Hogan, to plant trees and get rid of some of our cattle. It is emotive to talk to farmers tonight and tell them that it is advisable to

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plant trees. They know the amount they can plant on their land. If they have a small farm, they will do so much and if they have a bigger farm, they will do a bit more. However, despite being told that they are going to be paid to do it, I do not believe it. Today, yesterday and every other day, we have been asking the Government to pay for home helps, but it does not have the money to pay for the home help or the fair deal scheme. Therefore, from where is it going to get the money to pay farmers to plant more trees? That is the honest truth. Do not cod the people because they are not to be coddled anymore. They know what the Government is at and that it is only talk. There is all this talk about climate change and there are parties tripping over each other in this House to see which of them will be as green as the Greens, or greener if they could be.

There was a professor who stated 15 years ago that cows were creating a savage amount of methane gas. Three weeks ago he admitted that he was wrong and that they were not actually creating one third of what he had claimed. NASA admits that climate change occurs because of changes in the Earth's solar orbit, as the distance between the sun and the Earth increases and decreases at times. That is the cause of climate change, not the poor farmer-----

**An Ceann Comhairle:** The Deputy's time is up.

**Deputy Danny Healy-Rae:** -----with the poor cow. These changes in our temperature and our climate have occurred forever over the ages. Tonight we spoke about history, which is very important. The facts have been written down, the truth has been told-----

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I thank the Deputy. His time is up.

**Deputy Danny Healy-Rae:** -----and the truth is that climate change has always occurred.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** In case we all go into orbit, we had better move on.

**Minister of State at the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Andrew Doyle):** I was trying to absorb all that wisdom-----

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** What? Why should the Minister of State ignore it?

**Deputy Andrew Doyle:** -----from the good Deputy. I thank all the Members for their contributions on the subject of-----

**Deputy Michael Healy-Rae:** Hold on one second. The Minister of State said he was trying to ignore what we said.

**Deputy Andrew Doyle:** I did not. I said "absorb".

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** Sorry. He did not say "ignore".

**An Ceann Comhairle:** The Minister of State did not say anything-----

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** Gabh mo leithscéal. I thought he said "ignore".

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I ask Deputies to let the Minister of State-----

**Deputy Andrew Doyle:** Maybe they should have gone to Specsavers.

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** We thought he said "ignore".



**Deputy Andrew Doyle:** Well, I did not. Deputy McGrath knows my form. I would not say that.

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** Sorry.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I ask Deputies to let the Minister of State speak.

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** Ar aghaidh leat.

**Deputy Andrew Doyle:** I ask the Deputies to acknowledge I did not say “ignore”.

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** That is okay. We acknowledge that.

**Deputy Michael Healy-Rae:** We were wrong.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I call the Minister of State, without interruption.

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** He would not want to have said “ignore” anyway.

**Deputy Andrew Doyle:** I am sorry I did not make myself clearer. I would have thought the Deputies would understand my accent at this stage. As Minister of State at the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine with responsibility for forestry, I find these discussions very useful and informative. I also met the Joint Committee on Agriculture, Food and the Marine in July, which gave me an opportunity to update its members on developments within the forestry sector. I wish to respond to some of the issues raised. I hope I can answer as many questions and respond to as many issues raised as possible.

An earlier speaker - unfortunately, I cannot remember who - asked why a young farmer would embark on a programme of planting trees. It is said that the right time to plant a tree was ten years ago. The second best time to plant one is now. In Scandinavia, where there is a longer rotation cycle, it is common practice for a hectare of new plantation to be planted on the birth of a child in order that that child, when he or she reaches retirement age, will have something of a nest egg or retirement fund. This just gives an idea that there is a commercial reality here to some of the countries that have the highest average plantations. In Finland, which I have had the pleasure to visit, up to 73% of the land area is covered by forestry. There are basically three species there, two conifers and one broadleaf: birch, Scots pine and Norway spruce. From these they generate quite a significant bioeconomy.

I believe there is general consensus that we need to increase the level of new forest planting to maintain the range of benefits we derive from our current forest resource. As mentioned in the amendment to the motion, the achievement of the afforestation target of 8,000 ha each year, as outlined in the climate action plan, will be challenging, and there is no denying that. The Government is committed to achieving it, though. We propose to do so through engagement with both private and public landowners and local communities to encourage new forestry planting, allied to the provision of attractive schemes, promotion of such schemes and creating awareness of the benefits of forestry. An increase in afforestation levels is an ongoing Government priority, as evidenced by the consistent allocation of funding over the years to the forestry programme. Successive national forestry programmes since 1990 have been funded at more than €3 billion, which is a significant dividend for rural Ireland. I expect next week's budget for 2020 to continue this support.

It is also a priority to ensure that forestry is developed in a sustainable manner and with due

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regard to the environment, particularly our climate and biodiversity challenges. The forestry sector is unique in that it can impact positively across different aspects of our society. It can generate economic activity in rural areas which may be unlikely to see the benefits of large industry or foreign direct investment. At the same time it can improve the quality of our environment by removing carbon from our atmosphere and improving the quality of our water. Our forests also provide opportunities for leisure and recreation to locals and visitors alike. I believe our current forestry programme balances the needs and expectations of all stakeholders, including supporting economic growth in the forest sector, ensuring that the environment is protected and supporting local communities in the provision of forest recreational facilities.

The programme introduced a number of important structural and design changes, including the restructuring of forestry schemes in order that they present real options to landowners in generating alternative sources of income. Accordingly, the current programme included new agroforestry and forest-for-fibre measures targeted specifically at farmers, providing them with options for grazing livestock alongside forestry. In the case of forestry-for-fibre, provision was made for the harvesting of timber after ten to 15 years rather than 30 to 40 years, as is the case with other types of forestry. The programme also includes a broadleaf planting target of 30%, with higher grants and premiums on offer for the planting of broadleaves, and provides for the planting of more diverse tree species. I am pleased to say that notwithstanding the effects of ash dieback on the rate of broadleaf planting, we are very close to achieving this 30% target.

A range of enhancements were also made to the programme on foot of the midterm review of the programme, with higher rates of grants and premiums now available for certain species mixes. The grant and premium rates for the agroforestry option have been trebled. I visited an agroforestry site in Kilcock, County Kildare, in August and it really showed the way in which forestry and the rearing of livestock could be integrated.

I am pleased to note that there has been a good uptake of the schemes, with the rate of broadleaves planted already increasing by 25% last year compared with the previous year. Native woodlands are important for biodiversity and play an important role in helping to protect water quality by filtering sediment and slowing down runoff water from upland areas. I am pleased to note payments issued in 2018 in respect of 374 ha of new native woodlands while support has also been provided this year, under the woodland improvement scheme, for the management of almost 680 ha of broadleaf plantations.

The introduction of a new continuous cover forestry programme earlier this year has been also well received, with the initial limit of 30 projects already fully subscribed. This initiative will transform forests into uneven-aged and permanent woodlands, enriching the biodiversity of these habitats and enhancing the landscape.

As I mentioned, one of the objectives in devising the current forestry programme was to balance the needs and expectations of all stakeholders. I have focused so far on the schemes available to landowners. However, I should also draw attention to the support available to local communities under the NeighbourWood scheme to develop local woodland amenities. We have a number of examples of such woodlands throughout the country, including Balla Town Park community woodlands in County Mayo; one in Dunmore East, County Waterford; Ballyseedy Woods, near Tralee, County Kerry; and the Vartry lakes walk in my area of Roundwood, County Wicklow.

I have established a forestry programme implementation group to monitor the implementa-

tion of the programme. The group comprises relevant State bodies, the forestry sector and, to correct Deputy Sherlock, environmental NGOs. This is an inclusive body designed to reflect all views on forestry, and we have taken a number of policy decisions on foot of its discussions. I have also commissioned, with the agreement of the forest implementation group, a Scottish consultant, Mr. Jim Mackinnon, to review our forestry policies and procedures. This is similar to an exercise he has undertaken for the Scottish authorities. I expect that the findings of Mr. Mackinnon's analysis will be brought back to the forestry implementation group at some point in the future, I hope by the end of November.

I assure Members that the achievement of our afforestation targets will not be to the detriment of the environment. My Department is required to vet carefully all applications for approval to plant forests, having regard to their potential impact on the surrounding environment, habitats, archaeological monuments and the social aspects of the proposal and ensuring that, silviculturally, the proposal meets the required standards. We are cognisant of our obligations in these regards.

“The forestry sector” is an all-encompassing phrase and I believe it fails to convey the range of interests in the sector, ranging from forest nurseries, forestry companies, landowners, local communities, the timber processing industry, the renewable energy businesses, the wider environmental sector and end users. Against this background I believe it is beneficial to increase awareness of forestry in general. To this end, funding was approved earlier this year for 15 initiatives to highlight the multifunctional benefits of forestry, to promote planting of more trees and to encourage sustainable forest management.

A number of successful events have taken place, including a woodland festival in County Leitrim. I also launched a forest connections project in County Kerry, which aims to get people of all ages out into the forests to observe, enjoy and participate in forest life, enabling them to feel connected to local forests and forests throughout Ireland and enhancing their feelings of well-being and knowledge of the essential place of forests in our life. These projects will assist in creating a better understanding of forestry and the way in which it benefits all sectors in society.

I am passionate about delivering the benefits of forestry for our people, rural economy and environment. I echo the comments of others about the need for this debate to be based on evidence and the best available science. This House has declared a climate and biodiversity crisis and it falls to us to show leadership on this issue. I thank Members for this debate. I am committed to working with every one of them and any other stakeholder who shares a desire and ambition for forestry in Ireland.

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** The Minister of State's good intentions and honest approach are well recognised and we will always work with him and his colleagues to devise the best approach. That is the objective of this motion. However, we will push for a vote because there is a fundamental difference in outlook and philosophy between ourselves and most of the House and Fine Gael. I do not wish to isolate Fine Gael but there is a division of approach that must be teased out and addressed.

The Minister, Deputy Creed, said something to which I wish to draw attention: “The public debate on productive forestry is of concern and does not reflect current planting systems, which are more cognisant than ever of landscape, diversity and environmental sensitivities”. I differ from him on that. The debate is not of concern; it is vital. In fact, there are many people on the

environmental side of the debate, including a range of NGOs that I will not list now, who are saying something important that must be heard. I will cite some examples. Members of Extinction Rebellion interrupted a forestry industry event in the National Botanic Gardens a few weeks ago. There was a standoff between them and the people from the forestry industry, who were saying: “We doing the right thing and we are as green as you can get.” The people from Extinction Rebellion were expressing the significant anxiety that exists about the scale and nature of the biodiversity crisis we face. People were critical of Greta Thunberg’s speech in New York last week but we witnessed the sense of dread and fear among many young people that we are heading towards a sixth mass extinction and what it will mean for them in their lifetimes. They cannot rest easy and hear somebody say that the public debate on this does not reflect current plantings and we are “more cognisant than ever of ... environmental sensitivities”. I beg to differ; I do not believe we are.

There is a way to address those sensitivities. I was listening to BBC Radio 4 last week. I do not often do that but these days I have to listen to it to follow what is going on over there. At the end of the usual Brexit hoo-hah there was a brilliant short piece featuring the sculptor Antony Gormley. His grandfather was from Derry. He is a brilliant sculptor whose sculptures of himself are all to do with our connection to nature. He has a new exhibition in London currently. He was addressing the issue of how we are in despair at the destruction of nature. He said that we will get over that. It struck me when he said that, we will find our true nature in nature. Our connection to nature is important. If we do not have the sense that we are restoring nature and doing everything we can to create a rich natural environment around us as we face this biodiversity and climate crisis, we will go further into this despair and the public debate will get even worse. The people who have this sensitivity and sensibility will sense that the Government is all about numbers and has no sense of nature and its importance. I do not mean to be personally critical when I say that, but I am reflecting the view of many people in that community who feel this strongly.

The scale of what we must do is so great that the 8,000 ha of afforestation per year in the whole-of-Government action plan will not be commensurate with the type of carbon storage we will require, such is the crisis. We have significant potential in this country because it is such an incredible tree growing country. It has an incredible tradition and a skilled forestry and nursery sector so we should aim to think bigger and better than that. It should be 20,000 ha per year. We were doing that 25 years ago so why would we not aim for that scale now? There are vast amounts of land on which carbon could be stored through land management that would not involve plantations but a rewilding and the use of nature to do the work for us. That is what we seek to do.

The need for that is not just because of the climate and biodiversity crisis but the fact that there is an agricultural crisis in this country. It was stated on Radio Kerry, which I trust, that 60% of Kerry farmers have nobody to inherit their land and keep the farms going. Deputy Fitzmaurice might know if it is the same in Roscommon but I presume it is. The average age of a farmer is probably in the 60s. What will we do when all those people retire? Will we go with the current system where one might get a contractor in to install a monoculture plantation, leave it for 15 years and, please God, get the thinning done, and after 35 years chop it down and then do the same again? I do not believe the people want that to be the future of forestry. The people have a sense that they want to make this country the best example in the world of how to restore nature. In their deep psyche, they have a sense of crisis that we are about to lose the curlew and a range of bird species because of the way we are managing our land. This is not to

do with the climate or Europe telling us to do it; it is what we are doing ourselves. The people will want to change Ireland to be the best place in the world at protecting and restoring nature.

In the case of forestry, that is not just about the numbers and the percentage of broadleaves we have. The best academic research I can find on forestry states that even native plantation forests show a lack of native forest biodiversity. It is the nature of these plantations, be they broadleaf or conifer, that there is uniform plantation all of the same age. Once the canopy is closed, it is dark and there is no undergrowth in which birds and other species can thrive. No human being can walk there because it is so dark, dense and dead relative to a real biodiverse native forest. That is not what we want. It is not doing the best or thinking big about how we could tackle the biodiversity crisis.

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** What about deer?

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** Ireland has large populations of deer and, as I said earlier, pine martens and squirrels, but it is losing the bird and insect life. It is not just in the forests. Bird life is being lost because of inappropriate management of the grasslands and wetlands. This is forestry within the context of what is being done in farming. The two go together. I have heard almost uniform agreement in the debate, including in the Minister's contribution, that we look on agroforestry as a big step. The Minister should seek to get farmers behind this and skilled in this planting task in the upcoming budget. Let us do it in the next five years and get them to use native trees that are local to the area. The acorn from a local area has specific characteristics that will help it to thrive in that area. The complexity of forests is amazing. What we are learning about trees and their interaction with each other as they grow is fascinating. I spoke to a forester the other day who told me that even the smallest change in how they turn and blow can affect the nature of the wood as it grows. As the light is opened up and there is a more open canopy, the nature of what happens to the tops of the trees starts to change. This is an incredibly complex process. Every tree is different and every tree must be in the right place. As various people said today, we need the right tree in the right place but we also need a mix of trees, including trees of different ages and wild trees as well as planted trees. We need to step away from the concentration on plantations, whether monoculture or clear fell. That is as clear as day and we in the Green Party along with many others will be making the case for this, not just today but in the run-up to the budget and negotiations on any future programme for Government.

We believe that this is the responsible response that we need to the biodiversity and climate crisis we face. It must be based on science and the Minister is absolutely right about that. No one has absolute certainty on this because it is very complex, but we cannot say that what we are doing now is fine and the way we have always done it is fine. We cannot continue to drain the land, plant again, drain again, pour phosphates and glyphosates on and plant again, because that is not looking after nature. That is why we called this motion close to nature forestry because it is an ecological approach that values nature. In valuing nature, we value ourselves, whether we are Kerry, Roscommon, Dublin or Wicklow people. We are part of nature. Let us look after it.

Amendment put.

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** Vótáil.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** In accordance with Standing Order 70(2), the division is postponed until the weekly division time on Thursday, 3 October 2019.

The Dáil adjourned at 10.15 p.m. until 10.30 a.m. on Wednesday, 2 October 2019.