

Kildare Nationalist

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Update sought on Athy ring road

An update on the current status of the Athy Ring Road was sought in the Upper House by Independent Senator Victor Boyhan.

“I have some claim to fame there in that my family is originally from there and is in business and in the commercial life of the town itself in Duke Street,” he said. “I know it well. As I am there on a weekly basis, I am very familiar with County Kildare and with Athy in particular. It was once a very successful market town and a particularly attractive town. It is served by wonderful public transport because there is a train service there. It is a town that from the 1960s right up to the present has seen a diminishing of employment and economic activity.”

However, he said it has great prospects being so near to Dublin and there is a great potential future in respect of the provision for the Athy ring road. “My understanding is that An Bord Pleanála has now given the go-ahead,” he said. “There were planning issues and difficulties but they have been resolved. Kildare County Council is keen to get on with this project. People want to see this road put in as quickly as possible, subject to the available finances. They want to know where this project is on the priority list for the Minister's capital programme in the context of the town's renewal and revitalisation and in respect of capitalising on its potential.”

Senator Boyhan said it is an important hub for people doing business and living there and it has good transport connections. “We are trying to find out what is the status of the ring road in the grand scheme of things and what sort of funding has been identified,” added.

In response, Transport Minister Shane Ross said the Athy southern distributor road is one of the improvement projects designed to address bottlenecks on the road network included in the capital plan. “Following An Bord Pleanála's approval, to which the Senator referred, of the project in October, the next stage is for Kildare County Council to do the detailed project design and to prepare the contract documents,” he said. “Under the Department's funding programme for the regional and local road improvement projects included in the capital plan, it is anticipated that the main construction contract for the Athy project will start in mid-2020. It is hoped that it will be completed. I hope this answers the question, by 2022. It is likely that some advance works contracts will be undertaken in 2018 and 2019 in advance of the main contract. In addition, land purchase will proceed.”

Only sixteen per cent of Irish women receive full State pension

The major deficiency in this year's Social Welfare Bill is that it does not address the issue of pension inequality, which is having a devastating effect on older people, especially older women, Fiannna Fáil Deputy Fiona O'Loughlin told the Dáil. “While we are having this discussion, some of the women concerned are gathered outside these buildings to protest against a system that absolutely disadvantages those among them who took time out of the

workforce to engage in childminding duties or care for elderly parents,” she said. “Financial hardship in retirement has become a real problem for women because of the way the current system is structured. A 2012 study by the European Institute for Gender Equality found that the pension pay gap between men and women amounted to almost €700 a month. In fact, only 16% of women in this country receive the full State pension.”

Deputy O’Loughlin said she had repeatedly raised this matter in the House, having heard from so many women in Kildare South who are distraught to learn on reaching retirement age that they are not entitled to a full pension. “It is very difficult for people who have been looking forward to a secure retirement to discover that they will, in fact, be facing into financial hardship,” she said.

Heydon seeks increase in rates for foster parents

Plans to review the allowances and funding paid to foster parents who carry out a very important role, given the increased funding of €40 million for Tusla in Budget 2018 were sought in the Dáil by Fine Gael Deputy Martin Heydon.

He said he was sure Minister Katherine Zappone would agree that foster carers are a vital resource in the care system, in looking after almost 92% of the total number of children in care. “At the end of July there were 5,801 children in foster care,” he said. “I point to the extra resources needed to further support foster parents and the fact that we need to attract new foster parents. From talking to foster parents who have been fostering for many years and do not remember a change in the rates, my sense is that they have not been reviewed for a very long time.”

In reply, Minister Zappone said she had no plans to change the rate of the foster care allowance at this time. “However, my Department has begun an extensive review of the Child Care Act 1991 and will examine foster care arrangements as part of this review,” she said. “It will have regard to income support measures available to foster families generally.”

She said the foster care allowance is currently €325 per week per child under 12 years of age and €352 per week per child aged 12 years and over. “This payment was protected during recent economic hardships and is tax-free,” she said. “It is paid in respect of the child and provided in order to allow foster carers to meet all of the child's daily living needs, including food, clothing, basic travel, education costs and hobbies and sports activities. The allowance is not considered as means for social welfare purposes.”