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Mullingar retailers facing stiff and unfair online competition

The challenges facing the retail sector in Mullingar over recent months has moved from out of town shopping centres like those in Liffey Valley and Dundrum to the competition they face online, Fianna Fáil Deputy Robert Troy told the Dáil. Those online companies do not have the same costs base or overheads and can therefore sell their produce much more competitively at lower prices, he said.

“Customers now go into shops and try on shoes and clothes, note the brand and size of the clothing, and go home and order the product online,” he said.

Speaking during a debate on the new Local Government (Rates) Bill, he said his family has a small, family post office that goes back many generations in Mullingar.

“The postman told me that the number of parcels delivered this Christmas increased probably tenfold in the 12 months from the previous Christmas,” he said. “We have to look at how to capture the online trade if we are serious about helping small retailers. How can we ensure that the people working on the high street, providing a premises and employment and trying to pay their commercial rates are at least competing with companies that are paying their taxes? That is not the case currently.”

Childcare providers are providing a service that the State should provide and should be exempt from rates, he said. “They have filled a gap that was allowed develop or evolve over a number of years,” he said. “I understand from my previous days as my party spokesperson for children that community childcare facilities are exempt from commercial rates whereas private childcare facilities are not. That may differ from county to county, and the fact that there is a difference in how commercial rates apply from county to county further signifies the urgent need to reform how these rates are charged. Many commercial childcare providers provide the same schemes as other childcare providers, such as the free preschool year that has been extended to 24 months, but they have an additional overhead of commercial rates.”

Clarity sought on wind energy guidelines

In the first Quarter of 2018, every planning authority in the country was to have new revised wind energy guidelines, Fianna Fáil Deputy Robert Troy told the Dáil. However, some 12 months on, there has been no further word to local authorities.

“Renewable energy is essential if we are going to address our climate change obligations,” he said. “I realise that it is not the Government's top priority but it is an important issue. We must embrace it and address it but it must be done in a sustainable manner which does not impinge on our communities. Our communities want new, updated guidelines, which have been long overdue and promised. When can we see those guidelines implemented? In advance of the guidelines being implemented, is it possible that a moratorium will be put in place on any new applications until such a time as we have new, robust guidelines in place?”

In reply, the Minister for Housing, Planning & Local Government, Eoghan Murphy said this was a priority for the Government. “Over the course of 2018 the World Health Organization changed its guidelines relating to noise from wind turbines,” he said. “As a result, the EU

changed its directives in October last year. We decided it was prudent to take cognisance of the change in the directive from the EU before we went to public consultation. We will go out to public consultation within the next two weeks. It will be a short public consultation but as we go out to public consultation for the draft guidelines, we will expect planning authorities to take cognisance of them in the decisions that they make.”

GAA helping to integrate foreign nationals in Irish society

In many rural areas in which foreign national people have come to live in communities, they are being integrated and naturalised into the community through the GAA club, Fianna Fáil Senator Paul Daly told the Upper House. “We are seeing increasing numbers of foreign nationals, people of non-Irish origin, playing on our teams and yet we do not have or hear of, thankfully, any incidents of racism,” he said. “That is one major plus for how the GAA integrates society, particularly in rural areas.”

Speaking after an address to the Seanad by GAA President John Horan, Senator Daly said that having grown up as a farmer’s son with no social media, he would not have seen his school friends during the summers if he had not been lucky enough to be a member of a GAA family. “The tools were dropped and we were brought into town when there was an underage game, the club seniors were playing at the weekend or the county was playing,” he said. “It meant so much to me to be involved at the time of poorer communications.”

He said he agreed with what the president said about clubs, the club scene and how important clubs are in rural areas, in particular. “I hope that bottom-up emphasis can be maintained,” he said. “In my opinion and, I believe, of everyone, the club is the beginning and end of the GAA. When there is a bereavement in a family in a rural area, the GAA club will roll in and be involved in parking cars, stewarding etc. The club will rally around that family.”

Senator Aidan Davitt said he had been privileged to serve with club and county on the executives of Clonkill and St. Loman's GAA clubs and of Contae na hIarmhí. “The skills I learned have stood me in good stead in politics,” he said. “The skills I learned dealing with an organisation of volunteers have really been a help to me in life in general. The GAA is the last lifeline left holding most rural communities together. I believe that its facilities can be to the fore in arresting rural decline.”