

DÁIL ÉIREANN

AN COISTE UM ACHAINÍOCHA ÓN BPOBAL

COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC PETITIONS

Dé Céadaoin, 23 Deireadh Fómhair 2019

Wednesday, 23 October 2019

The Joint Committee met at 2.30 p.m.

Comhaltaí a bhí i láthair/Members present:

Pat Buckley,	Jerry Buttimer,
Shane Cassells.	Lynn Ruane.

Teachta/Deputy Sean Sherlock sa Chathaoir/in the Chair.

COMMITTEE OF PUBLIC PETITIONS

The committee met in private session until 2.43 p.m.

Decisions on Public Petitions Received

Chairman: Petition No. P00018/19 relates to rental properties. The decision of the committee is to forward a copy of the response from the Department of Finance to the petitioner. Is that agreed?

Deputy Shane Cassells: I do not disagree with the recommendation but it is a very important petition in the context of the manner in which the petitioner has suggested a course of action on the issue of housing and apartment developments being bought up by large investment companies, which is a huge problem. We cannot get away from that fact. At the end of the petition, the petitioner states “This is from a millennial worried about my prospects in the housing market in the future other than renting”. It is worth noting that for the first time in the history of the State, we have fallen behind the EU average rate of homeownership of 69%. We are behind Germany, which is supposed to have the model that pursues renting as the option, in home ownership rates. Less than 20 years ago, the average age at which a person could buy his or her own home was in his or her 20s. I was approximately 25 when I bought the home I live in now. It is now in a person’s mid-30s when he or she can buy.

The petitioner has touched on a major issue in respect of properties. It is a matter the Committee of Public Accounts touched on when the National Asset Management Agency, NAMA, was before us to discuss large developments being bought up by investment funds while squeezing potential first-time buyers out of the market. In that context, Fianna Fáil introduced the Planning and Development (Amendment) (First-Time Buyers) Bill 2019 in the Dáil yesterday through Deputy Darragh O’Brien to allow local authorities to designate up to 30% of zoned land for first-time buyers. Initiatives like that to tackle this issue in the context of what the petitioner has said are worthy of consideration. I would not pursue the method the petitioner proposes, but investment companies buying up these properties is fundamentally wrong. It is a slight against the country. Those of all political hues can agree when investment companies are squeezing first-time buyers. Looking at the statistics, home ownership figures are falling behind those in countries with a supposed rental model. That is worrying for this country. It was good to have the petition before the committee. As Dáil and Seanad Members, I hope that we tackle it.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: Notwithstanding the sentiment expressed by Deputy Cassells, only 4.6% of tenancies are held by landlords that are individual companies with more than 100 units. We should look at the response to the petitioner, which shows that less than 1% of transactions account for what the petitioner outlines. Undoubtedly, we have an issue with housing, but we must not get into fake news either.

Deputy Shane Cassells: We saw yesterday at the Committee on Housing, Planning and Local Government the failure of strategic housing development on a large scale. We are not getting into fake news. The policy has not worked. There is a crisis, which is not acceptable. Things like the Bill proposed yesterday to empower local authorities to stave off this onslaught are worthy of debate here.

Deputy Pat Buckley: I agree with the overall points raised in the petition. While I do not want to get into a debate here, the Austrian model builds 2,700 units per year outside Vienna.

Austria has a standard rate of rent of approximately €600 per month and they supply their schools, doctors and everything else. While the petitioner is flagging up a point about nervousness and planning for the future, we must acknowledge, whatever Government is in power, that not enough is being done to build affordable units. Not everybody wants to own a house. We have some kind of psychological block in Ireland that one has to own a house. It is all about having security and a home. Under the Austrian model, however, people can live in massive communal villages where no one is under pressure. It does not matter how much a person earns a month, there is a standard rate. If a person agrees to terms and a contract, he or she has harmony. When there is harmony in an area, it increases the mental health and wellness of individuals and communities. It is a model we should look at. It should be noted in relation to the issue the petitioner is trying to raise that no matter who is in government, we should plan for the future and look at alternative models that are affordable.

Deputy Shane Cassells: The petitioner states specifically that he does not want to be renting into the future. I accept that Deputy Buckley has a philosophy and ideology but I disagree with it. Home ownership in this country has fallen to 67%. We should offer people that option. The petition specifically referred to “options other than renting”. I agree that security of tenure is important but the submission was specific on allowing first-time buyers into the market.

Chairman: The point is well made. I will move on. The decision is that we will forward a copy of the response from the Department of Finance to the petitioner and close the petition. Is that agreed? Agreed.

Petition No. P00023/19 is from Mr. Wayne Hester. He would like to see 30 April designated a public holiday in honour of Riverdance. It is decided that we will forward a copy of the response from the Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht to the petitioner and close the petition. Is that agreed? Agreed.

Deputy Shane Cassells: If we had agreed, we would have got free tickets for the big show next year.

Chairman: Petition No. P00034/19 is from Ms Tanya O’Neill, who would like to see new labelling on all non-recyclable packaging stating that it is not recyclable. We have agreed that we would forward a copy of the response from the Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment to the petitioner. We will not quite close the petition yet but will give it further consideration.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: I concur with the decision to have further consideration. The petitioner is striving to achieve what we all want, namely, a new code on labelling and packaging. I support the principle of the petition. I suggest that we consider inviting in Repak and other organisations, as the Chairman and secretariat deem appropriate. The thrust of what we want to do is to reduce packaging and have more informed labelling. Repak has a recycling strategy for the period 2018 to 2030 and in that context it might be worth inviting it in.

Deputy Pat Buckley: I agree that we should keep the petition open because the background is the need to engage with producers and make retailers aware that there will be options. My understanding is that options are coming down the line. We should take a positive lead globally. We have the opportunity to do so. I agree with the Chairman and Senator Buttimer. We should hear from Repak and major producers of recyclable and non-recyclable goods about their plans for the future.

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Senator Lynn Ruane: I agree.

Chairman: The proposal before us is that we communicate with Repak and perhaps ask it to consider the content of the petition and respond on the work it is doing. To be fair, the response from the Department is comprehensive in answering the issues raised by the petitioner. We are going off on a tangent to the extent that it is not possible to adhere to what is being specifically sought in the petition. However, members understand the importance of packaging, which is one of the biggest issues in the area of climate action. It would be useful for the committee to gain an understanding of the position of Repak and industry representatives on this agenda. Is it agreed that we keep the petition open, communicate with Repak and see where we go from there? Agreed.

Petition No. P00035/19 seeks to have more funding allocated to create additional and larger autism spectrum disorder, ASD, classes and special classes in mainstream schools. It is proposed that we forward a copy of the response from the Department of Education and Skills to the petitioner and close the petition. Is that agreed?

Senator Jerry Buttimer: I know the petition refers specifically to the Clondalkin area but if it is appropriate, we should communicate with the Department about Cork city where an issue arises and parents experience frustration with regard to post-primary places for students who require ASD classes and special classes. I note the spend by the Government and Department in this area but parents are experiencing frustration. Perhaps we could communicate the situation in Cork to the Department.

Deputy Shane Cassells: Senator Buttimer is 100% right. The issue not only affects Cork. The transition between primary and secondary school is a major issue for parents right across the country.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: Is there any merit in the committee giving further consideration to that particular issue? I know it is a matter for the Joint Committee on Education and Skills and the petitioner refers to a specific area. However, it is an issue that is becoming more prevalent and a growing number of students are presenting. The Department has produced a report on the role of special education needs organisers, SENOs. I do not wish to be political in terms of scoring points against my own Government or creating a political divide, but there is an initiative we need to address. One might argue that this falls within the remit of the Joint Committee on Education and Skills and I will accept the decision if that is the case. Perhaps we should also inform the Department.

Chairman: Is there a proposal before us to keep the petition open?

Senator Jerry Buttimer: I am not saying we should keep it open but asking if we could revisit the issue. The petition relates to Clondalkin but I refer to the wider issue.

Senator Lynn Ruane: I agree. I am a member of the Joint Committee on Education and Skills and we often examine this area. As I am still fairly new to this committee, I do not know whether it refers to other committee work. I am pretty sure we have published reports on this specific issue. When we respond to a petition, can information be provided directing the petitioner to the work of other committees in the area that he or she might find helpful?

Chairman: A report was published by the relevant committee in October 2018. Like every other public representative here, we are all inundated with people contacting us about a range of issues in this area, from assessments to issues concerning bricks and mortar and the provi-

sion of capital expenditure. If we look at the issue narrowly through the prism of Clondalkin, I propose that we close the petition.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: I accept that.

Chairman: There is a wider issue and the solution may be as simple as this committee communicating with the Department and the relevant line committee, as per Standing Orders, asking if there has been any response or update to the 2018 report. It is such a live issue. The numbers are increasing all the time. I propose that we close the petition but write to the Chairman of the Joint Committee on Education and Skills and ask the committee to have regard to the petition we received. Is that agreed?

Senator Jerry Buttimer: I accept that.

Chairman: That is agreed.

It is deemed that Petition No. P00042/19 is inadmissible, as per Standing Orders, and we will inform the petitioner as to the reasons. Is that agreed? Agreed.

I understand Deputy Buckley wants to raise an issue under any other business.

Deputy Pat Buckley: Yes.

Chairman: I propose that we discuss the matter in private session, before we adjourn. Is that agreed? Agreed.

The joint committee went into private session at 2.59 p.m. and resumed in public session at 3.04 p.m.

Chairman: I refer Deputy Buckley to the discussion we have just had on the petition we received from the Save Fermoy Weir and Save Our Salmon group. We are in receipt of correspondence from the group rebutting in a comprehensive document the submissions laid before the committee and spoken to by individual stakeholders on 3 July. It is proposed that we note the correspondence from the stakeholders in Fermoy and submit the latest correspondence to each of the stakeholders, including the line Departments and State agencies that were party to the particular petition hearing at this committee, asking them to respond to each of the points raised in rebuttal to the points made on 3 July 2019. Is that agreed? Agreed.

Deputy Pat Buckley: That is certainly the fairest way to proceed. There is a great deal in the document and this is the proper procedure. I thank the Chairman.

The committee adjourned at 3.05 p.m. until 1.30 p.m. on Wednesday, 6 November 2019.