

DÁIL ÉIREANN

Dé Céadaoin, 8 Feabhra 2006.
Wednesday, 8 February 2006.

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

Paidir.
Prayer.

Leaders' Questions.

Mr. Kenny: Today's report from the National Roads Authority makes shocking reading. According to this survey, the level of speeding has increased by 800%. Every single-decker bus and almost every articulated truck is speeding on our motorways. Just over half of secondary school pupils wear seat belts while travelling in the back of cars.

There is an obvious link between the slaughter on the roads and the findings in this report. Deaths on our roads have risen substantially over the past few years. There were 335 such deaths in 2003, 374 in 2004 and 399 in 2005. Already this year, 50 people have lost their lives on Irish roads. In one 24-hour period, eight people died. This is an indication of a national emergency. Had these people lost their lives in a terrorist attack, or whatever, the nation would be in mourning, but as the *Irish Independent* says today, as it stands, those deaths will inevitably fade from the front pages.

It should be borne in mind that every death on a road is not just another statistic of shame but an unfilled place at a breakfast table or in college, or the absence of a parent to bring a child to school. The Government set out a list of promises nine years ago and it is about time it took serious action to deal with these unwanted and tragic deaths. Responsibility for the roll-out of speed cameras falls between a number of Ministers and Ministries. No-one carries the can or takes responsibility and no-one is seen to be in charge.

The Taoiseach is not responsible for road deaths, nor could he be. It is a matter of driver consideration. However, the Taoiseach and the Government stand indicted, and guilty of the charge of allowing an atmosphere and an environment permeate driving in this country whereby people assume they can get away with driving under the influence of drink or of substance abuse, or with excessive speed. It is about time the Taoiseach took personal charge of this national scandal and litany of shame. I ask him to do so now because one after another, his Mini-

sters have failed miserably in their duty to create that sense of awareness and consideration both for self and for others.

The Taoiseach: As I said in reply to Deputy Kenny previously, no-one can be happy when anyone is being killed on our roads. I agree that every road tragedy is a huge loss to a family, a community and a neighbourhood. The rise in road deaths figures over the recent period is a cause of huge regret.

A range of measures is under way. I have been involved in a series of relevant meetings recently, and over the years. Over the past decade we have seen an increase of almost 70% in the number of licensed vehicles using our roads and tragically, from a 40-year low of 335 people killed on the roads in 2003, which I consider 335 deaths too many, road deaths have increased in the past two years, with 374 people killed in 2004 and 399 killed last year. The opening weeks of this year have seen a further high level of road mortality, with 50 deaths though we are only in the first week of February.

Clearly we need to push home the message that 86% of deaths on the roads are caused by driver error. Speeding is the main killer. People must share responsibility and slow down. They must stop drinking and driving. In order to reinforce that message and force a dramatic improvement in driver behaviour we are currently introducing a co-ordinated series of measures in addition to those we have already introduced. We are the first Government to have a dedicated road safety strategy. We have introduced penalty points for speeding and for offences with regard to seat belts, insurance and careless driving. We have established a dedicated Garda traffic corps headed by an assistant commissioner. The number of gardaí assigned to the traffic corps reached 570 at the end of last year, will increase to 805 this year and to its maximum, 1,200, in 2008. We have invested in new, improved, safer roads, at enormous expense, with €1.5 billion being spent annually.

We are also seeing the results of improved enforcement. Though last year was a bad one for road deaths, nearly 300,000 drivers received penalty points, an increase of more than 100,000 on the previous year's figure of 189,000. We are introducing a series of other measures. The legal issues of speed cameras and random sampling have been resolved. As I explained last week, tricky legal issues were involved, but I co-ordinated a meeting which dealt with them. That legislation has been given urgent priority. It will help the Attorney General and the parliamentary draftsman. Hopefully, it will be in the House in this session, which is what I intend.

It gives me no satisfaction. People sometimes argue about the list of the new offences, asking if these penalty points are any use and will they solve the problem. Unfortunately, we are forced into taking these measures. Almost 600 people

[The Taoiseach.]

were dying on our roads 30 years ago when we had half the number of cars. This does not give any satisfaction. The reality is that people are not driving safely, they are taking too many risks and pushing the speed limits. Even though the roads are incrementally better than they were then, we are seeing too many tragedies. The only way we can respond is for gardaí to take measures that will inconvenience people.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Taoiseach's time has concluded.

Mr. Kenny: We have heard all of this from the Taoiseach before. The late Professor John Kelly used to say in this House that, if one allowed people to drive a tonne of metal down the road regardless of speed limits, there would be serious tragedies. At this point in the year, 50 deaths — eight in 24 hours — is a scandal of national proportions.

The Taoiseach has not implemented what he has talked about. He now tells us the issue of random breath testing is resolved. He gave the most complicated response to a question in this House last week, which has caused complete confusion between lawyers, the public, gardaí and members of the Government. The random breath testing issue is not resolved. There is no reform of driver education and no national programme for young drivers and non-nationals driving in this country, where they must drive on the left-hand side of the road rather than the right-hand side. Why have we got 425,000 people on provisional driving licences? Why is there a waiting list of over 53 weeks in many centres? Surely this is evidence of complete incompetence by whoever is in charge.

On the roll out of penalty points, referred to by the Taoiseach and promised by the Government, four offences covered eight years. There is complete inconsistency in the whole business of speed limits, from 60 km/h to 100 km/h. For example, the limit is 100 kph outside some schools. Every piece of roadway where major contractors contracted with the NRA or local authorities are nothing short of obstacle courses.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy's time has concluded.

Mr. Kenny: What about the number of deaths in cases where people have crashed into road-works, where there is confusion due to lack of consistency?

It is about time the Taoiseach takes personal charge of seeing that this is done. It is a matter that the Government can do and achieve. A sense of awareness can be given to people. Anybody taking a motorcycle, car, lorry, articulated truck, bus, other vehicle or using the public roadways should understand that they have personal responsibility and rights to show due consideration for others and the law of the land. The

Taoiseach should, for once, take charge of the half dozen Ministries that have failed utterly to create an environment and atmosphere of respect for others and understanding for the law. In that sense, it is time for action, leadership and enforcement. Lives depend on it.

Deputies: Hear, hear.

The Taoiseach: We are the first Government to have a national safety strategy and most of the issues mentioned by Deputy Kenny in regard to training, young people receiving reports and gardaí visiting them all happen.

I will go back over what is taking place because the Government is not sitting back. We are introducing measures to reduce driver test waiting times and we have made a critical contribution to road safety and improved driving behaviour. Ministers have announced those schemes already. We are rolling out more penalty point offences from 1 April.

Mr. Kenny: The Government will not.

Mr. N. Dempsey: We will.

The Taoiseach: The Minister for Transport has announced a further 31 penalty point offences, which will bring the total number to 35. We are establishing a road safety authority and bringing forward a Bill to provide private speed cameras. Cameras must be properly located at accident black spots. A new system must be designed to save lives, not raise revenues. A point was made in this House in recent weeks about that matter. Camera suppliers must be answerable to the Garda.

We are introducing legislation to provide for the establishment of random breath testing, to which drivers will be required to submit. What we said last week and what has been given to the Garda has not created any confusion other than people wanting to raise a point about it. The only argument is people trying to say the Garda cannot have random check points. The Garda can have random check points. It is a different issue to random breath testing and we are making the legal provision so they can have random breath testing. The Attorney General has given his views to the Garda. The Commissioner has been before a committee of the Houses and said the Garda is satisfied with the position. We must now bring it forward in legislation.

We have established a high level road safety group to co-ordinate the Ministers for Transport, Justice, Equality and Law Reform, Finance, Health and Children and Education and Science. I have already convened that meeting. We must also appeal to the public to take account of these issues as I can see what will happen very quickly. We are putting a large number of gardaí on the roads who will set up check points. It will be very difficult for ordinary law abiding people on the

roads, who will see a far greater number of gardaí. Unfortunately, if we have the number of road deaths that we do, we must impose this measure without fear or favour.

Mr. Kehoe: The Government will not.

Mr. N. Dempsey: We will.

The Taoiseach: It will create problems and Members of this House will hear people giving out about it, as they already do about some of the new provisions. We will deal with that matter.

Mr. Durkan: What about the real problem?

Mr. J. O'Keeffe: More talk.

The Taoiseach: We have told the Garda to enforce in numbers and enforce the law. It will create its own difficulties but I agree we cannot allow a situation where 50 people have died in the first five or so weeks of this year.

Mr. O'Dowd: It has happened.

Mr. Durkan: Even as we speak.

Mr. J. O'Keeffe: Less talk, more action.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Taoiseach's time has concluded.

Mr. Rabbitte: What is the Government's attitude to the proposed sale of the Great Southern Hotels? What is Government policy on the matter? The Taoiseach is very familiar with the contribution made down the years by the Great Southern Hotels and is aware of the very high quality service provided there. He appreciates that they have been a key piece of the tourism infrastructure of the country for very many years and will agree with me that they have tended to be passed from Billy to Jack in recent years. For example, the contribution the hotels made to the training of high skilled staff was, at one stage, more than the contribution made by the rest of the entire hotel sector.

I was contacted this morning by people in Killarney, not all of whom were of my particular persuasion, as they put it to me, to remind me of the Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism's pledge before the election that the hotels would not be sold. I was horrified to hear that, on local radio this morning, he seemed to resile from that position.

Mr. J. O'Keeffe: What is new?

Mr. Rabbitte: He now seems to be saying the hotels are loss makers and, therefore, it is a decision for the Minister for Transport, Deputy Cullen.

Mr. J. O'Keeffe: The Lord save us.

Mr. Rabbitte: We know what will happen there. We will be very lucky if he does not erect tolls at the entrances to all the Great Southern Hotels.

I will take up the two points advanced for this decision. One relates to — shock, horror — approximately €6 million in accumulated losses. In yesterday's debate I pointed out to the Taoiseach that the previous day's report stated that €125 million was foregone in tax to new hotels.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy's time has concluded.

Mr. Rabbitte: The accumulated losses in this case are €6 million. Let it be remembered that, contrary to the impression being put about, these hotels never got State subvention except at one stage in the 1980s when the State debt needed to be cleared, largely taxes due to the State at the time. That is the full extent — €6 million in accumulated losses compared to our willingness to give €125 million for the construction of new hotels. That is the financial record. Dublin Airport Authority has never made any secret of the fact that it did not want these hotels. It never permitted reinvestment to the extent needed as this would take up its borrowing capacity. They always made plain that they did not want it. The same situation obtained in CERT, where there was never a clear commitment to develop and invest in these hotels and establish necessary international linkages.

The Taoiseach: I appreciate Deputy Rabbitte's acknowledgement of my support for and knowledge of this group. Debts were cleared in the 1980s and the group was given a clean bill of health.

Ms B. Moynihan-Cronin: It was starved of investment.

The Taoiseach: In the late 1980s and early 1990s it was given the go ahead to redevelop a number of their hotels. Subsequently it set up new hotels, including the Great Southern Hotel at the airport, which is now the flagship hotel. They were given permission to invest in the Derry and Cork hotels and to refurbish the Corrib, Eyre Square, Parknasilla and Killarney hotels. Despite these efforts the group has continued to have trading difficulties. Accumulated debt is €40 million and rising. The Corrib, Galway and Rosslare hotels represent a serious strain on the group and only the airport hotel is operating with reasonable success. Even in this hotel wage costs are uncompetitive and the classic hotels of Parknasilla, Killarney and Eyre Square need major capital investment and retrenchment. A number of difficulties have continued for several years and I have continued to speak with staff, management and unions over the past few years.

[The Taoiseach.]

The board of the Great Southern Hotel Group has decided to sell the hotels as a going concern. The Dublin Airport Authority fully endorses the decision and the Government as shareholder has been kept fully informed of these issues. I have made the point to the chairman of the Dublin Airport Authority and to the Minister that it is important to engage with staff and staff interests to deal with these as a going concern and keep them as hotels in so far as is possible, keeping as many staff employed as possible, if not extending employment.

The reality is that the hotels are not going where they need to go. The Government assessment is that the orderly disposal of the hotels as a going concern offers the best opportunity for them to reach full potential in a niche market to which they are best suited. This will enable hotels to contribute to tourism in the community. The Great Southern Hotel Group has engaged advisers to assist in the orderly disposal. The Minister will meet staff interests in the next few days to discuss how we can assist in this process.

Ms B. Moynihan-Cronin: Shame on the Taoiseach.

Mr. Rabbitte: I am not sure how the Taoiseach can reconcile his opening remarks supporting the contribution of 800 staff in the Great Southern Hotel Group with his conclusion that he purports to sell the hotels in the manner described, keeping them as far as possible as hotels. That clearly means the inevitable will happen and some will be developed for property speculation, for which they are ideal sites, as opposed to being an element of the tourism infrastructure that disperses tourism around the country to areas that would otherwise suffer.

I am amazed the Minister for Arts, Sports and Tourism can facilitate this and that the Fianna Fáil Party can be dictated to by the Progressive Democrats. An obscure, unelected Senator ranted and raved this morning on the merits of selling the hotels. The Taoiseach referred to losses of €6 million in a hotel chain that has been starved of the capacity to make the necessary investment. The second element seems to be the high proportion of staff costs as compared to turnover. The staff are the leading, most professional, highest skilled staff in the tourism sector. That is a fact and if the argument is that they should be replaced by cheaper staff and the hotels sold for property speculation, it is a disgrace.

That is what will happen at a time when we need, more than ever, to disperse the tourism figures across the west of Ireland. Some major facilities that have played a major role in the past are to be sold for property development. Eyre Square sits on the edge of a 13 acre site, while the Killarney Great Southern Hotel and others are ideal for property speculation. I am amazed at the Minister for Arts, Sports and Tourism, who made

a pledge to the people of Killarney and staff a few years ago. The Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs, Deputy Ó Cuív, Tadhg an dá thaobh, has been running around speaking from both sides of his mouth about the two hotels in Galway.

This is a bad day for tourism and a bad day for Fianna Fáil when it is being dictated to by the Progressive Democrats' wish to put everything in the State sector under the hammer rather than creating a stand alone vehicle for these hotels where investment can be made, linked to an international brand to bring tourism to Ireland, using marketing skills to disperse tourism from the east coast and Dublin to the west of Ireland.

The Taoiseach: The Great Southern Hotel Group has had every opportunity over the past 20 years and support from various Governments to assist it. At a time when we have the highest number of tourists in the country, 6.5 million last year, the hotel group unfortunately lost between €7 million and €8 million. Accumulated losses amount to €40 million. The hotel at Dublin airport, which is coming under increasing opposition because of three new hotels that have opened in the area, needs capital to expand and develop. If we have a genuine interest, as I, Deputy Rabbitte and other Members of the House have, in trying to protect jobs in this group, it is by making—

Mr. Broughan: Cynic.

The Taoiseach: The Labour Party will realise that at the peak of tourism business, when there are more tourists than ever in the country, and a business is losing €8 million per year, with accumulated debts of €40 million, it cannot go on.

Mr. M. Higgins: There have been roadworks outside one of the hotels for two years.

The Taoiseach: The decision was taken by the board of the Great Southern Hotel Group.

Mr. Stagg: Fianna Fáil hacks appointed by the Taoiseach.

The Taoiseach: The Dublin Airport Authority, which is doing a very good job, believes this is the correct decision.

Mr. Stagg: Speculators will buy it.

The Taoiseach: I hope most of these hotels will continue to be hotels as I have always thought they have much potential.

Ms Burton: Will tax breaks be provided for them?

The Taoiseach: Hopefully they will generate the same interest as the huge number of hotels we have seen built in Killarney, Dublin, Cork and Wexford, so they will be able to continue.

Mr. M. Higgins: One of €25 million——

Mr. Stagg: They are being built with taxpayers' money.

The Taoiseach: In the meantime, the Government will work with the trade union interests and the workers to try to make the best decisions for their interests and protection in the future.

Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin: The Taoiseach is aware, as is every member of the Dáil and the Seanad and as are people throughout the country, that a woman has been protesting outside this institution day and night for several months, making what I and many see as a courageous stand for justice. She is undoubtedly an exceptional woman. If anyone took the time to stop and talk with her, that would be confirmed.

Marie Therese O'Loughlin confirms that she was a victim of neglect and serious injury in what has become known as the Morning Star hostel in Dublin. She alleges she was disgracefully ill-treated as a child in that institution. However, she has been denied access to the redress process because the Government deemed that the so-called Morning Star hostel does not fall within the remit of the residential institutions redress board.

Last evening I received a letter from the Taoiseach, comprising a cover note with an accompanying letter from the Department of Health and Children, having raised the matter of Marie Therese O'Loughlin's case with him. The letter from the Department of Health and Children states clearly that the Regina Coeli hostel, which is the same institution as that referred to popularly as the Morning Star, was subject to inspection and regulation by the Department of Health and Children. It states that a search of files related to the Regina Coeli hostel revealed that there was evidence of an inspection or regulatory function by the Department in regard to the hostel.

This information was previously rejected here. In this correspondence, the Department of Health and Children has confirmed that as far back as April 2005 it advised the Department of Education and Science that there was an inspection responsibility and it was carried out. The letter also states that as far back as April 2005, the Department of Health and Children asked the Department of Education and Science to consider including this institution under the Residential Institutions Redress Act, a step that would allow Marie Therese the opportunity of stating her case before the board, seeking redress and to at last be heard.

The Department of Education and Science continues to refuse what the Department of Health and Children as far back as April 2005 commended to that Department. There is a scandal here where justice is being denied to an unfortunate woman. Will the Taoiseach intervene

directly in this matter? Will he ensure through his good offices that the Department of Education and Science takes the appropriate steps in order that this poor woman's case can be properly heard and that her health and well-being continuing at risk outside the gates of this House are recognised, addressed and served by an immediate answer?

The Taoiseach: I answered this question and I have sent correspondence to Deputies on this case. Marie Therese O'Loughlin is a fine person. Most Members of the House at one stage or another have spoken to her. Many officials have also spoken to her and to me regarding this case over many months. I answered questions on the detail of the case.

There is no point in going over old ground to confuse the issue of what was the basis of inspections. She was in the Regina Coeli hostel. Hostels are specifically excluded in the legislation passed by this House. That is the point and all the other points are irrelevant. As I stated previously, it is not good enough that one was in an institution under the Act, one must have been abused in an institution. That is the kernel of the cases. Marie Therese O'Loughlin was in another institution that is listed.

Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin: The Taoiseach's response in repeating the mantra that he employed here before does not answer the questions put to him or the immediacy and importance of meeting Marie Therese O'Loughlin's case. This was not an overnight hostel as his choice of language would imply. Marie Therese O'Loughlin spent four and a half years of her young life in that institution. It can be described as nothing else. She was there for four and a half years because she was too young to be placed in any other institution at that time.

The reality is that if the Taoiseach is going to stick to his interpretation of the Act and its application and employed by the Minister for Education and Science, there is a bounden responsibility on him to amend the legislation to allow this institution to be included and Marie Therese's case, and the case of any other legitimately presenting, to be heard before the redress board. There is no other answer the Taoiseach can give.

When a Department, one strangely enough under the control of the Tánaiste and Minister for Health and Children, commends to the Taoiseach's party colleague, the Minister for Education and Science, to take this course of action more than nine months ago, it is not satisfactory that the Taoiseach gets up in this House this morning and continues to kick to touch. It is not acceptable and on behalf of all who seek justice in Marie Therese's case, and all others who deserve to be heard, I ask the Taoiseach once again will he directly intervene? Will he take the appropriate steps to have this case properly

[Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin.]

met and this poor woman's case heard within the redress process?

The Taoiseach: I have every sympathy for Marie Therese McLoughlin—

Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin: Her name is O'Loughlin.

The Taoiseach: Marie Therese O'Loughlin. I am duty bound to comply with the procedures. I cannot make up laws or switch laws on my feet to suit cases. I made this point several times to several Deputies and Senators to convey the message. The position is that the two Departments have extensively examined all of their records, files and archives to see whether inspections were carried out at the Regina Coeli hostel, the section of it that was a mother and baby home. There were not.

Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin: That is not true.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Ó Caoláin must resume his seat.

Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin: In the letter the Taoiseach sent me yesterday—

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy had his opportunity. The Taoiseach has been called.

Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin: The Taoiseach cannot turn the truth on its head.

An Ceann Comhairle: I ask the Deputy to resume his seat.

Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin: I ask the Taoiseach to withdraw that statement.

Mr. N. Dempsey: The Deputy should listen to the answer.

An Ceann Comhairle: I ask Deputy Ó Caoláin to allow the Taoiseach to answer.

Ms Shortall: On a point of order, the Taoiseach is misleading the House.

The Taoiseach: If the Deputy listens to what I was about to state—

Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin: I heard exactly what the Taoiseach stated.

The Taoiseach: The Deputy did not listen. He heard the first word.

Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin: I heard every word the Taoiseach stated.

An Ceann Comhairle: Allow the Taoiseach to speak without interruption.

The Taoiseach: I said there were no inspections in the home that was part of the hostel, and there were not. The records were extensively checked through an enormous amount of effort by officials in both Departments to see whether inspections were carried out in the mother and baby home that was part of the hostel. Approximately 30 Deputies have asked me questions on this matter and I asked the Departments to investigate it. There were no inspections and no amount of emotion or shouting will change that position.

Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin: It was an integral part—

The Taoiseach: I am giving the Deputy the position. Apart from that, hostels are specifically excluded from the legislation passed by this House. It is unfair and unreasonable for Deputies to go out to Marie Therese and suggest something can happen when it cannot. The point I have made, and of which I think the Deputies are aware, is that I cannot say what applications have been made or mention other institutions. Marie Therese was in another institution which is listed.

Ceisteanna — Questions.

Social Partnership.

1. **Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the work of the National Economic and Social Forum; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [38710/05]

2. **Mr. Kenny** asked the Taoiseach when he will next meet the social partners; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [39747/05]

3. **Mr. Kenny** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the recent activities of the national implementation body; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [39750/05]

4. **Mr. Kenny** asked the Taoiseach the proposed work of the National Economic and Social Council during 2006; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [39763/05]

5. **Mr. Rabbitte** asked the Taoiseach when the next quarterly meeting of the social partners under the Sustaining Progress agreement will be held; the agenda of same; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [40403/05]

6. **Mr. Rabbitte** asked the Taoiseach the progress on his contacts with the social partners regarding the possibility of a new national agreement to replace Sustaining Progress; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [40404/05]

7. **Mr. Rabbitte** asked the Taoiseach the matters discussed and conclusions reached at his meeting with representatives of the trade union movement on 4 January 2006; if further meetings are planned; if he expects negotiations on a possible new national agreement to open; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [1060/06]

8. **Mr. Sargent** asked the Taoiseach the position in regard to the social partnership process; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [1235/06]

9. **Mr. Sargent** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his 4 January 2006 talks with trade union leaders; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [1236/06]

10. **Mr. J. Higgins** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his recent contacts with the social partners. [1868/06]

11. **Mr. J. Higgins** asked the Taoiseach the studies currently being carried out by the National Economic and Social Council; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [1870/06]

12. **Mr. Sargent** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the work of the National Economic and Social Forum; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2325/06]

13. **Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on progress in the social partnership process; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [3205/06]

14. **Mr. Hogan** asked the Taoiseach the likelihood of a deal with the social partners; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4063/06]

An Ceann Comhairle: We are continuing with supplementary questions by order of the House yesterday. Deputy Rabbitte had been called when we adjourned.

The following reply was given by the Taoiseach on Tuesday, 7 February 2006.

As the House is aware, I met a delegation from the Irish Congress of Trade Unions on 4 January 2006. The meeting was positive and it was agreed that there would be further engagement at official level with a view to finalising a structure on a possible talks process over the following days. Subsequently, the Secretary General of my Department wrote to IBEC, CIF and ICTU outlining possible arrangements for the conduct of any new round of talks on a successor agreement to Sustaining Progress, in particular around the handling of issues regarding employment standards. It was proposed that a multi-stranded approach would be taken to the conduct of the negotiations and that they would commence with an early plenary meeting between the Govern-

ment and the four pillars of social partnership to launch the negotiations formally.

In respect of pay and workplace matters, it was proposed that the process of negotiation would reflect the NIB statement of 4 December which recognised the need for urgent engagement on employment standards, displacement, inspection and enforcement, the protection of vulnerable workers from overseas, and related issues raised by congress. This will therefore constitute the first strand of these negotiations. The Government recognises that it is the congress position that significant progress will be made in this first strand regarding employment standards before any substantial engagement takes place around core pay issues. It is proposed that talks with the four pillars on the other strands will commence simultaneously with the employment related strand. Furthermore, as in previous negotiations, another strand of talks around public service modernisation will also be established.

I am pleased to inform the House that, following the vote in favour of entering negotiations by the SIPTU special delegate conference on 31 January and the decision by the executive council of ICTU on 1 February to accept formally my invitation to enter talks on a new national agreement, I formally launched the negotiations at the plenary meeting of the social partners in Dublin Castle on 2 February.

The plenary meeting, which was also attended by my colleagues the Tánaiste and Minister for Health and Children, the Minister for Finance, the Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment and the Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment with responsibility for labour affairs provided an opportunity for the Government to set out its priorities for a new agreement and also to hear initial opening statements from the social partners on their priorities for a new agreement. Following on from this, a series of bilateral meetings has got under way. As with previous agreements, the proceedings are subject to normal confidentiality arrangements to protect the negotiating positions of all.

The Government recognises that there are many challenges to be faced in any talks on a new agreement, not least in determining how the area of employment standards should be protected. We believe, however, that the concerns of the social partners on this topic, as on other issues, can best be addressed through a new partnership framework. Social partnership has a proven track record of problem solving, resulting in the radical transformation of our economic and social fortunes since 1987. We believe that with goodwill and determination on all sides, we can negotiate a mutually satisfactory outcome which will deliver further economic and social progress, building on the strong foundations we have already put in place.

The national implementation body, which includes employer and union representatives,

[An Ceann Comhairle.]

operates under the chairmanship of my Department. Its purpose is to oversee delivery of the industrial peace and stability provisions of Sustaining Progress. The body met on a number of occasions over recent months to assist in the resolution of industrial relations disputes in both the public and private sectors. In particular, it played a key role in resolving the difficult disputes at An Post and Irish Ferries towards the end of last year.

Meetings of the body also provide opportunities for informal discussion of some of the broader issues relating to the social partnership process and the industrial relations climate generally. The body will continue to meet as necessary to this end.

In December last, the National Economic and Social Council published its three yearly strategic overview of Irish economic and social policy entitled NESC Strategy 2006: People, Productivity and Purpose. The strategy report, as its predecessors did, provides a guiding vision for the coming years for economic and social development in the country and, more immediately, the framework within which the talks will take place.

In the coming months, other studies will include completion of the study on migration policy, which is well advanced. In 2006, NESC will also complete a report on the Lisbon strategy, focusing on the open method of co-ordination. Further studies nearing completion include a study on child poverty and child income supports that will examine the possibility of merging child benefit allowance and family income supplement.

During 2006, the council will consider how best to address other items in its current work programme, including taxation policy and competition and regulation in networked sectors. It will also work on its first periodic social report and a significant NESC contribution to a knowledge society foresight exercise.

The reconstituted NESF held its inaugural meeting on 26 May 2004 in the Royal Hospital Kilmainham at which the work programme for the coming term up to 2006 was discussed, as well as the appropriate structures and working arrangements in the context of the work programme. Early childhood care and education, care for older people and creating a more inclusive labour market were subsequently selected as priority topics. The report on early childhood care and education was published in September last and the reports on care for older people and creating a more inclusive labour market were published recently and laid before the Houses of the Oireachtas.

Cultural citizenship and the delivery of public services have been identified for inclusion in the second phase of the work programme. Preliminary work has been undertaken on both these topics and projects in these areas will commence shortly.

The NESF held the second national anti-poverty strategy social inclusion forum in the Royal Hospital Kilmainham on 26 January 2005. The social inclusion forum gives those who are not directly involved in the social partnership process an opportunity to input their views and experiences in implementing the national anti-poverty strategy. A report of these proceedings was published in April 2005.

The NESF also hosted, in conjunction with UCD, a conference on evidence-based policy making in February 2005. The conference examined the supply and gathering of evidence and applying this in the policy making process and the design of practical policy solutions. The ongoing monitoring and evaluation of policy outcomes was an important focus of the conference.

Mr. Rabbitte: We have a major block of questions on social partnership and related matters. Probably the most topical question this morning is confirmation by the Taoiseach that he will sell off the Great Southern Hotels with some of them to continue in business as hotels. Even where that happens, given commentary in this morning's newspapers, we can anticipate the displacement of some of the remaining staff.

What is the Taoiseach's response to the protection of labour standards and displacement issue put at the top of the agenda by the social partners in the discussions which are underway? Is it his intention that his Government will move to deal with that concern highlighted by the trade union movement in the wake of Irish Ferries, Gama Construction, yesterday's report from the two economists establishing that displacement is going on generally in the economy and the fears expressed by the unions?

Will the Taoiseach respond to some of the measures set out in the Labour Party document? He sought a copy of the document on the date we published it. I refer, for example, to decisions on the labour inspectorate. Is it the intention to take on board the recommendation by my colleague, Deputy Howlin, that rather than establish a separate, new body, the labour inspectorate would fall under the Health and Safety Authority? I do not mean that — nor did Deputy Howlin — as a cover to maintain the low number of inspectors invigilating standards in Irish industry because clearly the number of inspectors must be increased. Will the Taoiseach respond to the suggestion in respect of the Health and Safety Authority?

The Taoiseach: On the issue of the protection of employment standards, the Irish Congress of Trade Unions made it clear since last summer that in the next talks, it wanted it to be the major issue. At meetings with it in September and in writing to it in October, I gave a commitment that we would accept that. In a rapidly changing labour market, the issue brings with it new challenges in the area of maintaining and developing

employment standards. The Government's commitment to meeting these challenges is equally clear. I have repeatedly made explicit the Government's intention to engage fully and effectively in the process of devising policies and measures which would protect employment standards and prevent a so-called race to the bottom. I have made this commitment in letters to the social partners and I stated it in my speech to them last July and again at public meetings in September and October and at the plenary last week.

We are committed to bringing about greater productivity and enhanced competitiveness based on innovation in the workplace through new work practices, new skills, new technologies and new products and services. We have stated clearly that it is neither acceptable nor sustainable to attempt to build a competitive advantage based on poor wages, on casualisation of labour, on low health and safety standards or other such practices. I have been very clear in my belief that the most effective way of engaging with these matters is through the partnership framework.

Last October I asked officials across Departments to bring together the various aspects of legislation in this regard so we would not have to wait for the talks process. They have carried out a comprehensive examination. We are looking at the ICTU-SIPTU document and at the Deputy's document, which I have read fully, to see how we can bring these issues forward. I do not have a fixed view on how this should be done. I have not thought about whether it should be done by the Health and Safety Authority or a new agency or whether legislation is needed. I am not saying I am against any particular proposal but I have been looking at how we can comprehensively deal with the issues highlighted.

I have engaged with the employers' side as well so that whatever we do is realistic. As the Deputy knows, some people on the employers' side will say any move on this will close off flexibility. We were aware of the danger in the autumn of people starting an unnecessary campaign on some of these issues but we have moved to a more realistic assessment. In a changed labour market and because of the voluntaristic nature of our industrial relations, we cannot leave things as they are. I think I have convinced both sides that is the right thing to do.

We are now into the detail. All the issues the Deputy mentioned and many more have been put on the table by the trade union movement. We will now systematically go through them. As the Deputy knows, the trade unions have asked that this be the first strand of talks, so we will deal with this before we address any pay issues. This is the priority of the talks. The other pillars will go ahead with their work but this will be the key issue in the employer-union pillar before we turn to pay issues.

Mr. Sargent: I noticed at the commencement of the talks, the Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment, Deputy Martin, made a statement which clearly indicated that competitiveness would be the big issue. Does the Government have a position on the issue of competitiveness from an international energy point view? That will be a key issue at the talks if we are dealing with competitiveness.

Is the Taoiseach aware of reports this morning from Sweden that it proposes to be the world's first oil free economy? It has a population of 9 million. The Swedish energy minister stated that a Sweden free of fossil fuels would give it enormous advantages not least by reducing impact from fluctuation in oil prices. Given that Ireland is the most oil dependent country in the EU, how does the Taoiseach propose to address the slide in competitiveness which is inevitable when one engages in the partnership talks? Can he offer anything to the other social partners?

My colleague, Deputy Boyle, asked the Taoiseach whether environmental and energy NGOs would be part of the partnership process. I also mentioned it to him in February 2005. The Taoiseach said he did not have any problem. Has there been any development on that? Does he see it is now more urgent than ever?

The Taoiseach: This is not the most uncompetitive country in the world. In many of the areas——

Mr. Sargent: I said we are the most oil dependent country in the EU.

The Taoiseach: Sorry. I thought the Deputy was speaking generally. Obviously, the issue of energy will come up as part of competitiveness because every country in the world, particularly in Europe, is looking at their dependency, especially on Russia. Those assessments are going on here. The Minister for Communications, Marine and Natural Resources, Deputy Noel Dempsey, has been involved in assessments from the Irish point of view. The Department of Finance has been involved in those assessments.

To the best of my knowledge, some of the non-governmental organisation groups, including Friends of the Earth, have applied for membership. However, as the Deputy is aware, as the environmental NGO views are conveyed by several different organisations, their work is fed into the process. Nevertheless, the Deputy is correct in that issues pertaining to sustaining and protecting our position in the future are related to issues regarding competitiveness and energy. As I have noted previously, we are pressing on with initiatives in wind energy and other matters. Sweden's forestry is a great natural resource. We have good natural resources as far as gas reserves and some other areas are concerned. It would also help us in the future if we could make use of some of

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the assets we possess, having gone through the proper processes.

Mr. Sargent: Not for long.

Mr. J. Higgins: Does the Taoiseach accept that the Government has no credibility in seeking another so-called partnership agreement, the main purpose of which is to hold workers' wage increases to a minimum? Yesterday, the Department of Finance's report on tax breaks showed that the Government has been shovelling billions of euro in tax savings to speculators, developers and builders who have squeezed the economic lifeblood out of young working people trying to purchase a home through the ransom demanded by these very beneficiaries of the Government's tax schemes. This has occurred to the extent that yesterday's "Pat Kenny Show" stated the Government has created 12 billionaire speculators.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy should ask a question.

Mr. J. Higgins: Does the Taoiseach accept that, in reality, social partnership is now another flag of convenience to curb workers' wage demands? In the context of the partnership talks, while private capitalists are allowed by the Government's policies to gorge themselves obscenely with speculative profits and tax breaks as crucial public services such as health and education go short, does the Taoiseach believe that the 18 so-called investors, who set up a speculator's company in the Caribbean to scam €309,000 per year legally from the tax fund in this State deserve to be called partners, or would the term "parasites" come more readily to mind? The Taoiseach has facilitated them. I read in yesterday's *Irish Examiner* that after——

An Ceann Comhairle: It is not appropriate to quote and I ask the Deputy to confine himself to questions.

Mr. J. Higgins: I am asking a question. While I will not quote, I read in the *Irish Examiner* that after the Taoiseach's recent visit to Singapore, they named a——

An Ceann Comhairle: It is not even appropriate for the Deputy to state what he read in the *Irish Examiner*. He should simply ask a question.

Mr. J. Higgins: Very well.

Ms McManus: This is ridiculous.

An Ceann Comhairle: The purpose of Question Time is to elicit information from the Taoiseach, not to impart information to the House.

Mr. M. Higgins: In Singapore, this would be a criminal speech.

Ms McManus: This is simply censorship.

Mr. J. Higgins: Yes. However, they named a new hybrid orchid in the Taoiseach's honour. They called it "Mokara Bertie Ahern".

Mr. Rabbitte: How can the Ceann Comhairle rule this out?

Mr. J. Higgins: It must have been sponsored by developers and speculators, as the Taoiseach has certainly been a true cara to them.

Ms McManus: A delicate flower.

Mr. J. Higgins: An extremely good cara to the speculators. How can workers take this seriously, against the background of the Government giving €5 billion in tax breaks to speculators and the super-wealthy? At the same time, the Government is now jeopardising 800 workers' jobs in the Great Southern Hotel Group as it prepares to hand the group over to the asset strippers through privatisation. On many occasions over the past eight years, I have debated this issue with the Taoiseach, who has looked upon me as though I was some kind of rare orchid. However, in today's *Irish Independent*, the economist David McWilliams, who is no revolutionary socialist, makes exactly the same point, namely that the partnership process is, in reality——

An Ceann Comhairle: I ask the Deputy to submit a question to the Taoiseach.

Mr. J. Higgins: ——a fraud. How does the Taoiseach reconcile the fact that for example, there is no inclusion of the massive increase in house prices in the reckoning of inflation in these talks, when it is now crucifying tens of thousands of young PAYE workers? How can we take any of this process seriously?

The Taoiseach: The Deputy will appreciate that I do not agree with him. In reply to the Deputy's last question on pay levels, the reason our competitiveness is out of line is because our pay levels, when set against our main competitors, are much higher across practically all professions and strands. The Deputy referred to hard-pressed workers. In most of these sectors they would be thankful because the social partnership process, along with the system which allows people to negotiate in this way, has given them much higher increases than any other system. People are engaged in this process across all sectors.

As for our own budgetary policies, I am sure the Deputy also read in the newspapers that the ESRI has shown that our last budget was the most progressive ever seen in this country. It strongly favoured low income groups. The ESRI

found that gains for the poorest 20% of the population were more than 6% while those for the top income groups only came to 2%. When it reviewed the budgetary impact from 2002 onwards, it found a similar pattern. Hence, the overall net impact over the past five years has been to boost incomes in the lowest income groups by between 8% and 17% while incomes in the higher groups have seen very small income gains.

Mr. Rabbitte: We will be obliged to have a whip around for the highly paid.

The Taoiseach: I am simply giving the facts provided by the ESRI, which would never give anything other than the complete truth in this respect. As I stated yesterday, the Government has examined the existing incentives for people to generate wealth and the Minister for Finance has named those which he believes should be eliminated. As we had that debate yesterday, there is no need to go back over such issues again.

Moreover, the developments in respect of affordable housing that have taken place are quite interesting. The Deputy is aware that currently in many cases, in some sectors, there is almost over-capacity in the affordable housing market, where people are not switching or—

Mr. J. Higgins: That is incredible. I do not believe my ears.

The Taoiseach: —where they are not selling.

Ms Burton: Where?

An Ceann Comhairle: The Taoiseach, without interruption, please.

Ms Lynch: It is a simple question. Where?

The Taoiseach: In several parts of the greater Dublin area, as well as in Cork.

Ms Lynch: No.

Mr. J. Higgins: This is unreal.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Taoiseach, without interruption.

The Taoiseach: There has been a slow take-up in affordable housing. Thankfully however, the affordable housing initiative, which has taken place under the aegis of social partnership, has facilitated far more co-ordinated activity in these areas. Hence, I do not accept the Deputy's point.

Mr. J. Higgins: More houses were built in the bleak 1980s than are being built now.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Taoiseach, without interruption.

The Taoiseach: The Deputy has referred to social housing. I referred to affordable housing, which has just been raised.

Ms Lynch: The Taoiseach has been misled by his brother, the Minister of State at the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government, Deputy Noel Ahern.

The Taoiseach: In the bleak 1980s, one had to provide social housing. However, as the Deputy can recall, there was no great difficulty in so doing, because so many people emigrated.

Mr. J. Higgins: There are 50,000 families on the housing list. Is the Taoiseach aware of this?

The Taoiseach: However, 80,000 families take up houses every year.

Mr. Rabbitte: I do not blame the Taoiseach for being misled by his brother. He has misled us too.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Taoiseach without interruption, please.

The Taoiseach: A total of 80,000 families a year have taken up houses. We have built more houses in the past five years than were built in the previous 30 years.

Ms Burton: However, 20,000 of those families are getting—

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Burton should note that it is Deputy Joe Higgins's question. I ask her to allow him to hear the answer.

Ms Burton: A total of 20,000 of those families are getting a second or third home.

The Taoiseach: Through affordable housing, social housing and the voluntary housing sector, the issues discussed in social partnership have improved the situation.

Ms McManus: It certainly helped the landlords.

The Taoiseach: I have provided comprehensive figures in this respect.

Mr. Stagg: We got two in County Kildare from the entire package. Despite all of the building in County Kildare, we only got two.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Stagg should allow the Taoiseach to speak.

The Taoiseach: Half of Dublin is moving to County Kildare because the houses are—

Mr. Stagg: They are not moving into social housing or affordable housing.

The Taoiseach: They are moving into affordable housing.

Mr. Stagg: Not at all. We only got two. I received a report yesterday.

The Taoiseach: The county has extremely good affordable housing.

Ms Lynch: It should be good as it took five years to build.

Ms McManus: Let them eat cake.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Taoiseach, without interruption, please.

The Taoiseach: There is some extremely good affordable housing in Kildare, which is much cheaper than most places, to that county's credit.

Mr. Rabbitte: The Indian visit was not good for the Taoiseach. He is out of touch with what is going on.

An Ceann Comhairle: I ask Deputy Rabbitte to allow the Taoiseach to answer Deputy Joe Higgins's question.

Mr. C. Lenihan: The Opposition wants to ruin the economy.

The Taoiseach: The Deputies do not want to accept we are building 80,000 houses and that through Part V of the Planning and Development Act 2000 and the affordable housing initiative, more than 11,000 sites have been generated.

Mr. Stagg: That is because investors are vying for tax breaks.

The Taoiseach: They do not want to say this is having a significant impact and they do not want to give credit to the affordable housing initiative, which is very unreasonable. They want to take issue with the ESRI and they do not want to recognise that this year's budget was the most progressive in the history of the State.

However, I agree with Deputy Joe Higgins on one point, which is that the high rate of salary paid to ordinary workers is a competitiveness issue. I hope he is not against that and that he does not want to return to the old days of—

Mr. J. Higgins: The fumes from that orchid must have gone to the Taoiseach's head because he is delirious, as he said yesterday about the Opposition. He is wandering in a—

Mr. C. Lenihan: The Deputy is a rare orchid.

Mr. Kenny: I heard a report about a flower called after the Taoiseach. Shelley wrote: "Full many a flower that is born to blush unseen, and waste its sweetness on the desert air".

Mr. J. Higgins: Gray wrote that, not Shelley.

Mr. C. Lenihan: Be careful of the cankerous rose.

Mr. Kenny: I am not sure in a political sense if the Taoiseach epitomises the orchid. When the people get an opportunity on the next occasion they might perform a painful process called an orchidectomy. Deputy Devins can explain what that means.

The role of the national implementation body was to determine the number of breaches of Sustaining Progress. Now that the agreement is drawing to an end, how many breaches took place? What arrangements will be in place in the event of another agreement being reached to ensure breaches will not recur?

Is the Taoiseach concerned by the economic report referred to by IBEC recently, which highlighted that because of America's budgetary situation and balance of payments deficit, there may well be a triggered devaluation of the dollar which would have serious consequences for exporting countries such as Ireland and for the construction industry, in particular, which is critical to our economy? IBEC pointed out, for instance, that a reduction of one third in the price of houses would drive down volume by 40% and growth by 1% and would drive unemployment up to 10%. While the Taoiseach would not have control over such a catastrophe, is he concerned the implications of such an economic report for Ireland in sustaining the strength of the economy?

The Taoiseach: On the first issue, in fairness to the social partners, while the national implementation body held numerous meetings during the round, there were not that many breaches. By and large, people stuck to the terms of the agreement and there was good compliance with it. However, my Department is undertaking an examination of the effects of progress on a number of areas, which will be ready shortly. While there were difficulties with the pay terms, I would not play them up. It worked well and people tried hard, including organised workers.

There is concern about the second issue. As a small and open economy, we have learned that competitiveness and flexibility are key to economic development, and that is a simple reality which must guide us in the talks, not least when it comes to pay. We must price and position ourselves in a very challenging market. We can best protect incomes by setting wage growth at a sensible and affordable level and it is important that we do not undermine the job creation capability of the economy or our international attractiveness as a place in which to work and invest. This is the context in which a successor to the current national agreement must be considered.

Deputy Sargent referred to energy policy while Deputy Kenny referred to the US deficit. These are the two concerns on the horizon. Energy is a concern for the reasons I stated earlier. The issue

has moved to a new plateau because of the strength of Russian control and the Iranians and a number of other oil producing countries on the other side. This is a concern. We saw what happened at the turn of the year following the difficulties with the Ukraine and the potential knock-on effect on European oil supplies. This could have a significant effect on the economy and it means everybody will examine alternatives. Deputy Sargent mentioned the Swedes but we must examine our own sustainable energy policy and natural resources, including gas supplies.

I find it increasingly difficult to understand how the US, with a budget deficit of more than 6%, is not forced into dealing with it. In some ways, thankfully, the US is not. If the Americans decide to correct the deficit in a major way, it would have a worldwide impact. However, they seem to think the vibrancy of their economy makes such a deficit sustainable or at least only needs a marginal correction. This is the fourth or fifth year international economists have stated this will be the year the Americans correct it. If they were to make a hard cut a year, it would have an effect. I hope, if they tackle the deficit, it will be done on a phased basis. I do not see it having a major impact in the short term because they are not tackling the problem but if they change policy, inevitably it will have an effect on us as an exporting country and as a country with a significant connection with the US through the 600 American companies located here and the significant number of Irish companies based there.

Mr. M. Higgins: I have three questions to which a simple “yes” or “no” reply will do for one or two of them. Did the social partners discuss the Government’s proposals for the sale of State assets at recent meetings? Have they been discussed at the new resumed meetings? I refer to property owned by CIE and the Great Southern Hotel Group. For example, there are implications for public policy where CIE in Galway has been instructed to hire consultants to examine the disposal value of a 15-acre site owned by the company, despite the Government’s commitment to the North-South rail line, commuter rail lines, intercity rail lines and so forth. Combined with the sell-off of the Great Southern Hotels——

An Ceann Comhairle: A question, please.

Mr. M. Higgins: The question relates to State assets. At the talks, does the Government favour amending the Competition Act 2002 to restore the right of atypical workers to be represented in collective agreements by their trade union? I refer to the ruling against SIPTU which resulted in the union having to sign an undertaking that it would not represent in collective bargaining actors, musicians, freelance journalists and all others outside the PAYE sector. Will that issue be resolved at the beginning of the social partner-

ship talks? It is a breach of the Trade Union Acts of 1900, 1901 and 1990 and the 1989 International Labour Organisation directive.

Have the social partners agreed, which would be surprising, that projected figures on social housing included in the current agreement could be substituted by alleged figures for affordable housing in the new agreement? For example, the Taoiseach referred to 80,000 families but that number refers to housing completions. These houses may be owned by people who own multiples of houses and are, therefore, not families. Does he agree it is a disgrace that the social housing outturn is less than one third of what it was in 1973 and that the 60,000 on the social housing list are subject to different criteria of qualification from those who qualify for affordable housing? Is it the case that the social partners disputed these figures with him and the ESRI has pointed to the distinction between social and affordable housing?

The Taoiseach: On the sale of assets, the Government has a position on this aspect and the Irish Congress of Trade Unions put forward a position paper on the sale of assets which, I have no doubt, will be discussed during the social partnership talks.

On atypical workers, I am aware of that initiative. The issue has not yet come up in the talks but it will come up. I am aware of the position for actors, musicians, sculptors and all atypical workers. The issue arose, in particular, in regard to the ILO issue.

Mr. M. Higgins: It was an ideological-driven decision by the Competition Authority.

The Taoiseach: I am not aware of the position regarding the CIE lands at the back of the Great Southern Hotel in Eyre Square. I understand that CIE proposes to develop further the station and its own site. If it is selling it off, I presume it will just sell the parts it does not want, but I am not aware it is selling the land.

Mr. M. Higgins: Will the Taoiseach confirm that there is no instruction to CIE to dispose of its property?

The Taoiseach: To the best of my knowledge, there is not, but I will ask about the matter. I heard the Chairman of CIE, Mr. John Lynch, say that it wants to extend the station in Galway, which I favour.

On social housing, there is a clear line between what is private housing, the affordable housing initiative and social housing. There is no transfer option in this regard. Under the social partnership process and Sustaining Progress, we are achieving as much affordable housing as possible under Part 5. We are making available as many sites as possible under the affordable housing

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initiative. In the latter part of last year, the new affordable housing initiative advertised for more and more developers to turn over part of their lands for affordable housing. I understand from those involved in the affordable housing initiative that there is a good take-up of interest in that. A significant number of developers are interested in making their lands available for affordable housing in conjunction with the affordable housing initiative, which is good.

Mr. M. Higgins: What are the social housing figures?

The Taoiseach: Social housing is a separate issue. It is a matter for the Minister of State with responsibility for housing, but I am not mixing up the two figures.

Mr. M. Higgins: I suggest that the Government is building only one third of what was built in the 1970s.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Taoiseach without interruption, please.

The Taoiseach: In the 1970s and early 1980s, when we were building far more social housing, hardly any houses were built in the private sector. The equivalent figure was approximately 20,000.

Mr. M. Higgins: People were driven into the private sector.

(Interruptions).

An Ceann Comhairle: I call Deputy Ó Caoláin.

Mr. Rabbitte: The social housing initiative is now being put into the private rented sector. If people receive rent supplement, they cannot work.

An Ceann Comhairle: Sorry Deputy Rabbitte, I have called Deputy Ó Caoláin.

Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin: Does the Taoiseach accept that a fundamental issue in the partnership talks must be the threat to the pay and conditions of workers in Ireland posed by the EU services directive? Does he accept that the services directive represents a threat to the long-established rights of workers throughout the length and breadth of the European Union? If implemented in its current form, what we will see is private companies undercutting public service providers by employing people on the salary levels and under the conditions of their countries of origin. This is a very serious matter. Has this issue been addressed in the partnership talks? Did the Taoiseach raise the matter, as the Government signalled its intent in the partnership talks, in regard to the EU services directive? What exactly

is the Taoiseach's stand on the matter? Will he oppose it as it is currently presented?

The Taoiseach: The key issue for Ireland in regard to the draft services directive is to ensure that we strike the right balance between removing obstacles to the realisation of a single European market in services, which we favour, while upholding the integrity of national traditions in the area of social partnership, industrial relations and dispute resolution practice, not least ensuring that established times and standards are properly protected. The Deputy will be aware that the current directive is under discussion. A huge number of amendments have been tabled. The Commission is committed to bringing forward a new document on the country of origin issue. Whatever happens, ultimately, it will be a very different document from the one we saw at the beginning. Our approach will be guided by the fact that as a small open economy, the development of a single open European market in services will be very much in our national interest in terms of employment prospects, trade opportunities, customer choice, the growing dependence of our future prosperity on high value international trade in services and goods. None of these issues should be underestimated.

It is clear that an enormous amount of work remains to be done on the draft directive before it is close to being presented for agreement to the Council of Ministers. While the Commission will bring forward these new proposals, it will probably be another few months before it will do so. It is expected to address the many concerns we raised, particularly the country of origin principle. There is a long way to go in this regard.

The answer to the Deputy's question is that we do not support the draft directive as it was put forward. We participated actively in the discussions to change it, as did our MEPs. Deputy Ryan, MEP, has been very active in this area. He has worked with trade union and employer interests, and will continue to do so. He will also continue to work with the social partners.

Ms B. Moynihan-Cronin: Will the Taoiseach agree that because of a direct decision of the Government a number of jobs will be lost due to the sale of the Great Southern Hotel Group, including up to 400 in my constituency of south Kerry, in Parknasilla and Killarney? The Taoiseach knows many of these people personally and, given the service they have provided over the years to this country and to visitors to the country, they do not deserve this treatment. The Taoiseach said this morning that some of these properties will not be retained as hotels. Will he agree that the jobs that will be retained will be replaced by a non-unionised workforce who will be paid slave labour wages, which is what is happening in the service industry?

Will he also agree that the issue of pay and conditions in the service industry in general needs to be part of the partnership talks, and particularly the lack of labour inspectorates? There are no labour inspectorates to examine the pay and conditions in certain sectors of the service industry. Will the Taoiseach agree that this outrageous decision by the Government to sell the Great Southern Hotel Group could have the effect of derailing the partnership talks?

The Taoiseach: I correct the Deputy in that the decision was taken by the board of the Great Southern Hotel Group.

Ms B. Moynihan-Cronin: Can nothing be done other than sell them off?

The Taoiseach: The board reported to the board of the Dublin Airport Authority, which fully supports and endorses the decision. The Deputy is correct that the staff in these hotels are excellent. I hope the interests of staff are protected in the negotiations and the sale. There are top quality staff in these hotels who are forever moving to greater things. The problem in the Deputy's constituency is trying to keep the good staff, whom I know so well, because they all move on to other groups. To their credit, they move to jobs in hotels in this and other cities with far better pay and conditions. Like the Deputy, I am always proud and satisfied with the service they provide.

Ms B. Moynihan-Cronin: They want to stay in Kerry.

The Taoiseach: Then I will rephrase it. Many of them move to better paid jobs in hotels in the private sector in other parts of Deputy Moynihan-Cronin's constituency.

Ms B. Moynihan-Cronin: Just say anything.

The Taoiseach: That has been happening all the time. The Ceann Comhairle knows that.

Mr. Rabbitte: People have been there for 35 years whom the Taoiseach and I know.

The Taoiseach: There are.

Ms B. Moynihan-Cronin: Is the Taoiseach saying he has no say in the matter? He will have a say.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Taoiseach should be allowed to speak without interruption. We must move on to the next business.

The Taoiseach: I am telling the Deputy that I have an interest in seeing——

Ms B. Moynihan-Cronin: No, that is not the question.

The Taoiseach: If the Deputy answers her own question there is no point in me trying to answer it.

Ms B. Moynihan-Cronin: That is not the question.

Mr. Stagg: That is not the question.

Mr. J. Higgins: Flagship is very important——

An Ceann Comhairle: The Taoiseach should be allowed to speak without interruption.

The Taoiseach: I hope that the key hotels in the group, that we both know, will do much better than is the case at present. We are already aware that they are looking at forming strategic alliances and partnerships to try to develop the sites. They can do much better. Even at the height of the season last year it was disappointing to see that they were only on 40% occupancy. We all know that is not sustainable. The best staff will not stay in that situation. That has increasingly been the case in recent years and they have had to recruit the key staff elsewhere. The people who have served me and others have been Austrians and Germans because the hotels were not able to retain people who moved elsewhere. That has been the position.

I do not know what will happen to some of the hotels that have been losing money endlessly and that have not been able to cut it. Perhaps others will come in and make them work, but the key ones can have a very good future. The Government will do anything it can to help in that. The Minister will meet the representatives next week.

Ms Lynch: So the Taoiseach has decided to sell them.

Mr. Sargent: Essentially the partnership talks will deal with major issues of national and international importance. Is the Taoiseach taking account of how the sale of the Great Southern Hotels could perhaps dominate proceedings? Does he believe the approach should be much more understanding of the concerns of those employed in the hotels in that, prior to the matter being raised at the partnership talks, there should be discussions on whether rationalisation will be involved as well as on any other changes that might be envisaged? Otherwise the current situation has the potential to derail the process. I urge the Taoiseach to take this seriously into account so that the partnership talks will not be derailed for want of some diplomacy, of which he claims to have some knowledge.

Mr. Rabbitte: Does the Taoiseach intend to provide for the involvement of the Houses of the Oireachtas in the social partnership process? I do not know how many pillars we have now, but it is extraordinary that everybody is involved in these discussions and negotiations except those chosen by the electorate to make decisions in this Chamber about their future. No provision has been made for their inclusion or for debate of the terms of the agreement and the framework that should apply. I read in the newspapers that there might be an agreement—

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Rabbitte should make just a brief comment. We are running out of time.

Mr. Rabbitte: —for ten years. The Taoiseach said he would not continue in office for ten years but I would not rule it out. I find it difficult to understand that decisions can be made for ten years and the Members of this House have no involvement or participation in the shape, substance or outcome of these discussions.

The Taoiseach: In the period of the previous programme, 40 different documents, including quarterly and sectoral documents, were laid before this House. I, and most other Ministers, answer questions daily on social partnership.

Mr. Allen: Yes, but do we get any answers?

The Taoiseach: The National Economic and Social Forum comprises public representatives who are the overseers of the various documents that come about through social partnership. It is not correct to say that there is no direct involvement by this House in the social partnership process. It is right that there should be. On the pay end, the Government acts as employer, the trade unions act as negotiators and IBEC and the other employer interests contribute on the issue. Full reports come to the House and to committees of this House on the other issues and that should continue to be the case.

In reply to Deputy Sargent's question, the Government has received the decision of the board of the Great Southern Hotel Group and the view of the Dublin Airport Authority. The Minister will act in any way that can be helpful on these issues, but they have made their decisions and the Government accepts them. Now we must see how the decisions can be implemented to take account of staff interests and to ensure the group is kept as a going concern and as many as possible if not all of the jobs are protected into the future.

The ten-year programme is a ten-year strategy. Some elements of it might only last a year but for others it might be three years. The special initiatives of Sustaining Progress and of previous agreements such as Partnership 2000 and others show

that one needs a longer period to achieve consistency of policy to try to resolve issues such as those currently arising relating to elder care and affordable housing. One needs a longer period than just three years to implement these policies. It is better that they form part of a ten-year strategy but obviously the process would be negotiated every three years. That makes sense and it would bring greater coherence into policy over the next ten years.

Requests to move Adjournment of Dáil under Standing Order 31.

An Ceann Comhairle: Before coming to the Order of Business I propose to deal with a number of notices under Standing Order 31.

Ms B. Moynihan-Cronin: I seek the adjournment of the Dáil under Standing Order 31 to debate the following urgent matter: the need for the Government to resist the request from the board of the Great Southern Hotel Group to sell the hotel group, including the Killarney Great Southern and Parknasilla, given the potential loss of jobs arising from the sale and the threat this will pose for tourism in Kerry. Given the importance of this issue, I hope the Ceann Comhairle will agree to this request.

Mr. Naughten: I seek the adjournment of the Dáil under Standing Order 31 to debate the following urgent matter: in light of the disclosure last night on "Prime Time" that the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government and the Government ignored the advice given to him by Teagasc on the implementation of the nitrates directive, the need for the Minister to clarify his role in this debacle, to publish the advice presented by Teagasc and to have the complete regulation withdrawn pending compliance with Teagasc scientific advice.

Dr. Cowley: I seek the adjournment of the Dáil under Standing Order 31 to debate the following urgent matter: why Mayo patients must still wait for up to eight years for urgent urology hospital services in Galway and why an 80-year old man who, clinically, has cancer of the prostate has already been waiting for 16 months to see the consultant urologist in Galway for urgent treatment; why this situation must continue when the solution is a urology consultant unit at Mayo General Hospital; and why it should be tolerated that people waiting for urgent urology treatment will more than likely have a shorter lifespan due to the negligence of Government in dealing with our health services. It is a disgrace.

Mr. Healy: I seek the adjournment of the Dáil under Standing Order 31 to debate the following urgent matter: the disturbing findings of the National Economic and Social Forum, including

that Ireland has one of the highest levels of inequality among OECD countries; 14% of households in poverty are headed by a person with a job; we are ranked 51 out of 56 countries in terms of equality of opportunity for women; 13% of Irish young people leave school early; 23% of the working population lack functional literacy skills; and we have significant unemployment blackspots like Carrick-on-Suir with 25% unemployment. Arising from this I call on the Government to prioritise spending on services like health, education, housing, social welfare and job creation by using the large budget surplus that stood at more than €6.3 billion in 2005 and is projected at €4.4 billion in 2006 for these services.

Mr. M. Higgins: In accordance with the terms of Standing Order 31, I wish to give notice of my intention to raise the following matter of public interest requiring urgent attention, *12 o'clock* the need for the Government to clarify its policy position on the future of the Great Southern Hotel Group in view of the fears that have been created among the staff, the tourism industry and the public as to what the Government has decided, its time scale and the implications of the sale of this State asset.

An Ceann Comhairle: Having considered the matters raised, they are not in order under Standing Order 31.

Order of Business.

The Taoiseach: It is proposed to take No. 3, the Finance Bill 2006 — Second Stage, resumed. It is proposed, notwithstanding anything in Standing Orders, that the Dáil shall sit later than 8.30 p.m. tonight, business shall be interrupted on the conclusion of Private Members' business, which shall be No. 41, motion re Irish farming sector, resumed, which shall be taken after 90 minutes at 7 p.m. or at the conclusion of No. 3, whichever is the later, and the proceedings of the resumed Second Stage of No. 3 shall, if not previously concluded, be brought to a conclusion at 7 p.m.

An Ceann Comhairle: There are two proposals to be put to the House. Is the proposal for the late sitting agreed? Agreed. Is the proposal for dealing with No. 3, conclusion of Second Stage of the Finance Bill 2006, agreed?

Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin: It is not agreed.

Ms Burton: The Minister for Finance, in last night's debate, declared that the Government has made a decision not to undertake a cost benefit analysis on tax breaks for psychiatric hospitals, institutions and mental care centres. This is in stark contrast to what the Taoiseach just stated.

There is no opportunity to debate this in the course of the Finance Bill.

An Ceann Comhairle: The proposal relates only to the taking of the Finance Bill. The Deputy is opposed to the taking of the Finance Bill.

Ms Burton: We are objecting to it being guillotined because we have no opportunity to discuss this really important issue of tax breaks for investment in Irish psychiatric health care.

Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin: I object to the guillotine applying to Second Stage of the Finance Bill this evening. For the reason Deputy Burton highlighted, and others allied to it, the Government is only too delighted to see a guillotine apply, with less opportunity provided to Members to draw attention to and tease out the salient items in the Finance Bill and those that are not so. This is against the backdrop of the publication on Monday of the review of tax reliefs which saw €37 million having been given to private hospitals since 2001. We are hearing now of — the Bill intends to accommodate this — an extension of these reliefs to those who will provide private mental health care. Given the completely underfunded and under-resourced mental health care system and network throughout the State, it is bizarre that the Government will provide public moneys to support private care, which will allow a two-tier system of mental health provision.

An Ceann Comhairle: We cannot debate the Finance Bill now, but only the reason you are opposing it.

Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin: I will not do so. We will see a two-tier system of mental health provision here, where on the one hand those who can buy access will get the best treatments and speediest access possible while everybody else will have to languish and wait, just as we must do in the case of the public health system through the network of hospital sites. It is no wonder the Taoiseach wants to see a guillotine on this and I absolutely oppose it. The Finance Bill needs to be properly addressed and all Members in this House should be accommodated with the opportunity to participate in Second and Subsequent Stages.

The Taoiseach: I totally agree with the Deputy that the Bill should be teased out, and that is the purpose of Committee Stage.

Ms Burton: On a point of order, many of the amendments will not be reached on Committee Stage.

Question put: "That the proposal for dealing with No. 3 be agreed."

The Dáil divided: Tá, 69; Níl, 58.

Tá

Ahern, Bertie.
 Ahern, Dermot.
 Ahern, Michael.
 Andrews, Barry.
 Blaney, Niall.
 Brady, Johnny.
 Brady, Martin.
 Brennan, Seamus.
 Callanan, Joe.
 Carey, Pat.
 Carty, John.
 Cassidy, Donie.
 Coughlan, Mary.
 Cowen, Brian.
 Cregan, John.
 Cullen, Martin.
 Curran, John.
 Davern, Noel.
 de Valera, Síle.
 Dempsey, Noel.
 Dennehy, John.
 Devins, Jimmy.
 Ellis, John.
 Finneran, Michael.
 Fitzpatrick, Dermot.
 Fleming, Seán.
 Fox, Mildred.
 Gallagher, Pat The Cope.
 Glennon, Jim.
 Hanafin, Mary.
 Haughey, Seán.
 Jacob, Joe.
 Keaveney, Cecilia.
 Kelleher, Billy.
 Kelly, Peter.

Killeen, Tony.
 Kirk, Seamus.
 Kitt, Tom.
 Lenihan, Brian.
 Lenihan, Conor.
 Martin, Micheál.
 McDowell, Michael.
 McEllistrim, Thomas.
 McGuinness, John.
 Moloney, John.
 Moynihan, Donal.
 Moynihan, Michael.
 Nolan, M.J.
 Ó Cuív, Éamon.
 Ó Fearghaíl, Seán.
 O'Connor, Charlie.
 O'Dea, Willie.
 O'Donnell, Liz.
 O'Donovan, Denis.
 O'Flynn, Noel.
 O'Keeffe, Batt.
 O'Keeffe, Ned.
 O'Malley, Fiona.
 O'Malley, Tim.
 Parlon, Tom.
 Sexton, Mae.
 Smith, Brendan.
 Smith, Michael.
 Wallace, Dan.
 Wallace, Mary.
 Walsh, Joe.
 Wilkinson, Ollie.
 Woods, Michael.
 Wright, G.V.

Níl

Allen, Bernard.
 Boyle, Dan.
 Breen, James.
 Breen, Pat.
 Broughan, Thomas P.
 Bruton, Richard.
 Burton, Joan.
 Connaughton, Paul.
 Connolly, Paudge.
 Cowley, Jerry.
 Crowe, Seán.
 Cuffe, Ciarán.
 Deasy, John.
 Deenihan, Jimmy.
 Durkan, Bernard J.
 English, Damien.
 Enright, Olwyn.
 Ferris, Martin.
 Gilmore, Eamon.
 Gormley, John.
 Hayes, Tom.
 Healy, Seamus.
 Higgins, Joe.
 Higgins, Michael D.
 Hogan, Phil.
 Howlin, Brendan.
 Kehoe, Paul.
 Kenny, Enda.
 Lynch, Kathleen.

McCormack, Pádraic.
 McGinley, Dinny.
 McGrath, Paul.
 McHugh, Paddy.
 McManus, Liz.
 Mitchell, Olivia.
 Morgan, Arthur.
 Moynihan-Cronin, Breeda.
 Murphy, Catherine.
 Naughten, Denis.
 Ó Caoláin, Caoimhghín.
 Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.
 O'Dowd, Fergus.
 O'Keeffe, Jim.
 O'Shea, Brian.
 O'Sullivan, Jan.
 Pattison, Seamus.
 Perry, John.
 Rabbitte, Pat.
 Ring, Michael.
 Ryan, Eamon.
 Ryan, Seán.
 Sargent, Trevor.
 Sherlock, Joe.
 Shortall, Róisín.
 Stagg, Emmet.
 Stanton, David.
 Twomey, Liam.
 Upton, Mary.

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Kitt and Kelleher; Níl, Deputies Kehoe and Stagg.

Question declared carried.

Mr. Kenny: I would like to raise No. 67, the judicial council Bill, which is to provide effective

remedies for complaints about misbehaviour, including lay participation in the investigation of complaints. When are we likely to see that Bill published? It is scheduled for the middle of 2006.

Is it intended that the Sea-Fisheries and Maritime Jurisdiction Bill 2005 be retrospective? The Minister for Communications, Marine and Natural Resources, Deputy Noel Dempsey, stated in his letter to the chairman of the committee that is discussing the matter——

An Ceann Comhairle: I am sorry, but we cannot discuss the fisheries Bill in the House.

Mr. Kenny: This is very important.

An Ceann Comhairle: It may well be important, but there is a long-standing tradition in this House that when the Bill is before the committee, it is the committee that deals with it.

Mr. Kenny: I know of that tradition, but there is complete confusion. I am asking the Taoiseach a question.

An Ceann Comhairle: It is not a matter for this House until the committee reports back to it.

Mr. Kenny: I want to know this. The Minister for Communications, Marine and Natural Resources has said in a letter that a small group of fishermen has deliberately flouted the law and made substantial sums.

An Ceann Comhairle: I am sorry, but it does not arise on the Order of Business. I ask Deputy Kenny to accept the rulings of the Chair.

Mr. Kenny: I will accept the rulings of the Chair.

An Ceann Comhairle: That ruling has been there since the committees were established.

Mr. Kenny: My question is whether this Bill will deal with that matter.

An Ceann Comhairle: I am sorry, but as the Chair has pointed out, when a Bill is referred to a committee, what happens is that the affairs of the committee cannot be discussed. That is a matter for the committee, which will discuss the Bill.

Mr. N. Dempsey: I will answer when Fine Gael stops filibustering.

Mr. Kenny: The committee refused to discuss the Bill until the contents had been discussed.

Mr. N. Dempsey: The Deputy should tell his members on the committee to get in there, and we will answer the question.

Mr. Kenny: I want to know if the Minister's Bill is attempting to deal with something retrospectively.

An Ceann Comhairle: I am sorry, but it is a matter for the committee to discuss.

Mr. Kenny: He said that a small number of fishermen deliberately flout the law and make substantial sums. He has set the entire coastal community——

An Ceann Comhairle: I am sorry, but we must allow for the committee to discuss it.

(Interruptions).

Mr. Durkan: Let us not get upset.

An Ceann Comhairle: The legislation is a matter for the committee, which will debate it section by section, decide and report back to the House, which will then have another opportunity.

Mr. Kenny: The committee has decided not to discuss the Bill until this matter has been dealt with. The chairman of the committee is a representative of the Fianna Fáil Party.

An Ceann Comhairle: I am sorry, but it will be back in the House on Report Stage, when the Deputy will have an opportunity.

Mr. Kenny: He has been told by his Minister that a small number of fishermen have deliberately flouted the law and made substantial sums.

(Interruptions).

An Ceann Comhairle: I ask the Deputy to accept the rulings of the Chair and not to argue with it. The Chair has ruled on the matter in accordance with precedent.

Mr. Kenny: Far be it from me to argue with the Ceann Comhairle, but this is an important matter of great interest.

An Ceann Comhairle: It will be dealt with in the way that the House has always done so.

Mr. Kenny: Last night I saw the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government, Deputy Roche, return flushed from the deserts of Dubai. He was red-faced with embarrassment trying to answer questions on the nitrates directive. The Minister for Agriculture and Food, Deputy Coughlan, is not here. She has abandoned the House, just as she has abandoned Irish farmers.

An Ceann Comhairle: Once again, that matter is before the House on Private Members' business.

Mr. Kenny: I want to know from the Taoiseach what the Minister, Deputy Roche, between closing down Sellafeld and dealing with Wrigley's chewing gum, will do about Part 3 of the regulations, which he has withdrawn.

An Ceann Comhairle: It does not arise. I call the Taoiseach on the first question. I suggest that the Deputy submit a question to the Minister.

Mr. Kenny: This is the legislation on the implementation of the nitrates directive. It is SI 788 of 2005. These are the regulations being implemented by the Government.

An Ceann Comhairle: We cannot go into the detail on the Order of Business.

Mr. Kenny: They do not take into account the scientific evidence provided by Teagasc, which makes us proud by telling us that we have the cleanest water in Europe. However, the Minister for Agriculture and Food, Deputy Coughlan, abandoned it to the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government, Deputy Roche, who has no regard whatsoever for agri-economics or the confusion that he will now cause.

An Ceann Comhairle: I am sorry, but the Deputy knows he is trying to drive a coach and four through the Order of Business.

Mr. Kenny: I want to know from the Taoiseach what will now happen to Part 3 of the regulations, which he has withdrawn, and whether the Government intends to withdraw the statutory instrument entirely and reintroduce it to the House in a fashion that can be implemented.

Mr. J. O’Keeffe: He should withdraw the lot and recast it.

The Taoiseach: The judicial council Bill is due in 2006. The draft heads are being prepared in the Department, taking into account work completed by the constitution review group, the Joint Committee on the Constitution, and the Chief Justice’s committee on judicial ethics. On Part 3 of the nitrates regulations, the EU (Good Agricultural Practice for Protection of Waters) Regulations 2005, the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government, Deputy Roche, has announced that there will a short deferral to deal with nutrient management.

Mr. J. O’Keeffe: Has the regulation been withdrawn?

An Ceann Comhairle: I call Deputy Rabbitte without interruption.

Mr. J. O’Keeffe: Has it been withdrawn?

The Taoiseach: Did the Deputy hear what I said?

Mr. J. O’Keeffe: Did the Taoiseach hear what I asked him? Has the regulation been withdrawn?

(Interruptions).

An Ceann Comhairle: I call Deputy Rabbitte without interruption. I ask the Minister and Deputy Jim O’Keeffe to allow Deputy Rabbitte without interruption.

Mr. Rabbitte: After the appearance from Dubai, it is no longer possible to blame Teagasc. Last night’s programme largely made clear that Teagasc is not to blame.

An Ceann Comhairle: I am sorry, but we cannot have a discussion on it.

Mr. Rabbitte: The Minister went ahead and made his own decisions, for which he should answer.

Why is there still a vacancy in the second tier of Government, and when does the Taoiseach propose to fill it?

The Taoiseach: Shortly.

Mr. Sargent: Perhaps the Taoiseach might say what he means by “shortly”.

I wish to ask about promised legislation. Regardless of the law of the land applying, it seems the Government has difficulty in agreeing on the law of the sea when it comes to promised legislation. I talk not only of fisheries but of the harbours Bill, which was in the Department of Communications, Marine and Natural Resources but is now in the Department of Transport. On the Bremore development, it seems that Fianna Fáil and the Progressive Democrats hold diametrically opposed views. When can we have the harbours Bill published by whatever Department is now responsible? We have been told that it is pending, but we have heard that before.

An Ceann Comhairle: We cannot have a debate.

The Taoiseach: The legislation is due in 2006.

Mr. Sargent: Again.

Mr. Stanton: When will we see legislation or ministerial orders to establish the new national Irish heritage trust?

The Taoiseach: Legislation is being prepared. I am not sure when it will be ready, but the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government, Deputy Roche, is working on it.

Ms Shortall: In a few months, we face complete gridlock on the M50, and particularly the West Link, since the Dublin Port tunnel will be adding an additional 2,500 trucks to it every day. That is because of the Minister’s inability to deal with this problem and plan ahead. Among the things that he had promised to do was introduce legislation to allow for open-road tolling last autumn. We still have not seen it. How much longer must

we wait, and when will there be action from the Minister on this issue?

The Taoiseach: The legislation is being prepared at present.

Ms Shortall: At present. When can we expect to see it?

The Taoiseach: Later in the year, as soon as it is ready.

Ms Shortall: When can we expect any solution to the problems of the West Link?

The Taoiseach: The legislation will be prepared this year, but some other Bills have preference. The infrastructural Bill has priority, and the same section is drafting it.

Ms Shortall: Does the Taoiseach accept we are facing complete gridlock with an extra 2,500 trucks on the West Link?

An Ceann Comhairle: I call Deputy Ó Caoláin. Deputy Shortall cannot have a debate on the matter.

The Taoiseach: I accept that it is necessary.

An Ceann Comhairle: I call Deputy Ó Caoláin.

Ms Shortall: What will be done about it? The Government has known about the port tunnel for years.

An Ceann Comhairle: I ask Deputy Shortall to resume her seat and allow Deputy Ó Caoláin.

Ms Shortall: "Nothing" is the answer, just as with everything else for which the Minister is responsible.

Mr. Cullen: No, it is just hot air coming from over there.

An Ceann Comhairle: I ask the Minister to allow Deputy Ó Caoláin without interruption.

(Interruptions).

Mr. Durkan: A tyre pressure gauge — that is the only way.

Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin: Three Bills relate to health. I wish to ask regarding the health (nursing homes) (amendment) Bill, the hepatitis C and HIV compensation tribunal (amendment) Bill, and the health (repayment scheme) Bill, formerly the repayment scheme for charges for publicly funded residential long stay care Bill.

Under the current programme each of these is promised for this spring session. Will the Taoiseach advise the House in what order of priority they will be presented and will he reaffirm they will be published in this session?

The Taoiseach: They are all due in this session. Priority was given to the nursing homes Bill.

Mr. Durkan: A recent survey in the UK disclosed tens of thousands of visits to child porn Internet sites over a long period of time. Will the promised legislation affecting this area be brought to the House as a matter of urgency? The electronic communications miscellaneous provisions Bill seems to be the obvious vehicle to control this unwarranted and dangerous practice, which is growing. Will the Taoiseach indicate whether he and the Minister will move with urgency on this issue?

The Taoiseach: The Bill is due this year. Strong legislation to deal with child pornography has been on the Statute Book for a number of years. This country was well advanced in dealing with this matter as the legislation was passed several years ago.

Mr. Durkan: There has been some dispute about that.

Ms C. Murphy: In view of the number of new properties for sale, the ambiguity surrounding property management companies and the sometimes disgraceful advice being given by the legal profession to their clients, when will legislation be introduced to regulate these property management companies?

An Ceann Comhairle: Is legislation promised?

Mr. Stagg: The Minister promised it in the House.

The Taoiseach: I am not sure which Act deals with this.

Ms Shortall: The Taoiseach should tell us.

The Taoiseach: The Minister is preparing proposals but I cannot recall the relevant Act.

Ms C. Murphy: What about all the people buying houses who are being snookered by this?

Ms McManus: Will the Taoiseach inform the House when the promised human tissue legislation will be introduced? It is probably ten years since the Medical Council first urged the Government to produce a medical practitioners Bill. When will we see that legislation?

The Taoiseach: Which legislation?

Ms McManus: I cannot hear the Taoiseach.

The Taoiseach: It will be later this year, in the autumn.

Ms McManus: Is the Taoiseach saying that both those Bills will be ready?

The Taoiseach: No. The medical practitioners Bill will be ready in the autumn.

Ms McManus: What about the other legislation?

The Taoiseach: There is no human tissue legislation listed.

Ms McManus: It has been promised for some time. Will the Taoiseach come back to me on that issue?

Mr. Gormley: Yesterday I raised the issue of legislation governing the tenant purchase scheme for local authority housing. The Taoiseach had not been briefed at that stage but I believe he has now been briefed. Will such legislation be contained in a new social housing Bill?

The Taoiseach: I believe I answered the Deputy's question. Legislation is being prepared on tenant purchase.

Mr. Gormley: Will the provisions be included in a new social housing Bill?

The Taoiseach: I am not sure.

Mr. Gormley: I will raise this matter again next week. I understood the Taoiseach had been briefed in the meantime.

The Taoiseach: I believe my office contacted the Deputy regarding this matter.

Mr. Gormley: The Department for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government contacted me.

Mr. N. Dempsey: A phone call.

Mr. Stanton: In view of the fact that the child care supplement will not be paid until very late in the year, perhaps as a Christmas bonus, when will legislation be introduced to establish the new children's office?

The Taoiseach: There is no truth in that view about the payments; they will be made when they are due.

Dr. Cowley: This House deals with legislation. Will the Taoiseach investigate the situation whereby the Constitution does not allow people to be treated equally? People have been waiting eight years for urology services in Galway. We need a urology service as 1,000 people are waiting.

An Ceann Comhairle: The matter does not arise on the Order of Business. The Deputy will have to find another way of raising the matter.

Mr. Broughan: With reference to an earlier question, does the Taoiseach intend to make a

number of appointments in his reshuffle? I notice a couple of distinguished Fianna Fáil backbenchers are assiduously following proceedings and they might be recommended for promotion.

The Taoiseach will be present on Sunday at the Stardust memorial function. I refer to the matter I raised on the Adjournment of the House last night. Will the Taoiseach give consideration to establishing another inquiry into the causes of the disaster and its investigation?

An Ceann Comhairle: That question was raised yesterday on the Order of Business.

Mr. Broughan: I raised it last night.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy cannot raise it again.

Mr. Broughan: The Taoiseach is a fellow northsider. I wish to make a brief point on legislation. Yesterday the Ceann Comhairle underlined part of the question I asked him, whether the Minister for Communications, Marine and Natural Resources had sought the advice of the Attorney General—

An Ceann Comhairle: That does not arise.

Mr. Broughan: It relates to legislation. I understand the Ceann Comhairle misled me.

An Ceann Comhairle: What legislation?

Mr. Broughan: I asked about four or five European Union regulations concerning administrative fines. I asked whether the Attorney General had seen the Minister's—

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy cannot discuss that matter here. He will have to find another way of raising it.

Mr. Broughan: The Ceann Comhairle misled me. We cannot make progress on the fisheries Bill. We do not know where we stand. The Ceann Comhairle misled the House in the reply he gave me.

An Ceann Comhairle: The House is moving on to the next business. The Chair has already ruled on that matter. I wish to make it clear to Deputy Broughan that we will not discuss legislation that is before a committee. It has never been the practice here and it is not the practice now. It is a matter for the committee.

Mr. Broughan: The committee cannot get going. We are stopped dead in the committee. As the leader of Fine Gael said, we cannot make progress.

Finance Bill 2006: Second Stage (Resumed).

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

Mr. Boyle: In my remaining minute of speaking time, I draw attention to two aspects of the Finance Bill, the first being the environmental aspects of the Minister's proposals. He is seeking plaudits for his proposal on biodiesel. The original proposal was made by his predecessor in his budget speech of 2004 but was not implemented until mid-2005. The Minister is now proposing in this Bill to issue a ministerial order at some time in the future. As my party leader stated in the House recently, the Government is addicted to economic policy fuelled by oil which is becoming a diminishing resource. The Minister has the most vested interest of all because of the amount of taxation he collects at the highest level, not income or corporation tax but value-added tax.

As referred to on today's Order of Business, I protest at the intention to extend tax reliefs to the health service in general but to private hospitals and private mental hospitals in particular. This proposal will be assiduously examined and opposed by this side of the House on Committee Stage.

Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin: The Finance Bill reaches the floor of the Dáil in the wake of the latest National Economic and Social Forum report published on Monday. The report confirms in the starkest of terms the gross inequality in this society after over a decade of the Celtic tiger and nearly a decade of continuous Fianna Fáil-Progressive Democrats Governments.

The NESF makes clear we now have a wealthier but more unequal society than before. The richest 20% of the working age population is earning 12 times as much as the poorest 20%, one of the highest levels of income inequality among OECD countries. That is a shameful level of inequality, especially in a small country such as ours. Extravagant wealth and avoidable poverty are living side by side on this small island, and it is little wonder given the revelations in the review of tax reliefs also published on Monday. That report reinforces everything that has been said, not least by Sinn Féin, in identifying the use of tax reliefs by the Government to further enrich those prospering most in this economy.

The review of tax reliefs is a catalogue of daylight robbery of the ordinary PAYE taxpayer and of those on or below the poverty line. It is robbery of the poor by the rich facilitated by this Government. Reading the report is like assessing one's losses after the burglars have left one's house; it is too late to do anything about it. The robbers have fled with the loot, cheered on by former Minister for Finance, Charlie McCreevy, whose echoes are still going around this Chamber.

What we have in the review of tax reliefs are three substantial volumes cataloguing the amount

of tax revenue squandered on a plethora of tax breaks that has primarily benefited the highest earners. In the case of pension reliefs, the biggest beneficiaries have been able to stash away pension funds of up to €100 million and enjoy the tax benefits, in one case withdrawing a bounty of €25 million tax free. This has been going on for years.

These tax breaks have rewarded developers and speculators and were introduced and continued without any cost-benefit analysis. Only now are we getting an estimate of their cost. It is scandalous that after years of these schemes the report should have to make the following recommendations: first, all tax incentive schemes should require full disclosures of key information to the Exchequer by investors/promoters via a certification scheme or other mechanism to enable the full cost and impact of the schemes to be monitored; and second, the decision to introduce any new tax incentives should be informed by a formal assessment of the likely costs and benefits.

Most ordinary taxpayers must be incredulous that tax relief schemes which bestowed such massive sums on wealthy individuals were not subject to such basic requirements as disclosure of information and analysis of cost and benefit. The report makes clear that these tax reliefs have been seen primarily as incentives for the construction industry. However, they have poured public money into a booming private sector for developments that would have happened anyway, as is clear from the report. This is public money that should have been spent directly on providing the infrastructure and social services we need. Instead, it has mostly benefited individuals who, the report estimates, earn at least €100,000 per year.

The general recommendations of the review also include the following: "Where there is justification for Government incentives the option of direct public expenditure as an alternative to tax incentives should be considered". The option of direct public expenditure should have been the approach with regard to child care facilities. While the report contends that the relief for child care facilities contributed to increasing the supply of places, it did nothing to make those places more accessible or affordable.

The social impact is not considered in the report and the lack of social impact analysis across the range of reliefs is one of its major flaws. However, we know that private child care facilities, subsidised by tax breaks, follow the money. Like general practitioners, there are many more of them in wealthier urban areas while poorer areas suffer a lack of child care places or, where places exist, they are not affordable for many people.

The Finance Bill promises to bring many tax reliefs to a close, with an extension to 2008, but others remain open or are being extended. The Bill sees the Minister cleaning out the trough after most of the pigs have eaten their fill but for others there is more swill to come. It is disgrace-

[Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin.]

ful and totally unacceptable that in this Finance Bill tax relief for developers of private hospitals and nursing homes is to be consolidated and extended. This is a huge subsidy to the thriving private health business that needs such support least. Profit-driven operators are being rewarded again at a time when all State spending on health should be invested in public health and social services that care for everyone based on need alone and not on ability to pay and the profit motive.

The extension of the tax relief to those providing private mental health services is perverse, as spending on publicly-provided mental health services is still totally inadequate. Are we now to have a profit-driven mental health care sector which provides privileged care to those able to pay for it, while patients dependent on the public system continue to suffer?

Some €37 million has been spent on tax breaks for private hospitals so far, rewarding wealthy operators of the thriving private health industry and reinforcing the two-tier public-private system. No public money should have been spent on such private hospitals, yet the Finance Bill actually extends this tax relief. Taking just one set of reliefs, almost €330 million in tax reliefs has been given to developers of private hospitals, private nursing homes, hotels, holiday cottages and multi-storey car parks. While the review of reliefs pulls its punches, it can only be read as a damning indictment of Government policy when it recommends, as I have pointed out, that "The decision to introduce any new tax incentives should be informed by a formal assessment of the likely costs and benefits".

One of the key points about these reliefs is that they were pocketed by developers and speculators and no benefit was passed on to the consumer. In the context of child care, places increased but accessibility and affordability did not. The property-based tax reliefs have fuelled the spiralling price of residential property and have contributed to the housing crisis for so many people on average or above-average incomes who cannot afford a mortgage. It is an obscenity that developers of massive shopping centres and luxury apartments have benefited hugely from these tax breaks. Meanwhile there are 43,600 families on local authority waiting lists. This equates to more than 100,000 of our citizens.

The Minister has made much of his scheme in this Bill to encourage SSIA account holders on low incomes to invest in pensions. This is a modest measure and it is almost laughable when one considers the massive sums awarded to the highest earners through pension fund relief as highlighted in the tax review. The SSIA itself was kinked in favour of higher earners who could put more money into these accounts. What is to be done for those workers who could not afford to take out SSIA accounts? What proposals does the Minister have for those workers in his overall

package? What is to be done for their pension provision? There are no answers to those questions that I can see in the Bill.

Yesterday, I listened to the Taoiseach talking during Leaders' Questions about the issue of tax reliefs and he was totally disingenuous. He portrayed those tax reliefs as old-fashioned measures dating back to an era before the Celtic tiger, putting money into disadvantaged areas and promoting development that would not otherwise have taken place. That is a complete misrepresentation. This Finance Bill does nothing to disturb the night's sleep of those who have pocketed plenty over the years from these reliefs.

Mr. F. McGrath: Hear, hear.

Mr. Connolly: This Finance Bill adopts a softly, softly and somewhat tentative approach in the clear and certain knowledge that the electorate will be the final arbiters on the Government's stewardship in a relatively short space of time. The decision to abolish the favourable remittance basis of income tax was long overdue. Under this system, foreign managers and nationals were only required to pay tax on that portion of income they used to live on in Ireland, and it was open to widespread abuse.

In recent years, Ireland acquired the reputation for being a tax haven for technology multinationals and Irish operations have been used to manage and repatriate funds. In recent months, some threatening noises have been made about far-reaching consequences for Ireland if US companies pulled out as a result of this measure. I welcome the decision to face down the multinational lobby which sought to reverse the measure to end the remittance tax system. It goes without saying that a minimum contribution to Irish society would be due from those who avail of and benefit from our country.

The measures to encourage low earners to put a portion of their SSIA savings into pensions will be welcomed by many people. It is of no interest to those poor people who cannot afford it. It will also be a major disappointment for those who took out SSIA's but were unable to maintain payments. Had they known this additional benefit would come down the line, they would possibly have held on to their SSIA's or made a greater effort to do so. Nevertheless, this measure appears somewhat restricted and very limited in scope to improve the position of low-income pensioners. There are many borderline cases between the standard rate of income tax and the 42% rate, many of whom would welcome the opportunity to have €2,500 put towards their €7,500 SSIA's.

We saw the alarming figure announced by the Central Statistics Office that almost 50% of the population has no form of pension cover. This is a frightening statistic, particularly with an ageing population and the implications for workers in years to come. The CSO also noted that half of those with SSIA's had never saved before the

scheme was introduced four years ago, so it would be logical for these funds to be directed towards pensions and would give them a major boost. Those targeted should specifically be those on lower incomes with inadequate pension provision. The SSIA pension investment measure could be made infinitely more attractive for those on lower incomes if the Minister were to match the SSIA investments on a euro per euro basis. We are talking of the lowest income earners and those with no pension provisions.

One sector which needs a boost is business tourism, which involves conferences and major corporate meetings. Many of our hotels have expanded in recent years to include top class conference facilities, yet the Irish hotel VAT rate of 13.5% is the second highest in Europe, second only to that of Germany which has a rate of perhaps 16%. Colleagues in Northern Ireland get tax rebates on any VAT paid in excess of 10% and we should consider that to make ourselves more competitive. Ireland needs to be in a competitive position to avail of the €40 billion world conference market and we should set our sights on that.

The Finance Bill further tightens the noose around tax evasion and avoidance and it is to be hoped it will contribute towards everyone paying a fair share of tax. That is what it should be about. However, the flip side should involve securing value for taxpayers' money as a prerequisite of Government expenditure. For example, in the renting or leasing of properties for the various Departments throughout the country, the judicious expenditure of taxpayers' money should be paramount. Several Departments and the Health Service Executive have quite a number of properties leased and lying idle. Questions should be asked about whether we are getting value for taxpayers' money. We must ask if it logical to spend money leasing property and have nothing at the end of the year or at the end of ten or 20 years. This would not work in terms of a private property business.

Ms C. Murphy: Like other Deputies, I received three large volumes yesterday morning related to the review of tax schemes. Most of us expected these schemes to be discontinued well before now, but the Finance Bill states a number of times that July 2008 is the cut-off date for some. Where there is no contractual agreement, why can such schemes not be discontinued this summer rather than in two years' time? Essentially they provide subsidies or supports for a sector which clearly does not need them. We need to divert those funds towards areas of genuine need.

I do not know if the Minister of State feels ashamed when he goes outside the gates of Leinster House and sees people across the road sleeping in cardboard boxes. People are sleeping rough on the streets of the city every night. That area needs to be targeted and needs support more than developers do. Others who need support

include children whose life chances are affected because they are on waiting lists for speech therapy, and people on housing waiting lists who have had no chance. In effect they must wait until 2008 by virtue of the subsidy being postponed to that date.

Section 13 of the Finance Bill involves the exemption of €10,000 tax for childminders. It is appropriate that I should address my comments in this regard to the Minister of State with special responsibility for children, Deputy Brian Lenihan. If one minds up to three children, the exemption allows one earn up to €195 weekly. If one earns 50 cent over that, one loses the entire exemption. I asked a number of childminders known to me what they thought of this and if it would encourage them to enter the scheme. The most frequent response was: "Is that all they think I am worth?" They also asked who would work for €195 weekly and what had happened to the minimum wage. That would come to €300 per week, yet childminders are being asked to accept a limit of €195. They feel the value placed by the Government on their work is nothing like the value they attach to it. They may not be well rewarded in monetary terms but this exemption, with a cut-off point of €10,000, will not have people queueing up to avail of it because those working in the area see such a cut-off figure as an insult.

The HSE is supposed to have a co-ordinating role in this area but anyone involved must have everything authenticated by the HSE. In Kildare and west Wicklow there is one co-ordinator who looks after networking, improving skills and organising courses. It now looks as if co-ordinators will be redeployed to hand out letters to people to tell them they qualify for the tax exemption. That is not child-centred and needs to be re-examined. It needs substantial amendment.

Section 8 relates to bin taxes. Essentially the amount one can claim back will be reduced. Many people are not even paying tax, so they cannot claim anything back. The "polluter pays" principle has circumvented the principle of the ability to pay in this area of service charges. The Combat Poverty Agency has flagged this as one of the key issues which needs to be addressed. The cutback in this area, for people who essentially are the working poor, needs to be re-examined.

The final issue I wish to deal with may seem unimportant. It relates to ATM machines and the card tax of €20. Numerous elderly people have told me they would not use such cards and have cut them up, because of the €20 charge, despite making only a small number of transactions. Such people need to have their money in financial institutions rather than in tin boxes in their houses. They could well be given exemption from this tax. They often do not have to pay tax in another sphere and I do not see why they should have to pay it in this area. There is a protection issue for the particular people involved.

Minister of State at the Department of Education and Science (Mr. B. Lenihan): I wish to share my time with Deputy Kelly.

I am pleased to address the House and I welcome the provisions of the Finance Bill 2006 which give effect to many of the initiatives announced by the Minister for Finance, Deputy Cowen, in the budget for 2006. As Minister of State with special responsibility for children, I especially welcomed the decision announced in the budget to introduce a new child care strategy spanning the years 2006 to 2010 and the subsequent announcement by the Taoiseach of the establishment of the new office of the Minister with responsibility for children. My responsibilities include the issues of child welfare and protection, early childhood care and education and youth justice. The office has been staffed with key officials from each of these areas, thus bringing together their expertise. Housing together all these issues in one vision of care, protection and provision for children will empower me to make real change and progress on these vital issues. As Minister of State with special responsibility for children, I am honoured with the unprecedented opportunity to develop and deliver policies and programmes which will help ensure the well-being of all our children.

Since 1997, child care has been to the forefront of Government policy. Deputies are aware of the significant achievements made under the equal opportunities child care programme, which ran from 2000 to this year. A general agreement had emerged and the time had come to take a long-term view of current child care policies with a view to adopting a more strategic approach to the delivery of services and meeting the current demands of parents. The recent Government decisions relating to child care represent a comprehensive response to the call from the child care sector, parents in particular, for greater funding to be made available for child care and the adoption of a more cohesive approach to the delivery of child care services.

The Government has adopted a new child care strategy for the period 2006-10. It is a comprehensive strategic approach by the Government to the emerging needs of future development of the sector. One of its key elements is the national child care investment programme, which is effective from 1 January 2006 and supersedes the previous programme. Unlike its predecessor, the new programme is entirely Exchequer funded and the Government has committed €575 million to it over the five year term.

The decision by the Government to create a major new five year investment programme immediately rather than waiting until the equal opportunities programme expired is evidence of our commitment to the provision of quality child care. The programme aims to provide a response to the development of quality child care supports and services, which are grounded in an under-

standing of local needs. It will build on the existing programme and incorporate a number of key objectives, such as the creation of 50,000 additional child care places, including 5,000 after-school places and 10,000 pre-school places aimed at three to four year olds. It aims at improving the quality of early childhood care and education, including part-time full day care, school age child care and child minding, supporting families in breaking the cycle of disadvantage and supporting a co-ordinated approach to the delivery of child care, which is centred on the needs of the child.

The Government has set ambitious targets for the next five years, including the creation of 17,000 additional trained child care personnel. I am committed to ensuring that we meet these targets and objectives in a way that takes account of the need for pre-school child care, school age child care and wrap around services that meet the specific needs of parents and their children. It will require careful planning and incremental development but I am confident that I have been given the necessary tools and resources to deliver on them.

The availability of the additional capital funding announced in the budget will enable me to allocate capital grant assistance to groups that address significant child care service gaps. The maximum capital grants available for the building or expansion of child care facilities will be €1 million per facility for community based not-for-profit providers. There will be a strong focus on private provider applications, with a maximum capital grant of €100,000 per facility and a maximum of €500,000 per provider in the case of multiple services in different catchment areas.

The new national child care investment programme will continue to assist with staffing and other operating costs in community facilities that cannot meet the full costs on fee income alone. Staffing grant assistance under the previous programme will be continued until the end of 2007 to ensure that there will be no break in the momentum built up and the transition to the new programme is a smooth one.

A key element of the new programme is the decision to deliver it at local level through the city and county child care committees, which were established under the previous investment programme and have been an active force at local level. They identify and meet local child care needs and facilitate greater flexibility in our responsiveness to those needs. This will involve building closer links between infrastructural development and the planning regulations under the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government. I propose to work closely with that Department to strengthen the links at national and local levels between the relevant players, including the planning authorities, the county development boards and the city and county child care committees.

The legislative provision for the new early child care supplement will be provided for in the forthcoming Social Welfare and Pensions Bill 2005. It is worth commenting on it today as it forms an important part of the child care package. It is an additional payment of €1,000 in a full calendar year in respect of all children aged under six years. The payment will be effective from 1 April and be a direct non-taxable payment of €250 paid per quarter year in respect of each eligible child.

Ms Burton: When will it be paid?

Mr. B. Lenihan: I will come to that in a moment. As a new payment affecting some 350,000 children, it is evident that a new system of administrative arrangements must be established to give effect to the supplement. As with any other payment scheme, care is taken at the planning stage to ensure it will operate in a streamlined way, which is done to facilitate the recipients of the payment so that, for example, they can have their payments paid directly into bank accounts or through post offices if that is preferred.

I assure the House that, having decided that the Department of Social and Family Affairs will be the agency through which my office will administer the early child care supplement, officials from my office have been in contact with the relevant officials in that Department since the supplement was announced in Budget 2006. At this stage, plans for the introduction of the scheme are well in hand, as is the draft legislative provision, which I expect will be published shortly in the Social Welfare and Pensions Bill 2005.

I take this opportunity to clarify the position regarding when the first payments of the supplement will be made. It is my understanding — it has been confirmed to me by the Department of Social and Family Affairs — that the Department will be in a position to make the first early child care supplement payment on behalf of my office in late August 2006, with the second payment, which is due in September 2006, being paid at that time. To put it simply, for the sound reasons I have outlined, the first payment is expected to be made in August rather than June. I hope this statement clarifies the issue.

As the Taoiseach and I have said in recent days, the early child care supplement makes no distinction as to the income or employment status of the parents. This is deliberate. Some may be critical of this feature but the Government believes it is right that parents have a choice when it comes to child care. It is not the role of the State to tell parents which child care arrangements are best suited to their families. Rather, it is for the State to support them in such arrangements as are appropriate. Budget 2006 also included significant increases in child benefit and there will be a further opportunity for discussion

on this matter in the context of the Social Welfare and Pensions Bill 2005.

On the question of childminders, which was raised by Deputy Catherine Murphy, childminders are an important sector of our child care services and, for many parents, are the preferred option. It is important that we recognise and support this resource. In this regard, the Government has introduced a new child-minding relief, legislative provision for which is set out in section 13 of the Finance Bill 2006. As a result, where an individual minds up to three children in the minder's own home, no tax will be payable on the child-minding earnings provided the amount is less than €10,000 per annum. Following the rent-a-room scheme model, if child-minding income exceeds €10,000, the total amount will be taxable as normal under self-assessment. To avail of the exemption, an individual will be obliged to make an annual tax return on the child-minding income and notify his or her city or county child care committee of the service.

While I appreciate Deputy Catherine Murphy's point about the HSE's role in the co-ordination and support of child-minding service, it has no specific assigned role in the context of this provision. The notification requirement is to the city or county child care committee, not the HSE. Regarding the overall figure arrived at, opinions can clearly differ as to what is appropriate but the cost and affordability of child care was a significant element in the debate that arose. In selecting a figure, I take it that the Minister for Finance was prudent not to further increase the cost of child-minding. The payment is only available to those who fall outside the current pre-school regulations. The new regulations I am about to promulgate will not affect the numbers involved, as it is up to a maximum of three other than children of the child-minder.

Ms C. Murphy: I would not expect a stamp to be paid.

Mr. B. Lenihan: That is a matter that can be examined and monitored.

This is only the beginning of a very ambitious child care strategy embarked upon by the Minister for Finance and the Government in the budget. A number of initiatives are being taken. I would have liked to mention another number but, for reasons of time, I am constrained from doing so. It is important to bear in mind that this is a multi-annual strategy. It is a clear commitment by the Government to tackle this area and make progress upon it.

Mr. Kelly: I offer my congratulations to the Minister for Finance, Deputy Cowen, on his record in his political career before and since becoming the Minister for Finance and on his recent budget, which is widely recognised as one of the best budgets ever.

Mr. Durkan: Every budget is the best budget ever.

Mr. Kelly: I have not met anybody outside the House who did not ask me to pass on their good wishes to the Minister for Finance on probably the best budget in the history of the State.

Mr. Durkan: Hear, hear. Come on the old conventions around Mullingar.

Mr. Kelly: To those of us who know the Minister, his appointment was no surprise and the country is very fortunate to have a caring and compassionate family man in Government. In any walk of life, including politics, it is a duty and obligation on people in posts of responsibility to mind the finances in the interests of all.

Mr. Durkan: The Deputy is right about that.

Mr. Kelly: The success of our country is due to the combination of Government policy and the hard work and genius of the Irish people. We should have learned that the only way forward is the way we got here, with partnership and people working together towards a common goal, namely, the promotion of our country for all people.

Our people are well educated and hard working, and nobody can question that. Optimism is the present and the future, with pessimism put to one side. Pessimistic attitudes and negative ideas are not in the best interests of the majority of our people.

Mr. Durkan: The Ministers in front are getting embarrassed. Deputy Kelly is making them blush with all the accolades.

Mr. Kelly: Perhaps the less said the better. Perhaps Deputy Durkan was blushing during a previous debate today.

I refer to the rural tax scheme. Some people in this House, who are not from my constituency, were not in favour of the tax scheme. I invite Deputies to visit Longford and speak to the people to understand how the rural tax scheme is working. Longford people must be encouraged to work with the Government and improve the lot of people. The people in my constituency wanted the rural tax scheme and welcomed it. Our main concern was that couples would be able to build or buy their own house by working hard and availing of this tax relief scheme. Many jobs have been created in Longford and the better our economy, the better our social services.

Mr. Durkan: I am not sure about that. When we did not have it, we spent it better.

Mr. Kelly: It is factual. If the economy is not successful and we have no money, how can we spend what we have not got? In 2006 funding is needed to finance schemes and all parties in the

Dáil seek more money for everything. I have heard no one stating that money does not count. Why does everyone seek more money if there is a better way of proceeding?

I will bring Deputy Durkan on a quick tour of County Longford.

Mr. Durkan: Hear, hear.

Mr. Kelly: The county contains Abbeylara, Granard, Aghnacliffe, Ballinamuck, Drumlish, Newtownforbes, Clondra, Killashee, Lanesborough, Ballymahon, Kenagh, Moydow, Abbeyshrule, Legan, Mostrim, Moyne, Legga and Longford town.

Mr. Durkan: Deputy Kelly left out a few.

Mr. Kelly: Major development is taking place in all these towns and they have been transformed. Everybody is pleased with the transformation taking place under the Government. They are delighted and happy.

Mr. Durkan: The Government will know if people are happy on election day.

Mr. Kelly: One can visit rural areas of Longford where people did not think they would see development. People who had to emigrate in the 1950s and 1960s are now returning and are proud of the progress made in their absence.

We welcome people who came to Longford as a result of the rural tax scheme. The many new businesses and families are more than welcome. We are delighted to see the end of derelict sites and the difference development makes. I am at one with the people of my constituency, who want clean, new, environmentally friendly buildings rather than derelict sites. This has been the result of the scheme.

We have a major asset in the River Shannon, which needed to be improved. I listened to Opposition speeches on tourism, an industry that does well in Longford, with natural resources and people. The scheme helped to promote tourism, which was needed. Apart from the rural tax scheme, the greatest asset is the friendliness of our people — Longford is the friendliest county in Ireland.

This Bill will give effect to measures announced in the budget. We must support sustained economic growth and promote improved quality and opportunity for all. This requires the development of a knowledge-based Irish economy, supported by sound fiscal policies that deliver value for money to the taxpayer. The Government has radically restructured the tax system in the past eight years. The challenge is to implement policies that support growth and employment and that are seen as fair and equitable. Previous budgets have worked towards that and if the Opposition think this budget is good, it should hear the next budget.

Mr. Durkan: We have no doubt about that. We are waiting with bated breath, and it is not only our breath that will be bated.

Acting Chairman (Dr. Cowley): Deputy Kelly has the floor. Deputy Durkan will have the opportunity to respond shortly.

Mr. Kelly: I thank the Acting Chairman for his protection.

Mr. Durkan: Deputy Kelly needs protection.

Mr. Kelly: The Government has done a great job in removing those on the minimum wage from the tax net. Workers on the average industrial wage are excluded from the higher tax rate.

I am pleased to note the success of the film industry. I do not know how any member of any political party could disagree with tax relief for the film industry as it sought this measure last year.

Mr. Durkan: We are artistic people.

Mr. Kelly: Relief rates have been raised to 80% and the ceiling has been raised from €15 million to €35 million. The tourism and film businesses are important to our economy and Ireland has been noted for its actors and actresses outside this House.

Mr. Durkan: There are some inside the House also. Has Deputy Kelly sought the Equity card?

Ms Burton: Deputy Kelly is not doing badly.

Mr. Kelly: I am glad to note there are some actors in the House. With the expansion of the film industry some of us will never be out of a job.

Mr. Durkan: It was unfortunate that the budget debate disappeared from the clár very quickly, denying some of us an opportunity to speak. I am worried by the failure to correctly identify the total amount accruing from Revenue towards year end. As a result, ten days after the budget we discovered the Government was much better off — in the region of €1.8 billion — than we thought it was. If the figures accruing to Revenue are out by €1.8 billion, the calculations are not correct. For the integrity of the Department of Finance and its advisers we must examine the implications of this episode. There was a time in this country when a miscalculation of that nature would have caused serious rumbles across the entire financial services area. While the Government may rejoice in the fact that it had more money than it thought, it does not go down well in international circles where it is questioned how good are our systems and our great administration. If they do not stand up to international scrutiny, they do not stand up at all. Far from patting themselves on the back, the members of

the Government should take full account of the need to be as near as possible to dead reckoning.

I remember an occasion some years ago when the budgetary outturns were miscalculated or wrong to the extent of £40 million. There was a public outcry and absolute uproar. It does not happen any more because so many billions fall off the table that a billion here and a billion there does not matter. If that is the attitude of Government, I assure the Minister of State that the time is coming when the end of the runway will be in sight. It could be brought about as a result of the Government's hype and inability.

Mr. Parlon: Dream on.

Mr. Durkan: Part of the budgetary system is to be able to identify and judge with reasonable attitude where one is going, how one has performed and how one is likely to perform for the next 12 months. Every other country in the world does it well. I do not know of any other country in the European Union, including those that recently joined, where one can be that far out and still have credibility.

Mr. Parlon: The Deputy does not know any others that have surpluses like ours either.

Mr. Durkan: It could just as easily have been a deficit. I do not know whether the Government would be fully aware of whether it was a surplus or a deficit. The major difference between a surplus of €1.8 billion and a deficit is certain. If the Minister of State happens to have the two in the one year he will find out all about it.

Mr. Parlon: A Progressive Democrats-Fianna Fáil Government is the difference.

Mr. Durkan: I will deal with that in more detail in a minute. There are some contradictions which are of great concern to me and which were referred to by a number of other people. We will come to those in a moment.

I want to discuss matters for which I have responsibility — energy and communications. I do not know what has gone wrong in the communications area. The Government's delivery of modern telecommunications is miles short of what it promised. The Finance Bill and the budget contain nothing to improve on it. Utility services now take the place of financial investment houses. Anyone who wants to make money should be advised to buy either a toll road or a telecommunications sector. Therein lies the secret of making much more money by way of dividend than can be made by investment in any financial house.

I will ask the much-vaunted two parties in Government, which have such great policies, a question regarding a comparison with other European countries in telecommunications areas such as broadband and developing state-of-the-

[Mr. Durkan.]

art technology. Ten years ago this country was one of the leading five countries in Europe in those areas. We are now in the last two and falling rapidly. Some countries in Europe which have only barely come on stage in these issues are well ahead of us and rapidly going out of sight. Despite all of the ingenuity congregated between the combined masses of intelligence of the two parties in Government, they have failed miserably in this area. They will fail even further. Not only do they fail themselves, they fail to deliver on promises and projections and they fail the people and this economy. No area has more influence on a developing economy at present than the telecommunications area.

I will now speak on energy. It is true that in this budget the Minister made some concessions in the area of excise duty on renewable oils and that is welcome. However, why in heaven's name did it take so long? How did this Government with such massive foresight and, according to itself, the confidence of all the people miss that until now? Why did it not recognise that to develop a proper energy policy, adequate research and development is required, all of which has been and still is being sadly neglected?

Despite the manifestations from the other side of the House, nothing has happened that will in any way bolster the peoples' or industry's confidence in continuity and security of supply. We know from last week and the week before that in a few moments people ran scared because of difficulties with the supply of gas from Russia. Our economy depends heavily on energy and will depend on it to a much greater extent in years to come. It is an appalling indictment of the Government and an example of its inaction and inability to read the signs before it that so little has been done for so long. It should know that this area is fundamental to the development of the economy.

Far from being a case of a lot done and more to do, it is all to do and the Government has done nothing so far. As for buying credits for carbon emissions, I do not know whether the Government realises that the millions set aside for that purpose do not do anything for the atmosphere or the ozone layer. While members of the Government might feel reassured when they go home at the weekend that they have done something for the environment, they have in fact done nothing for it. They spend €20 million buying credits from elsewhere which does nothing for the atmosphere.

I wish to discuss a few other areas. Much has been said about the need for carers for older people and for their importance to be recognised. It is important to have adequate carers to cater for the ageing population given that we live in a society where both partners in a relationship must work because it is otherwise no longer possible to pay a mortgage. The Government can take full credit for that. It increased house prices tenfold during the past seven or eight years. Members of

the Government should be ashamed of themselves. It has already been indicated and it never shows up on the consumer price index because it was never intended to show up that way. The real inflation rate has never been tapped into. Nobody has recognised it and I give the Government full credit for it. The Government conned the people and it did so effectively.

Mr. Parlon: It is a good thing the Deputy read the *Irish Independent* today.

Mr. Durkan: I read everything. The Minister of State should not be concerned. I also read that which he may not want me to read.

Another concern is that those who need care have already worked for 45 or in some cases 50 years. They paid PRSI and huge sums in interest at times when interest rates were excessively high and reached levels of 22% or 23%. They struggled through all that and bought their houses. Now the Minister for Finance, the Revenue Commissioners and the accompanying gurus state that if those people require carers, they will face a severe means test to make the system as stringent as possible. Grants and tax incentives are available to build nursing homes but to enter one is much more difficult. If a carer is not available or the person does not pass the means test and must enter a nursing home, those now in need of care and support must sell the houses they worked and strove for, paid tax on and struggled to keep. How dare their families suggest they should qualify, despite the fact their parents worked all their lives and shed blood sweat and tears during the most difficult times in this economy. After all that, they are thanked and told they must sell their houses which will be taken and distributed to others.

Debate adjourned.

Sitting suspended at 1.30 p.m. and resumed at 2.30 p.m.

Ceisteanna — Questions (Resumed).

Priority Questions.

Dormant Accounts Fund.

104. **Mr. McGinley** asked the Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs when funding from dormant funds for all three categories of disadvantage identified as applicable for funding will be released to the community and voluntary sector in 2006; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4728/06]

Minister of State at the Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs (Mr. N. Ahern): Disbursements from the dormant accounts fund are designed to assist three broad

categories of people — people who are socially and economically or educationally disadvantaged and people with a disability.

Having consulted appropriate Ministers and obtained the approval of Government, I announced details on 4 January last concerning the allocation of €24 million in 2006 for the purpose of supporting programmes and types of projects tackling social and economic disadvantage. Details of the announcement are available on the website of my Department at www.pobail.ie.

The roll-out of the measures announced on 4 January has now commenced. In this regard, an invitation to the 45 RAPID area implementation teams, AITs, issued at the end of January requesting them to submit their priority projects for consideration. This measure provides for the ring-fencing of €11.5 million for priority projects identified by the RAPID AITs. On the other measures proposed, it is anticipated that they will be rolled-out on a phased basis over the coming months as operational arrangements are finalised.

With regard to the other two categories — educational disadvantage and persons with a disability — the consultation process required under the legislation is not yet completed. It is anticipated that further announcements will be made shortly on proposals under these headings when work ongoing in both the Departments of Education and Science and Health and Children is completed, subject to specific measures being submitted and approved by Government.

Mr. McGinley: I am sure the Minister of State will agree he has a veritable crock of gold at his disposal for the coming year or two and I know he made his announcement on 4 January last. Under the old board, allocations were made on a regular basis. Will applications submitted while the old board was in charge of distribution and allocation stand? Will groups have to submit new applications? The Minister of State mentioned the RAPID groups. Is there a cut off date within which applications must be submitted by those groups involved with the socially and economically disadvantaged? When will applications be invited by the Departments of Education and Science and Health and Children from the educationally disadvantaged and the disability sector? Is a needs criteria established to ensure these grants are allocated on the basis of needs rather than any other basis?

Mr. N. Ahern: Some €60 million has been agreed by Government with €24 million going to the economically disadvantaged. I do not know whether that is a crock of gold.

Mr. McGinley: Some €60 million is a crock of gold.

Mr. N. Ahern: It will go to many worthy projects. The old items dealt with by the previous board have been finalised. Decisions were made

and those concerned got funding or did not get it. Anybody who got funding or who did not and who wants to try again will have to apply under the new system.

In regard to the cut off dates, as I said, we will roll out the different programmes as the year goes on. So far, we have asked the RAPID AITs with €300,000 required for the urban ones and €200,000 each for the ones in the provincial towns. They have been asked to send in their priority projects amounting to the amounts outlined. We asked them at the end of January and they must have that data in by late March. The other projects will be rolled out. That is the only cut off date at present within which the specific RAPID AITs must apply. We will give cut off dates for the others as we announce them during the year.

Mr. McGinley: In regard to the other two categories, will the allocations be made to groups rather than individuals? Does the Minister of State expect the €60 million will be allocated between now and the end of this year?

Mr. N. Ahern: It is divided up into three sections. The Department of Education and Science is working on its plan and the Department of Health and Children is working on the disability one. We expect the Department of Education and Science plan will be in within three or four weeks but it might take the Department of Health and Children a few more weeks. They will be rolled out as the year goes on. We cannot predict exactly what will be in their two plans. It will probably be roughly what we are doing but we must wait and see what plans they come in with.

National Drugs Strategy.

105. **Mr. O'Shea** asked the Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs the discussions he has had with the national drugs strategy team in regard to the potential danger of the rapid spread of the use of crack cocaine; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4505/06]

Mr. N. Ahern: I assure the Deputy that I am in ongoing contact with the national drugs strategy team regarding various aspects of the national drugs strategy. I am monitoring the situation with regard to the misuse of drugs, including crack cocaine.

No specific studies on the use of crack cocaine in this State have been carried out. The available figures come from the joint national advisory committee on drugs and the drug and alcohol information and research unit — Northern Ireland — drug prevalence survey. The survey showed that the use of crack cocaine was very low at that time — 0.3% reported lifetime use and 0.1% reported use in the past 12 months. It is intended that a new drug prevalence study will be carried out from perhaps this autumn to 2007.

[Mr. N. Ahern.]

Each of the drugs task forces has an action plan in place to tackle drug use in their area based on their own identified priorities and they continue to have ongoing contact with their local communities. These projects deal with supply reduction, prevention, treatment and rehabilitation for a range of drugs, including crack cocaine. We must be aware that most drug users engage in poly-drug use and, therefore, projects generally aim to address this pattern of usage rather than concentrating on one drug to the exclusion of others.

I recently met senior members of the Garda Síochána involved in the drugs area. The feedback from them and other sources indicates that crack cocaine is not being used extensively in Ireland but is confined to small areas of the population.

However, I fully accept that a potential danger exists that the use of crack cocaine could spread rapidly and I assure the Deputy that I will continue to monitor the situation and will ensure any necessary steps are taken to address increased threats.

Mr. O'Shea: Does the Minister not agree that 80% of crack cocaine users go on to develop an addiction, usually within a fortnight of their first smoke, while 7% of cocaine users go on to develop an addiction, which can take up to 18 months? The "high" associated with crack cocaine is unparalleled. I understand that it can last for 40 to 50 seconds and never exceeds a few minutes. However, the "high" from cocaine lasts for half an hour and that from heroin for three to four hours. Hence, this is a particularly lethal and awful drug.

Recently, I read a report that suggested that Irish underworld dons are major players who bring untold amounts of cocaine into Britain. My basic point is that there are indications that crack cocaine is available here. There is plenty of cocaine in the country and establishing so-called cocaine factories is not particularly difficult. When one sees the rapidity with which cocaine use — and crack cocaine use in particular — spread in the United Kingdom, I am not convinced that the system outlined by the Minister of State is anywhere near adequate to deal with this issue. Cocaine appears to be available here and taking that extra step is not beyond the ken of the people to whom I refer. Ultimately, the problem is that people get addicted so quickly that the spread of crime and the consequences on the community at large would be enormous.

Mr. N. Ahern: I agree this is a particularly lethal and awful drug. While it is obtainable in Dublin, thus far it has been largely confined to certain community groups. It is an open question as to whether it stays within those community groups or spreads out among native Dubliners. I agree this is a real problem. It is harder for the

Garda to make seizures of crack cocaine because it might not be imported. Ordinary cocaine is processed or cooked into crack cocaine. However, we are aware of the dangers it poses. The Garda Síochána is aware of where it may be found, is monitoring the situation carefully and is trying to clamp down on it. Undoubtedly however, if it became more widespread, some of the Deputy's fears could well be realised, as it is a particularly lethal drug.

The problem with cocaine, either crack cocaine or the ordinary variety, is that unlike heroin, there is no substitute treatment for it. Hence one can only try to attract users who have become addicted to avail of services such as counselling or behavioural therapy. This is often difficult because some of the people concerned live fairly chaotic lives and it is difficult to attract them to avail of services. However, the situation is being monitored carefully and I hope the drug will not become prevalent in more mainstream communities.

Mr. O'Shea: While I thank the Minister of State for his reply, does he not agree that in terms of reassuring the public, he has said nothing that suggests the levels of urgency, alertness and keen observation that will be necessary to keep this situation under control? The impact of this drug far exceeds anything we have encountered heretofore. For instance, I have read that people of middle class backgrounds, particularly in the financial sector in London, have also been dabbling in crack cocaine. Hence, there is a need to impress on people the message about the awfulness of this drug. If one can become addicted to it within a fortnight, time is of the essence. People must be warned about the drug and there must be more urgent and focused preparations to prevent the awful plague that may result from its use.

Mr. N. Ahern: I appreciate the Deputy's comments and assure him the Government is doing what it can. I do not believe the middle class people mentioned by the Deputy are those who are most at risk. As of now, it is more likely to be heroin misusers who have availed of drug addiction services. Consequently, they can be made aware of the dangers of this drug through such services. To some extent, people must also be aware of their own role and responsibility in this respect. However, we have conducted more widespread awareness campaigns, strictly targeting cocaine users in nightclubs, late night pubs and similar venues. Last year, we specifically mounted such a campaign to inform people of the dangers of cocaine and of crack cocaine in particular. They were informed that it is not a recreational drug and, as the Deputy has noted, that one can become addicted extremely quickly. This information should be widely disseminated.

Thus far however, crack cocaine is not a major problem here. The situation is being carefully

monitored and while it may be in use within immigrant communities, individuals from such groups could easily and rapidly begin dealing it to the local population. Through community groups, local drugs task forces and different projects we make people aware of this drug's awfulness and of the potential damage it can do to them.

Community Development.

106. **Mr. Boyle** asked the Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs if his attention has been drawn to the fact that hill walkers are being restricted and pathways are being blocked by farmers in the northwest of the country; and the implications such actions have on reaching agreement on access issues. [4503/06]

Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs (Éamon Ó Cuív): I established Comhairle na Tuaithe in February 2004 to address the three priority issues of access to the countryside, the development of a countryside code and the development of a countryside recreation strategy. This decision followed consideration by the rural and agri-tourism advisory group of a report presented by the consultation group on access to waymarked ways. The establishment of a countryside council was the key recommendation of the report.

Comhairle na Tuaithe comprises representatives of the farming organisations, recreational users of the countryside and State bodies with an interest in the countryside. They have approached their work in a spirit of co-operation and through working groups, which further components of these aims. To achieve its work programme, Comhairle na Tuaithe has established separate working groups, which report regularly to the full comhairle to address the three specific areas of its mandate. The group working on the issue of access to the countryside, is chaired by an official from my Department and consists of a representative of the Irish Cattle and Sheep Farmers Association, the Irish Farmers Association, the Mountaineering Council of Ireland, Keep Ireland Open, Fáilte Ireland and Comhairle na hÉireann.

The Deputy will agree that the access working group representation takes in the varying concerns and opinions of those with an interest or stake in this issue. It has met on eight occasions since it was established. Through discussion, debate and the application of a pragmatic willingness to co-operate, it has agreed a set of access parameters which Comhairle na Tuaithe has formally endorsed and which it believes will act as a basis for conflict prevention and will integrate a variety of needs and responsibilities. The access parameters agreed by Comhairle na Tuaithe state that access to the countryside must be based on mutual respect and: acceptance of the rights of farmers and landowners over access to their land; acceptance of the need of recreational users to

have reasonable access to the countryside and uplands; acceptance of the aspirations of recreational users to lobby for legislative change; acknowledgement of the concerns of farmers and landowners in respect of insurance and liability; opposition to the use of any form of violent or threatening behaviour in relation to conflicts over access and where a conflict arises, rapid positive efforts should be made to resolve it by all parties involved; recognition of the value that recreational activity brings to the rural economy; and acceptance that recreational users in the countryside must be responsible for their own safety.

As for the Deputy's reference to the north west of the country, the Deputy may be aware that the national waymarked ways advisory committee of the Irish Sports Council is the body which is primarily concerned with the development of waymarked trails in Ireland and that it is represented on Comhairle na Tuaithe.

Additional information not given on the floor of the House.

One of the fundamental principles underpinning the development of these trails is that they are only developed with the consent and full support of all landowners. The staff of the advisory committee, in reply to an inquiry from my Department, indicated that there are currently five national waymarked ways in the north west. There are two in County Donegal, namely, Slí Dún na nGall and the Bluestack Way and three in the Sligo-Leitrim area, namely, the Sligo Way, the Miners' and Historical Trail and Slí Liatroma. Between them these trails cover almost 570 km of walks. The national waymarked ways advisory committee has informed my Department that it is not aware of any difficulties or blockages being experienced on these routes.

I am aware that some landowners in the Sligo-Leitrim area have placed signs on their land prohibiting access. However, I have made clear my view that a local community-based approach is the way forward where issues of access to the countryside arise. Where it is not possible to reach agreement, in a particular location, alternative routes should be explored and developed so that landowners' rights over access to their lands are not interfered with. Any proposal for Exchequer payment for access would not be acceptable.

Mr. Boyle: It is almost two years since the establishment of Comhairle na Tuaithe. Is the Minister satisfied there has been perceptible progress on the issue? Relations have deteriorated on the ground between all sides with an interest in the dispute. My reference in the question to the north west had nothing to do with the legal history in the area. A number of incidents were brought to my attention and that of other elected representatives in Counties Donegal, Leitrim and Sligo. For example, a walking club journeyed to north Leitrim. The members planned a route

[Mr. Boyle.]

which they discovered passed through agricultural land and they changed their route to use a public right of way, which passed through commonage. When they reached the commonage, they were stopped by the landowner. He not only said they could not pass because he owned the commonage but he also identified himself as the secretary of the north Leitrim branch of a farming organisation. He stated that not only was he expressing his strong personal reservations about the walkers passing through, he was following the policy of the farming organisation, which was involved in negotiating on an individual basis a compensation package for its members to allow access to their lands.

This represents a disincentive for people to travel to rural areas and for the promotion of rural tourism. In addition, the perception is that the Government is being manipulated by one organisation in the wider negotiations. Ultimately, this issue raises questions about the effectiveness of Comhairle na Tuaithe. I would like the Minister to address these issues.

Éamon Ó Cuív: I refer to two basic principles, the first of which is that a landowner owns the land and he or she is not under a legal obligation to allow anybody on his or her land. The second is no compensation will be paid by the State for the provision of access to land. I have made those two principles clear time and again. It is, therefore, within a landowner's right to say he or she does not want a person crossing his or her land. Commonage in Ireland is not defined as it is in England where such land is community land. Commonage in Ireland is normally undivided land in which there are more than two shareholders. They are as much owners of the land collectively as a person who owns land outright. Rights of way are different. No one can be prevented from walking on a right of way.

The Deputy referred to the north west, which is home to a significant number of walkways on which full agreement has been reached regarding access. The national waymarked ways committee has a policy of ensuring it has the agreement of various farmers before it advertises walkways. The following walkways are accessible in Counties Donegal, Sligo and Leitrim: Slí Dhún na nGall, the Bluestack Way; the Sligo Way, the Arigna Miners Way and Historical Trail and Slí Liatroma. They provide 570 km of walks and more walks will be developed over time.

One can always bring the horse to water but one cannot make the horse drink. If people feel it is not in their interest to promote rural tourism and so on in their areas, so be it because that is their right. However, we should advertise those areas where people are only delighted to attract rural tourists and are more than willing to allow them to roam the hills freely. That is the case in the vast majority of areas. If this is done in a focused way, a top quality product can be pro-

moted without conflict and it can be marketed internationally in the knowledge that tourists will not only have the acquiescence of the landowner but also his or her encouragement to visit. That is the way it should be. A céad míle fáilte should be given to those who wish to visit our countryside. Plenty of communities would give a dhá chéad míle fáilte to anybody who wishes to visit their areas as long they respect the countryside code agreed with Comhairle na Tuaithe.

Mr. Boyle: I appreciate the Minister's comments, which will be reassuring to many. However, he did not address the commonage issue, which should be addressed legally as soon as possible. If walkers travel across land owned by two or more people, seeking permission to access it will be very difficult. The Minister's Department must take the lead in resolving this issue and put thought into tackling it legally.

Éamon Ó Cuív: This is always a problem. The ownership issue was a problem when the commonages were destocked. In most upland areas, the landowners are more than willing to allow people cross them. The consensus in Comhairle na Tuaithe is that upland areas should be accessible and, as long as people are not doing damage, there should be no difficulty accessing them. There is a large number of mountains where I live and the tenure system in place means they are in commonages while other large mountains are in private ownership. The general approach is to treat them similarly and the owners tend not to object to people walking across the mountains. We should keep it that way and presume that, unless otherwise stated, there is no objection to crossing mountains.

The issue was discussed by Comhairle na Tuaithe and there is little difference between the landowners and recreational users. Crossing enclosed fields is a different issue as this raises safety concerns relating to gates, machinery, livestock and so on. The solution to this is a little more sophisticated. Where people want access from a road to a mountain I wanted to try to secure agreement with the landowners to build pathways through the granting of a licence or other arrangement such as the rural social scheme.

I have lived in the countryside for approximately 30 years and I am absolutely convinced that whatever chance there is of resolving this by dialogue, the heavy hand of the law will not resolve the underlying issue because a law which people do not buy into is unenforceable in a situation like this. We are going the tedious, slow way, but it will achieve the best result.

My other basic principle, which I have made clear to the farming organisations, including the organisation referred to by the Deputy, is if there are areas in which farmers do not wish to promote rural tourism, so be it. The vast majority of people living in uplands and areas of attraction for rural tourism recognise the benefits for them.

The rural social scheme is helpful in this regard because it covers farmers and a large number of rural tourism Leader groups using the scheme are anxious to work on walkways. When the farmers are working on the walkways, it is unlikely their neighbours will oppose them.

Decentralisation Programme.

107. **Mr. McGinley** asked the Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs the breakdown of the grades of staff within his Department who have expressed a desire to decentralise to the locations chosen by his Department; if he is satisfied that it will be possible to fill all the grades with existing staff from within his Department in the chosen locations; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4729/06]

Éamon Ó Cuív: My Department is transferring its headquarters to Knock Airport and 13 posts to Na Forbacha. Seven Na Forbacha posts are in place and it is expected that the remaining posts will be filled by the end of 2006. My Department

Sec. Gen.	Asst. Sec.	PO	AP	HEO+AO	EO	SO	CO	Services Officer	Total
1	2	3	2	4	9	0	4	1	26

Mr. McGinley: My question relates to the interest within the Minister's current Dublin-based Department staff to decentralise to the chosen locations. He is well aware of the importance of the wealth of expertise within his Department in regard to key areas such as drugs control, community development and so on. Will he agree that he will still need a continuity of this expertise after his Department has decentralised? Can he guarantee to the House that he can make up the numbers of all grades, from clerical officer to principal officer, who make up this expertise? Is he satisfied with the preparation that has been engaged in by his Department, and perhaps other Departments, for the people who will move from Dublin to different parts of the country? Are offices and accommodation available? I understand that a hotel complex, or part of a hotel complex, in the Minister's constituency, has been taken over to facilitate these people who are moving from Dublin to decentralised locations. Is he satisfied that this is the most economical, logical and practical way to deal with the issue, or will he agree that custom-built offices, suitable for their work should be prepared before the move takes place?

Éamon Ó Cuív: I am pleased the Deputy has given me an opportunity to correct an incorrect report in a Sunday newspaper, based more on fiction than on fact, despite the fact that we gave

is scheduled to complete its move to Knock Airport by the end of 2007. It is also planned to relocate up to 70 posts in advance of the main move subject, *inter alia*, to the availability of suitable temporary accommodation in the general area. The Office of Public Works is seeking to source suitable accommodation and I hope that this advance move can take place from mid-2006.

Currently some 26 members of staff have indicated a willingness to transfer to Knock Airport. Additional staff are transferring into my Department from other Dublin Departments for decentralisation. In addition, a large number of applicants who are currently decentralised wish to transfer to my Department. With all of those staff, and with the adoption of appropriate HR and risk management responses, I believe I will have sufficient applicants to fill all posts, both for the advance move and for the next phase of my Department's decentralisation programme, namely, the relocation to the new permanent headquarters building.

The following is a breakdown of staff currently serving in the Department who have committed to decentralise to Knock Airport.

the details, and suggested they should contact the organisation involved, Pobal. In regard to these jobs, they are not civil servants. They are the staff of Pobal, which is a private company that operates under the aegis of the various Government Departments and gets administrative money from my Department.

I would like to put on record what is happening in Clifden. Some 20 new jobs are being created in Pobal to provide services for the rural social scheme and a new community services scheme that was the social economy scheme, which my Department has just taken over. These services are being provided on contract to my Department. The Deputy will be aware that it was agreed there would be decentralisation of ADM staff, now Pobal, to Clifden. It was decided to recruit these new staff for Clifden. We need them now because they must provide the services now. Pobal decided to recruit the staff and sought temporary accommodation in Clifden. The most suitable office accommodation was in the station house, a very large complex, including a hotel, apartments and many other buildings in Clifden. Some ten staff, who are extra employees, will commence work this month, with a further ten later in the year. These people are being recruited currently. Some journalists appear to think we are providing overnight accommodation, which is not the case. We are providing ordinary standard office accommodation.

[Éamon Ó Cuív.]

The cost of the accommodation is €18 per square foot, which is approximately half of what the same accommodation, which would have had to be rented here for extra staff, would have cost. What was the point hiring staff to work in Clifden, bringing them to Dublin for a year or so while seeking permanent accommodation and moving them to Clifden? It would make no sense when they were hired to work permanently in Clifden. The obvious and cheapest way to proceed was to acquire the accommodation in Clifden.

I thank the Deputy for the opportunity to correct an incorrect report in the newspaper. I wrote a short letter to the newspaper to the effect that I hoped the newspaper would win the newspaper award for fiction.

Mr. McGinley: Was it published?

Éamon Ó Cuív: No, it was a bit hard-hitting. It was a short letter stating that I hoped the newspaper would win the award for fiction writers whenever the journalists are presented with awards.

There is a challenge in all of this for the Department. However, many of the senior staff are already in place. Some 187 people in total are seeking to come into the Department, which is more than sufficient, but they do not match grade by grade. The grades in which there are deficiencies currently are HEO, assistant principal and principal officer. For this reason, we need a two year roll-in, in other words, 70 staff will be moved this year and the remainder will move the following year. There are plenty of COs, SOs, EOs and so on offering; the problem is with the three middle grades. However, I have no doubt that in the two year period the deficiencies in these numbers will be made up because people are continuing to apply for the CAF.

While it is a challenge for us this year, I have no doubt as we go through the year, the staff will rise to the challenge. There are already people moving out and moving in, which is good, because it is taking place ahead of the physical decentralisation. People are becoming accustomed to the job. It poses challenges but the Department is determined to ensure this move will take place with as little ripple as possible in terms of customer service. If everyone works together, we can achieve this, and I am determined to ensure it happens.

Dormant Accounts Fund.

108. **Mr. Boyle** asked the Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs his views on recent remarks made by a person (details supplied) the chairman of Integrated Rural Development, Kiltimagh, on a show (details

supplied) regarding the changes in the dormant fund allocation system which he claims has made the system less accessible and accountable. [4504/06]

Mr. N. Ahern: The Deputy will be aware that I have outlined in the House on a number of occasions the reasons the Government decided to make changes to the dormant accounts scheme. In summary, these were to fully address governance and accountability issues and to provide for greater transparency in decision-making on disbursements.

On 4 January 2006, I announced details concerning the allocation of €24 million from the Dormant Accounts Fund this year for the purpose of supporting programmes and types of projects tackling social and economic disadvantage. Following this announcement, there was a certain amount of media coverage, including an interview on national radio with a representative from Integrated Rural Development, Kiltimagh, concerning the changes introduced by Government on dormant accounts.

There may have been an impression given in the interview that Pobal was previously the decision-making authority with regard to disbursements from the dormant accounts fund. This is clearly not the case. The Dormant Accounts Fund Disbursements Board engaged Pobal as a service provider to administer the initial round of funding on its behalf. In this regard, Pobal received and evaluated applications and submitted its advice to the board which then made decisions on whether applications should be approved or not.

Under the new arrangements recently put in place by the Government, applications will be received and assessed against published criteria by or on behalf of public bodies and the results of such assessments submitted to the Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs. The Minister will then submit the results of the assessments to the Government for approval. It is anticipated that Pobal will, in the main, be engaged as a service provider to again carry out the function of receiving and assessing applications similar to its role for the former board.

Mr. Boyle: Will the Minister of State agree that this criticism, coming immediately after the first round of allocations under the new system, undermines many of the arguments the Minister has been making, particularly in the recent dormant accounts legislation? If a system is to be seen to be accountable and accessible, it does nothing for the Government's credibility if those who have had most experience of such allocations in the past, including personal direct experience in the assessment of allocations for communities, react in such a negative way immediately following a new system being operated. For those of us

who criticised the new system of allocations as having the potential to be open to abuse, particularly with successors in the Department of Community, Gaeltacht and Rural Affairs, we now have confirmation on the ground that the system does not find acceptance, is not seen to be working and has none of the qualities described by the Minister of State in terms of being open or transparent.

Mr. N. Ahern: I do not agree with Deputy Boyle. There was much favourable media comment after we made our announcements in early January. I am not sure if I heard that interview but I heard a few of them — I may have heard that one. Some people were all mixed up. Deputy Boyle may have drawn conclusions, or one interview followed another and people quoted things as gospel which were absolutely not so. I realise that person had previous experience and knowledge of ADM but some of the things I heard on radio were due to people not realising what was happening. We clearly explained the system several times and I think it will work and be accepted and appreciated by people as the schemes are rolled out during the year.

Mr. Boyle: My question was specific. It related to a specific interview and the experience of a particular individual. If this person who has had direct experience of the assessment process in the past is unhappy about how the new system is working, that reflects greater unhappiness among the community and voluntary sector as a whole. It is an attempt to obscure the issue for the Minister of State to talk about the lack of knowledge apparent in other interviews. The Government is in difficulty on this issue and if it wants to bring credibility to this process it must urgently examine how these allocations are made and by whom so that those who make the applications know they are being assessed honestly.

Mr. N. Ahern: The system we have introduced is in accordance with the legislation. It is very open and transparent. We have gone through that several times so I will not rehash the debate we had on the legislation. ADM was employed by the Dormant Accounts Fund Disbursements Board as a service provider in the previous round of funding. ADM is now called Pobal and it will have much the same role this time — as a service provider. It was not a decision maker in the previous round and it is not a decision maker this time. I cannot swear that I heard that interview and I did not listen to it a second time, but I believe that some people, perhaps including the person to whom Deputy Boyle referred, were a bit mixed up. The journalist may not have been all that well up on this area. There is no real change in the role of ADM.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: That concludes Priority Questions. We now take other questions.

Other Questions.

Postal Services.

109. **Mr. Cuffe** asked the Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs if decisions have been reached on applications made to his Department in September 2005 for funding to automate a number of island post offices. [4341/06]

Éamon Ó Cuív: In September 2005, an application for funding to automate a number of island post offices was received by my Department from An Post. This application is being evaluated in the context of the funding available to me and the competing demands on same.

Mr. Boyle: I am disappointed that the Minister has not been able to answer the question more directly. This question was first asked prior to Christmas, at which time he indicated that those decisions would be made by the end of 2005. We are now two months into 2006 but no decision has yet been made. Will the Minister expand on the information and give the number of applications that have been sought from his Department, when a decision is likely to be made and the funding implications of positive decisions being made in each case?

Does the Minister accept that for the island communities involved, automation should be adopted, especially in terms of social welfare payments because of the insistence on this policy by his Cabinet colleague, Deputy Brennan, the Minister for Social and Family Affairs. In more urban areas it appears that social welfare recipients are being pushed towards the banking system but no such option exists on many of the islands. This is a service that can and must only be provided through An Post.

Éamon Ó Cuív: I absolutely agree with Deputy Boyle. Funnily enough I have been driving this matter since I became a Minister of State six or seven years ago. The reluctance has been on the part of An Post to get on and do the job. It said it did not have the resources. We then offered capital resources to try to enable it to do the job. I have no problem in providing funding of a capital nature, including training on a one-off basis and so on to install the system. I more than agree with everything Deputy Boyle said. AIB banking services, passport applications, mobile phone top-ups and all these other services are now available through post offices. We are committed to providing these services on the islands but the obligation is on An Post in the first instance.

There are post offices on 11 of the islands, two of which, Árainn Mhór and Inis Mór nó Árainn

[Éamon Ó Cuív.]

are fully automated. The proposals we got are for Oileán Thoraí i dTír Chonaill, Clare Island and Inishturk in County Mayo, Boffin, Inis Meáin and Inis Oírr in County Galway, Bere Island, Oileán Cléire and Sherkin in County Cork, which gives a total of nine, and when the other two are added this gives a total of 11 post offices, nine of which require to be automated.

We have no problem with the one-off cost. The issue is that having put in the system An Post claims it does not have enough money to run it. It is not my business to pay running cost subsidies on islands. If I start down that road every agency of the State would be looking for running cost subsidies but they will not get them. We will have to resolve that issue.

Mr. McGinley: I am not sure how far the Minister's writ extends in these issues but I am anxious that post offices would not close down along our coasts. The Minister is also responsible for rural development. Does he have a role in protecting existing post offices in a Gaeltacht area in my county? I am sure the Minister is very familiar with Rann na Feirste. The post office there, which probably predates the foundation of the State, has been closed. The same thing has happened in the next village, Croithlí. It is happening all over rural Ireland. I agree with Deputy Boyle on the need to have post offices automated as much as possible. Does the Minister have a role in ensuring that post offices remain open and that services remain available to the people in these rural areas? I am sure the Minister will agree that having a post office in an area is a valuable facility. Very often, it is the only State-sponsored facility in an area and it is a backward step to close it down. Does the Minister have a view on that and what is his responsibility as Minister with responsibility for rural development?

Éamon Ó Cuív: I will not comment on the situation in regard to any particular post office, but in terms of the broader issue, the ministerial responsibility for that matter rests with the Minister for Communications, Marine and Natural Resources. Of course I am anxious that services are maintained in rural communities, but that has to be done within the remit of An Post, which has the primary responsibility to make sure it is done. An Post must have a policy to provide services throughout the country.

The issue of the island post offices is different in that if one is on an island there is no question of going down the road to the next post office. If one is on the mainland, at least one has the choice of going to a post office three or four miles down the road. The reason we kept pushing money and that there is a desire to see island post offices upgraded is that there is no other choice for people on islands, and we will continue to pursue this matter.

There is a broader policy issue at stake, one which would create a very dangerous precedent.

The various agencies of State have an obligation to provide services to our island communities. As a Department, we have facilitated capital expenditure on health centres, schools, post offices and a wide range of services. Once we have facilitated that we expect the service to be provided without a continual subsidy from the Department by the agency with responsibility for that service. In other words, the health authorities would provide health services and so on. It would be a dangerous precedent for us to cross the threshold. If I were to do so in the case of one State agency I would have every State agency pleading poverty when it came to providing island services.

Funding is always limited. There is funding for providing air services and boat services and we want to improve those services. For example, there is a need for cargo services to islands like Turk, Boffin, Clare and Tory. There is a need for an air service to Tory, and to Boffin in County Galway. We want to improve a range of services. If I started subsidising health boards, education authorities and the like on a day to day basis, the Deputy would quickly realise I would have no money left to improve the ferry services. I have a clear view that the day to day cost of running the services, and obligation for doing so on a parity of esteem basis with people on the mainland, rests with the various agencies. When we resolve that issue, we will then look further at this issue and I hope we will be able to resolve this An Post issue.

An Post has had its own travails in the past few years. I think they were caused, not by the cost of rural services but by other issues. We will try to resolve this as speedily as possible. It has been a long drawn out process. These matters can be frustrating, but there is no point in taking a short cut that leads to even bigger problems in the future and in my view would lead to a draw on island funds that should not be made on specific island funds.

Mr. O'Shea: What is the approximate cost of automating a post office? The post office is central to communications, especially on the islands. The former Minister of Public Enterprise, Senator O'Rourke, mentioned a one stop shop approach to rural post offices which she was addressing at that stage, where various State services could be delivered in the one building. The idea was that this would generate some kind of income so one would get somebody to take on such post offices. Are such approaches being examined by anybody? Is the Minister really stating that the current position is there will be no movement on this because An Post will not pay for it and nobody else will pay for it, and there will be no automation?

Mr. English: I am inclined to agree with the way the Minister is approaching this. What are the running costs? Are they excessive?

I would totally agree with Deputy O'Shea's comments on this as well. I am sure this is being looked at but it should be the way forward.

Éamon Ó Cuív: The capital costs are €129,000 and the running cost per annum is €26,000.

Mr. English: Is that per office?

Éamon Ó Cuív: No, my understanding is that the entire project will also require an annual subvention of €26,000. The issue is whether I cross a line. The problem for me is not the money. Some €26,000 will not break the bank, either for me or for An Post.

Mr. English: It is the principle.

Éamon Ó Cuív: What I would be afraid of is the queue that would form quickly behind An Post — we have seen this in the past — of all sorts of service providers on islands queuing up with their hands out stating, "Please, sir, can I have some more too?" The Deputies know what would happen then, there would be no money left for the services we subvent on a daily basis, particularly transport services.

The figure for capital costs of €129,000 is modest. No doubt I can come up with €129,000. That is not a problem; we just would have to go through the processes.

I agree with Deputy O'Shea on the issue of the one stop shop. Currently, there is not the full range of automated services available. The first step we want to take is to provide everything that the best post office in the country can provide in terms of banking, passport applications, mobile services, sterling drafts, business deposits, gift vouchers etc. Of course there is a captive population on an island, where people cannot go to the next post office and the post office gets all the business available. There is also quite a bit of tourist business on some of these islands. I agree they can build up a good business.

On the issue of other services, the concept is good. However, we run a community development project on all of those islands, with the exception of Sherkin for reasons of which the House will be aware, and we are a little between and betwixt as to who should provide the one stop shop, in that there is the post office which is often associated with a shop and there is also this community development project or Gaeltacht co-operative providing other services, to which we often give the role of providing the kind of other one stop shop services. I agree that between those two organisations as many services as possible should be delivered within the islands. The principle is correct, but in certain cases perhaps the Gaeltacht co-operative or the CDP should provide it. In other cases, the idea of the local post office providing as many services as possible is a worthy one to which I would be open.

Polasaí Díláraithe.

110. D'fhiafraigh **Mr. McGinley** den Aire Gnóthaí Pobail, Tuaithe agus Gaeltachta an dtabharfaidh sé cuntas ar an dul chun cinn atá déanta ina Roinn maidir le polasaí díláraithe an Rialtais agus cén uair atá súil aige go mbeidh an polasaí curtha i gcrích. [4403/06]

Éamon Ó Cuív: Tá sé beartaithe go mbeidh aistriú mo Roinne-se go hAerfort Chnoc Mhuire críochnaithe faoi dheireadh 2007. Tá sé ar intinn againn suas le 70 ball foirne a athlonnú roimh an phríomhaistriú, ag brath, *inter alia*, ar chóiríocht fheiliúnach shealadach a bheith ar fáil sa cheantar máguaird. Tá Oifig na nOibreacha Poiblí faoi láthair ag iarraidh cóiríocht chuí a aimsiú, agus tá súil agam go dtarlóidh an t-aistriú tosaigh seo ó lár na bliana 2006.

Faoi láthair, tá 26 duine d'fhoireann mo Roinne sásta aistriú go hAerfort Chnoc Mhuire. Tá breis foirne ag aistriú ó Ranna eile chun díláru. Chomh maith leis sin, tá líon mór iarratasóirí atá díláraithe cheana ag iarraidh aistriú go dtí mo Roinnse. Leis an bhfoireann sin, agus leis na céimeanna iomchuí ó thaobh acmhainní daonna agus láimhseáil riosca de a bheith glactha, creidim go mbeidh a dhóthain iarratasóirí ann chun na postanna go léir a líonadh don aistriú tosaigh agus, ina dhiaidh sin, don aistriú chuig an gceannceathrú buan i gCnoc Mhuire.

Tá suíomh roghnaithe don cheannceathrú buan sin, agus tá Conradh sínithe ag Oifig na nOibreacha Poiblí chun an suíomh a cheannacht. Fógraíodh comórtas le déanaí do dheardh agus do thógáil an fhoirgnimh. Tá súil agam go dtosóidh an obair ar an suíomh sa cheathrú dheirdh den bhliain reatha. Tá sé beartaithe go mbeidh críoch leis an obair uilig is gá ar an fhoirgneamh in am d'aistriú na foirne uile go hAerfort Chnoc Mhuire faoi dheireadh 2007.

Maidir leis an aistriú chuig Na Forbacha, tá seacht bpost as an 13 post atá i gceist líonta cheana féin, agus táim ag súil leis go mbeidh fuílleach na bpost líonta ar an láthair sin faoi dheireadh na bliana.

Chun tacaíocht a thabhairt don phróiseas seo uile, tá plan forfheidhmithe um dhílárú ullmhaithe ag mo Roinnse ag leagan amach na gcéimeanna chun aistrithe áitheasacha a chinntiú. Leanann an plan na treoirlínte atá leagtha síos ag an ghrúpa um fhorfheidhmiú díláraithe. Tá an plan á chur i gcrích i gcomhairle le bainisteoirí agus foireann araon, agus i gcomhréir leis na socruithe lárnaacha atá á ndéanamh maidir le haistrithe foirne agus nithe gaolmhara eile.

Mr. McGinley: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht an freagra céanna a thabhairt arís. Sílim go raibh dúbláil i gceist anseo agus go raibh mé féin mar chúis leis mar gur ionann iad Ceisteanna Uimh. 107 agus 110. Ní rachaidh mé siar ar an mhéid a bhí le rá agam nuair a bhí an tAire ag tabhairt freagra ar Cheist Uimh. 107.

[Mr. McGinley.]

Is dócha gurb é an t-aon ghné den díláru nach ndearna mé féin nó an tAire tagairt dó ná an díláru go Dún na nGall, is é sin, Foras na Gaeilge. An bhfuil aon dul chun cinn déanta ó thóg mé an cheist sa Dáil? Is dócha go bhfuil an tAire ag fanacht le tuairiscí agus mar sin de. B'fhéidir go bhféadfadh sé stádas rudaí i láthair na huairé a mhíniú. Tuigim nach mbeidh deacracht mhór ar bith le foirgneamh oirúnach agus fóirsteanach a chur ar fáil i nGaoth Dobhair a bheidh chomh saor agus inchurtha le foirgneamh ar bith atá ar fáil i gceantar ar bith eile sa tír. B'fhéidir go mbeadh an tAire ábalta a rá conas atá rudaí i láthair na huairé, chomh fada agus a bhaineann sé le Foras na Gaeilge.

Éamon Ó Cuív: Díreach sula labhróidh mé ar an bhForas, b'fhéidir go dtabharfainn píosa eolais nár thug mé roimhe seo. Tá 26 duine sa Roinn cheana féin atá sásta agus réidh le bogadh go Cnoc Mhuire.

Mr. McGinley: Cé mhéad?

Éamon Ó Cuív: Tá 26 duine sásta a bhogadh go Cnoc Mhuire. Bhog 70 duine i mbliana. Cheana féin, tá na daoine sin á lonnú sa Roinn le bheith réidh le bogadh, is é sin le rá, tá meaitseáil ar bun le go mbeidh na daoine atá ag teacht isteach sa Roinn nó atá istigh cheana féin sna háiteacha a bheidh ag bogadh go luath. Mar sin, déanfaidh sé sin an jab níos éascaí. Maidir le ceist Fhoras na Gaeilge, tá an plean faighte sa Roinn. Tá stáidéar á dhéanamh air, agus tá an roinn ó Thuaidh ag déanamh an rud céanna. Tá mé thar a bheith muiníneach ag éirí as an bplean sin go mbeidh muid in ann bogadh ar aghaidh. Tá an ceart ag an Teachta. Thiocfainn leis go hiomlán. Tá acmhainní maithe ag an Stát cheana féin i bhfoirm cinn de na heastáit ghnó is breátha sa tír san eastát tionsclaíochta i nGaoth Dobhair. Sin ceann de na fáthanna a roghnaigh mé an suíomh áirithe sin le haghaidh na dílárnaithe an chéad uair. Beimid in ann bogadh air seo mar ní bheidh na fadhbanna céanna i gceist ó thaobh aimsiú suíomh agus a bheadh i gceist i gceantracha eile. Tá mise ag tnúth leis an bplean seo a fheiceáil agus a scagadh agus ansin go n-éireoidh linn é a fheidhmiú. Níl sé léite agam fós ach déanfaidh mé sin go luath agus bogfaimid ar aghaidh. Caithfidh an bheirt Aire a bhogadh in éineacht ó Thuaidh agus Theas.

Mr. McGinley: Ar chuir an foras féin an plean seo ar fáil don Roinn?

Éamon Ó Cuív: Tá sé curtha ar fáil ag bord an fhorais.

Mr. McGinley: An bhfuil sé ar fáil don Roinn anseo agus don Roinn ó Thuaidh?

Éamon Ó Cuív: Tá.

National Drugs Strategy.

111. **Mr. Sherlock** asked the Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs his views on whether €1 million is sufficient funding for the emerging needs fund under the national drugs strategy; if representations have been made for increased funding in this regard; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4436/06]

129. **Ms O. Mitchell** asked the Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs if the amount allocated to the emerging needs fund will be increased in order to enhance drug prevention and treatment initiatives; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4373/06]

Mr. N. Ahern: I propose to take Questions Nos. 111 and 129 together.

The emerging needs fund was devised to address an evolving situation in regard to the misuse of drugs on a flexible basis and in a timely manner. To date I have allocated almost €850,000 under the fund to 15 projects. I hope to be in a position to make further allocations soon. I do not anticipate that the total allocation to projects under the fund will be capped at €1 million. I look forward to successful outcomes from the initiatives to which moneys under this fund will be allocated.

Mr. O'Shea: At what level does the Minister of State expect the fund to be capped if not €1 million? There is a wide discrepancy between the €1 million that appeared to be in place until the Minister of State spoke and the estimate of the chairpersons and co-ordinators of local drugs task forces that at least €8 million is required for the emerging needs fund. This group has on-the-ground experience and knows what is happening in communities. How can there be such a large discrepancy between what the Minister of State provides and what this group sees as the minimum amount necessary?

Mr. N. Ahern: It was originally envisaged that the fund would be €1 million for last year. It was intended to respond to key issues as they arose. The national drugs strategy team then decided to apply in tranches. If one does not know how much is required one must be careful not to spend all one's money on the first day. My comment about more than €1 million is not new. I sent word before Christmas, I think, to the national drugs strategy team to send in another list of maybe up to €2 million.

The final figures on these items depend on money and need, and on the quality of the projects that might come forward. It is one thing for a group to say it needs €5 million or €10 million but it is a different matter when one sees the quality of the projects submitted. I have asked it to prioritise its submissions and send in a list worth up to €2 million. It set three dates last year,

the last being November so no one could accurately predict what would be available.

Mr. English: It appears there is a delay in spending the money. The blame is apportioned to various people. It is not all the fault of the Minister of State's Department. There is a strong need for the money to be spent and this amount falls below that need. Any amount spent in this area makes a difference. Is there any way to speed up the funding process? The Minister of State said some of the applications came in late last year. What can be done to fast track the process?

If the Minister of State sees beneficial projects, better even than those in other countries, is it possible for the money to be spent more quickly? The sum of €2 million falls far short of the €5 million or €6 million that is badly needed.

Mr. N. Ahern: The emerging needs fund is not the overall Government spend on this area. Our budget is between €30 million and €35 million a year. Other projects worth over €20 million have been brought into the mainstream. The figures in our Department will never increase very much because we constantly send items into the mainstream health and education services as they are piloted and evaluated.

Almost 600 people work on projects that started at local drugs task force level or young people's fund level. The State invests significantly in this area. More may be needed and that is why we came up with the emerging needs fund idea. I accept Deputy O'Shea's point that new drugs appear regularly, requiring new responses.

Mr. English: It is not a case of what may be needed but what is needed.

Mr. N. Ahern: That is why we established this fund. The national drugs strategy team decided to apply for it in three tranches, the last of which came in November. I do not have the list of applications. It will send another list and we will continue to watch the situation which is fluid. We must move with it and be flexible enough to have new services. Equally, one needs to look at a project funded five or eight years ago and decide, if it is no longer needed, whether it can be adapted to today's needs.

Mr. Gregory: Is the Minister of State not misrepresenting the emerging needs fund? Is it not the case that it is intended to cover the needs of 14 task force areas, which is a major responsibility? Surely the emerging needs fund was a result of the Government's failure to provide round three plans for those task forces. Instead of round three plans the idea of an emerging needs fund was put to the national drugs strategy team which received the impression that this would be a substantial fund, not in the region of €800,000 which the Minister of State says might increase to €2 million. This is not the way to

oversee and fund strategic planning on an issue as widespread and as complex as drug abuse.

Surely the Minister of State and the national drugs strategy team and the drugs task forces agreed criteria for this fund. The task forces were asked to apply for the fund which they did to the tune of €4.5 million. The national drugs strategy team approved over 90% as fulfilling the criteria. The task forces were then told the fund was only worth €1 million. Recently they have been told it may increase to €2 million. In the context of the Minister of State's other area of responsibility, housing, where a handful of individuals earns billions of euro, it is not too much to ask for the €5 million required to cover this major social problem.

Even as we speak, other issues such as crack cocaine threaten to cause chaos in this city yet there is no strategy, funding or anything else available to deal with it because there is no strategic planning by the Minister of State at the Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs, Deputy Noel Ahern. When the national drugs strategy team produces a plan, it is humiliated by being told there is no money.

Mr. N. Ahern: I do not know where the question was in all that, but I sincerely hope I am not misrepresenting anything. It was certainly not my intention. We talked about the 14 local drugs task forces. One cannot have round three while the pilot project is on round two. Many of the projects under round two that might have been all right two or three years ago have not been in place all that long. They have certainly not been evaluated or mainstreamed. There must be some sense and logic in this. One cannot have a round three when much of round two is still at a pilot stage.

Most people in the community sector with whom I deal regard €1 million as substantial, and that was what was originally envisaged. Government funding is not just about the emerging needs fund. As I said, approximately €55 million is being spent that would have started at local drugs task force level. The health services would spend that and more, never mind education or justice. If one added them all up, one would find that considerably more than €150 million is being spent on the fight against drugs. It may not be fair to include all those matters, but it is probably €55 million of what started at local drugs task force level, with approximately 600 projects. I do not know what is required immediately, since many of the applications arrived only at the end of November. The team is assessing them.

Mr. Gregory: That is misleading this House. The team has approved those projects to the tune of €4.5 million.

Mr. N. Ahern: It may have approved some of them for €4.5 million, but not all of them. One must naturally see them all and know what the

[Mr. N. Ahern.]

bill is before one starts paying them in large numbers.

Mr. Gregory: Will the Department fund all those approved?

Mr. N. Ahern: Talking of strategic development, it was up to the local drugs task forces to send forward those projects that were critical.

Mr. Gregory: They have done that.

Mr. N. Ahern: They were dealing with real burning issues, such as crack cocaine. The final outcome will depend on money and the quality of the applications. I have not seen too many so far about the burning issue of crack cocaine. Let us get our facts together.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I call Deputy Crowe.

Mr. Gregory: The Minister of State is passing the buck.

Mr. Crowe: On reflection, will the Minister of State accept that part of the difficulty was that projects and task forces were not told that €1 million would be available from the emerging needs fund? The Minister of State mentioned 600 people. The message I get is that the natural development of many projects is being stymied by the fact that funding has not been available. I am a member of a drugs task force in my area and am quite aware of the difficulties there. Dublin is awash with drugs, and the same is true of towns and villages throughout Ireland.

The Minister of State has stressed that 600 people are working on projects, but many grew from the failure of the State to respond to emerging needs and the drug problem. The feeling is that we are failing to support those communities. The Minister of State is out of sync with what is occurring with the drugs problem throughout the State. That is why people are up in arms, frustrated, angry and beginning to march again. No one wishes to march, but we should support those communities rather than holding them back. That is the view of the groups to whom I have spoken. The Minister of State is holding them back by meanness in handing out money. The sum of €4.5 million is buttons compared with the problem, and we must support those communities.

Mr. N. Ahern: I have never said that €4.5 million was a massive sum.

Mr. Gregory: The Minister of State said that €1 million was.

Mr. N. Ahern: I do not know why we always concentrate on this fund when it is only a small part of our overall expenditure. If the Deputy is a member of a drugs task force, he will be aware

of the good work they do. I am not a member of one, and I have not been able for the past three years. I previously was a member of one, however, and I know the good work done locally by many good people. I sincerely hope that we are not stymieing them. I understand that a campaign is under way, although I am unsure of the agenda.

I am probably responsible for one thing, namely, the Deputy's first question. It was envisaged that this would be an extra-special little fund to deal with emerging needs. That was the attitude in the Department, which I shared. I hope that I made that clear at various meetings, but I did not put it down in writing. To the extent that I did not specifically state the figure of €1 million, I am probably partly responsible. However, in all other respects, I am very much working with people and considering the issue. It was not to be the overall policy on drugs or the overall Government social inclusion programme, and some projects come through that are not really emerging needs. They should turn to other Departments or agencies.

That was last year. We have more money this year, and I sincerely hope that we will be able to fund some of them once the good ones have been identified. I very much want to encourage and help work locally.

Written Answers follow Adjournment Debate.

Adjournment Debate Matters.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I wish to advise the House of the following matters in respect of which notice has been given under Standing Order 21 and the name of the Member in each case: (1) Deputy Bruton — the need for the Minister to approve the establishment of a new school operating the applied behaviour analysis method of teaching for Dublin's north side; (2) Deputy Pat Breen — if the Minister intends to subsidise the operations of Iarnród Éireann between Ennis and Galway and subsequent routes on the western rail corridor; (3) Deputy Gilmore — the need for the Office of Public Works to stop work on the erection of a new telecommunications mast at Shankill Garda station, County Dublin; (4) Deputy Cregan — the appointment of a third geriatrician to the Health Service Executive in the mid-western region; (5) Deputy O'Connor — to ask the Minister the action he is taking to ensure the completion of the Shamrock Rovers stadium at Tallaght; (6) Deputy Cowley — to ask the Minister the reason Mayo patients must wait for up to eight years for urgent urology hospital services in Galway; (7) Deputy Lynch — to ask the Minister the reason grant aid funding has been withdrawn from Feis Maitiú, Cork; (8) Deputy O'Sullivan — the need for the Minister to restore home tuition grants to children with autism who are attending school; (9) Deputy Crowe — the reason vital funding was blocked for a multi-use stadium for Tallaght against the

overwhelming support of local public representatives; (10) Deputy Catherine Murphy — the need to ensure that the waste water requirements of the upper and lower Liffey catchments are fully implemented; (11) Deputy Gogarty — if the Minister will appoint a commissioner to carry out and have full responsibility for the functions of Fingal County Council; (12) Deputies Paul McGrath and Ring — the issue of performance awards paid to senior managers in local authorities and the assessment process for those awards; (13) Deputy Penrose — if the Minister will sanction the additional €150,000 request to complete a new national school (details supplied) in County Westmeath; (14) Deputy Michael D. Higgins — the Minister's plans for the future of the Great Southern Hotels group; and (15) Deputy Morgan — the Minister's views on the sacking of a shop steward of the union Mandate from their position at Dunnes Stores in Crumlin.

The matters raised by Deputies Cregan, Penrose, Catherine Murphy, and Paul McGrath and Ring have been selected for discussion.

Finance Bill 2006: Second Stage (Resumed).

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

Mr. Durkan: Before the change in the business of the House, I was reminding the Minister of State of the neglect of the elderly, with specific reference to the callous attitude of recent years whereby even the homes they have built up and paid for over the years must be taken from them before they qualify for any kind of nursing home care. Incidentally, such care does not come cheap, as we know.

Another recent announcement concerned the closure of all psychiatric hospitals. I know it was heralded on the other side of the House with great applause, foot-stamping and the general acclamation that accompanies such serious announcements. Perhaps we will shortly hear that the various psychiatric institutions will be sold for urban development or apartment complexes. As one who has spent some considerable time on a health board, I hope that the promised community care follows. If it does not, the other side of the House, and everywhere else, will reap the whirlwind.

Mr. Parlon: Does the Deputy agree with the plan, however?

Mr. Durkan: We have no problem with the plan. It is its implementation with which I have difficulty, since I do not trust the Government with it. I particularly do not trust the Minister of State at the Department of Finance, Deputy Parlon. Every plan he has produced hitherto has fallen short of the guidelines, deadlines or target. There are few places one can go after that.

Mr. Parlon: The Deputy had better start listing them.

Mr. Durkan: If the Minister of State so desires, I have no difficulty in doing so. I do not wish to embarrass the Minister of State. However, if he was on a rifle range and missed as many targets, the spectators would need to be herded away from the scene for their own safety.

Mr. Parlon: The Deputy should name a few instead of waffling. This is more empty rhetoric.

Mr. Durkan: To return to the Minister of State's missed targets, it would be the most callous action to close down institutions on the basis that primary care was to be available, if that primary care is not available. I remind the Minister of State that primary care does not come cheap. It is not as cheap as promises and it should be capable of lasting somewhat longer. This affects vulnerable people, those needing support and back-up. To do anything other than deliver would be appalling. Needless to say, nothing would surprise me because there are people on the other side of the House who are quite capable of doing just that.

The Minister of State suggested I refer to specific targets. Unfortunately, time does not permit me to go through that long list but given the opportunity, I would cite missed targets such as the Red Cow, the M50, the voting ballot boxes, the electronic ballot boxes that were never used. These are all missed targets. It is not so much missed targets as invisible targets and perhaps this is the reason they were missed. I could cite instances of failure to deliver on time, on price or within budget price. One of the major themes of this Government and its immediate predecessor has been its total, absolute and abysmal failure to meet any kind of price target. There has hardly been a project that has not doubled and quadrupled in price.

Mr. Parlon: How then did we end up with €1.6 billion?

Mr. Durkan: I will explain how the Government ended up with €1.6 billion although I thought the total was €1.8 billion but perhaps it has shrunk in the meantime.

Mr. Parlon: The Deputy said €1.6 billion earlier.

Mr. Durkan: I said €1.8 billion. I am surprised the Government found the €1.8 billion. I am surprised this was not overlooked as well, on the basis that it was only a small sum of money when there was a great deal of money around.

Mr. Parlon: The Deputy is contradicting himself.

Mr. Durkan: The Minister of State should be ashamed of himself. He has come to the House and has the effrontery to suggest that the Government had done well and had a good surplus of money, even though it did not know it was there. This is like the postman going out to deliver letters but discovering his bag is empty one day and he has a full bag another day. The Government should be careful; it will do very well if it keeps going like that.

Mr. Parlon: If the Government is overspending, how did it end up with a massive surplus?

Mr. Durkan: I wish to emphasise the failure of the Government to deliver on its projects, failure to deliver on time, failure to deliver within price and failure to deliver to the people to whom it made wild promises.

The Government should be given time to apologise to the people. Just as in American football, there should be time out allowed for the Government to issue a profound apology to the people for the manner in which it has treated them, misled them, misguided them and taken their money out of their pockets. This is money the Government has lost and they cannot even count it as they have so much of it.

Mr. Parlon: I wonder whether the Deputy has been on the Kinnegad motorway lately.

Mr. Durkan: The Government could not even leave the Kinnegad motorway alone. It has immediately established toll booths, in case the motorway might work. There are now more tolls. The motorist who contributes €5.2 billion to the Exchequer every year gets nothing in return. He cannot park and if he parks where he should not park, his car will be clamped. He cannot drive anywhere because somebody will stop him for some reason or another. The clowns on the Government side have decided that not only must the motorist pay beforehand, but he will pay on the double and if he is on the M50, he will pay four times over because there will be four toll plazas. If he escapes one, he will still encounter more.

Mr. Parlon: The Kinnegad motorway is a tremendous success. It was built on time and within budget. It has taken half an hour off a journey.

Mr. Durkan: The Government is deluding itself—

Mr. Parlon: The Deputy only sees the negatives and he is deluding himself.

Mr. Durkan: Is the Government sure it has not been eating magic mushrooms? It is delirious, delusional and hallucinating. It does not know what the people are thinking. They should come

up close and ask the questions because the people will tell them very quickly.

I note the new rules governing the right of Revenue to make inquiries and this is to be welcomed. I participated in the DIRT inquiry and I appreciate the importance of such legislation. The lack of legislation is not always the cause of failure to detect. Countless cases were dealt with during that time and it was not necessary to introduce any legislation but it was clear to all that the rules had been broken several times over, at will, and yet nothing had been done. It is not sufficient to simply state that more legislation and more controls will be introduced. I agree that some controls are necessary and I would expect these controls to be exercised.

In a recent reply to a Dáil question, I was informed that €7.3 million was taken in armed robberies in ten months during 2005 and a total of €38,000 was recovered. This is a very poor show. It is important that the resources of the State be used to detect where such moneys are going. There is far too much organised crime, far too much talk about it and far too much talk about introducing more legislation coming from the other side of the House but far too little action in dealing with it.

I agree that tax concessions are desirable and can be used positively. In some towns and villages the urban renewal schemes fell apart and never materialised because a deadline was not imposed on their use. Potential investors thought the schemes would remain unchanged in the future.

I cannot understand the reason that at a time when there were tax concessions and allowances for everything and at a time when we could not produce enough houses for people who were eligible for social or affordable housing, it was not possible to produce a scheme to give tax relief to those willing, ready and prepared to build houses for them. I rest my case.

Mr. Parlon: I wish to share time with Deputies Andrews and Fiona O'Malley.

I am glad to have the opportunity to contribute to this debate and to raise a number of important issues that may assist the debate on taxation matters.

The Finance Bill demonstrates the continued commitment of this Government to use the tax system to expand our economy, reward work and alleviate the burden on taxpayers, especially those on lower pay. It also underlines the Government's commitment to a fairer and more equitable tax system.

I welcome the income tax changes confirmed in the Bill which will have the effect of removing all those on the minimum wage from the tax net, excluding workers on the average industrial wage from the higher tax rate, ensuring that high income taxpayers pay a minimum amount of tax and ending the remittance basis of taxation. The ESRI has said that budget 2006 had a more progressive impact on the distribution of income than any other in the past decade or more.

With reference to tax changes which impact positively on particular sectors of the economy, I welcome those affecting the farming community, including the continuation of the stamp duty exemption for young trained farmers for a further three years, the increase in the tax exemption limits for income from long-term farm leasing, a further improvement to the special tax relief for farm pollution control measures and the extension of certain existing capital acquisitions tax, capital gains tax and stamp duty reliefs to cover the EU single farm payment entitlement in appropriate circumstances.

With reference to the construction, meat processing and forestry sectors, I welcome the tightening of rules on relevant contract tax which will help tackle shadow economy operators and eliminate the competitive advantage enjoyed by non-compliant operators.

The Bill confirms the introduction of a tax disregard of up to €10,000 for child minders minding up to three children in their homes. It proposes significant improved tax reliefs aimed at restoring Ireland's competitive position as a film location. The Bill introduces a new scheme of relief for heritage property donated to a proposed new Irish heritage trust.

With regard to pension improvements, I applaud the significant pension initiatives in the Finance Bill which are aimed at SSIA investors and individuals who are 55 and over. These measures will greatly assist those on lower incomes or those not using their current full entitlements to provide themselves with reasonable retirement arrangements.

On the subject of Revenue powers, the proposed requirement for automatic reporting by financial institutions to Revenue of interest payments and other profit payments made to customers is reasonable and justified on the grounds of transparency and openness. Likewise, the proposed surcharge of 10% of the tax payable on undisclosed transactions that are ultimately determined to be purely tax avoidance transactions should send out a clear signal to those who seek to circumvent the system that they will be penalised if they flout it at the expense of others. Taxpayers who are open about their earnings and tax planning arrangements have nothing to fear from these revised arrangements.

There are no increases in VAT rates or in excise duties on petrol, tobacco or alcohol. In addition, a halving of excise duties on certain home heating oils is significant. These policy measures will make a significant contribution to ensuring that overall inflation is kept low during 2006.

I welcome the phased five-year scheme of targeted excise relief for biofuels introduced in the budget for 2006 with a view to assisting biofuels to achieve an initial target of 2% penetration of the transport fuel market by 2008. I understand that when fully operational in 2008, this relief is

expected to support the use and production of 163 million litres of biofuels per year. I also welcome the vehicle registration tax relief of 50% for new flexible fuel vehicles — vehicles capable of running on both conventional fuel and high-grade biofuels — which is being introduced for a pilot two-year period with effect from 1 January 2006.

This Finance Bill builds on the solid achievements of recent years and supports the progress of our economy. In its totality, it reflects the Government's commitment to consolidating our economic gains and creating the conditions for future employment growth. It is a Finance Bill which should be broadly welcomed by both the ordinary taxpayer as well as members of the business community.

Mr. Andrews: I thank the Minister of State for his comments. I wish to address two issues in which I have taken an interest — child care and pensions. Like the Minister of State, I welcome the proposals which will make a great difference to people struggling to manage their domestic and working lives. The Bill contains some imaginative and useful proposals. I hope in future we can expand the benefit-in-kind rules in the taxation legislation so that it will be simpler for companies to extend benefit-in-kind to their employees without tax. In that way, employees will know that is a right they can argue for in the context of pay negotiations. I also hope that in conjunction with this Bill, planning legislation will be relaxed to allow for much greater access to child care facilities.

There should also be a requirement to ring-fence development levies for child care. As things stand, there is simply a discretionary duty on the county manager to include child care as part of a development. This should be specifically ring-fenced and made mandatory so that funding will be available for child care facilities from local authorities. On the other hand, employees will be able to negotiate benefit-in-kind in pay talks in the context of their employment. I hope that will happen in future but perhaps it is a bit early for it occur now. The Taxes Consolidation Act contains certain provisions in this regard but they are much too complicated. My information is that only one employer in the State is taking advantage of those provisions, which is a clear failure of the original intention of that measure.

I also wish to refer to pensions. It is well known that in Ireland we are perhaps going backwards in terms of pensions coverage. The PRSAs have not taken off successfully, although the country is in the fortunate position of not having the worst demands on the pension sector because of the high working population to dependants ratio. In addition, the older segment of the population is not as high a percentage as in other countries. We have, therefore, an opportunity to solve the pension problem for future generations.

[Mr. Andrews.]

To the credit of the Minister for Finance's predecessor, Mr. McCreevy, the National Treasury Management Agency manages a large fund for future pensions, which is to be commended. The current State pension is heading towards €200 per week, which is also commendable. Currently, however, only 50% of workers have pension coverage, which is far short of the 70% target.

Recently, the Pensions Board suggested that compulsory pension coverage should be introduced but, in my view, this is not a very well thought out suggestion. I admit that the Pensions Board was split on the issue but there are clearly those who hold that view, including the Minister for Social and Family Affairs who suggested it as a possibility. It would, however, penalise employers and small businesses in particular. In other countries, employees and employers share the contributions to mandatory pension schemes. Inevitably, however, employees will seek that their half should be paid through wage increases. We live in a competitive environment for insurance rates and other requirements on employers, so if mandatory pensions were to be introduced, it would have a bad effect on small and medium-sized enterprises which do not have the resources, expertise or time to devote to setting up such a system.

The recent Central Statistics Office figures also show that we had a reduced pension coverage in 2005 compared with 2004. We need to take advantage of the fact that people are willing to save — the SSIA's are a classic example of that — and tap into it. The Minister is to be commended on the €1 for €3 initiative when SSIA's are used for pensions, but there is much more potential for development in this area. What is missing is a high profile campaign to make people aware of the need to provide for pensions. Such a campaign should paint the stark picture that because so few have pension coverage, many people will face into a difficult retirement period. We need to undertake such a campaign straight away.

We also need to introduce the concept of a pensions regulator, as they have done in the United Kingdom, to increase public confidence in pensions. Currently, the Pensions Ombudsman is simply a reactive office which deals with queries as they arise.

While we face a real challenge on pensions, the Bill has gone a long way towards improving the situation as well as ameliorating the issue of child care. There is great potential for tackling both issues. Thanks to the Government's financial management, we will be able to deal with such problems in future.

Ms F. O'Malley: I am glad of this opportunity to speak on the Finance Bill which is passing quickly through the House. A budget such as the current one does not happen overnight. Prudent

management of the economy and sound investment have led us to a position whereby we are able to deliver such a budget. We should cast our minds back to the 1980s to realise the transformation that has taken place in Ireland since then. Massive unemployment, economic stagnation and emigration created an air of seemingly permanent despair that was a feature of the country in those years. Tax reform, compliance with EU criteria, the Maastricht treaty, the Stability and Growth Pact in particular, and social partnership have all contributed to the economic and social transformation we now experience.

This is the eighth budget which bears the hallmarks of the Progressive Democrats's philosophy. Together with Fianna Fáil, we have put in place economic policies which have permitted us to generate wealth which can then be redistributed to the most vulnerable and marginalised in society. However, if one does not generate wealth, one cannot disperse it. This budget, more so than any other, is tackling in particular the needs of people on lower incomes. It takes those on the minimum wage out of the tax net. It removes those on the average industrial wage from the top rate of tax and brings the old age pension up to €193 weekly, well on the way to the target of €200. This represents an increase of 67% since 1997.

It is such details and statistics which are long forgotten because we now have days of plenty and we forget. Looking back, nobody would have thought that over the lifetimes of the current and previous Governments, we would be in a position to increase the old age pension by 67%.

The early child supplement to which Deputy Andrews referred is an example of an innovative response to a particularly trying challenge. I commend the Minister on his flair in dealing with the situation.

Another commendable measure relates to bio-fuels. This is an area in which Ireland can grow and develop. Recently we have all become more aware of energy issues and the energy crisis. Ireland can play a major role in developing bio-fuels and renewable alternative energy. There are opportunities for Ireland if someone is prepared to take a bold step. We have the expertise but we need the taxation and fiscal incentives. In time to come, we will reap the rewards. I commend the Minister on taking a stand on this matter and, as he is aware, he is very popular with the biofuels sector because he has taken a brave step by allowing the sector to grow and advance. It is an area of major growth in this country.

A Minister for Finance has a responsibility and an opportunity to be forward looking and to take bold steps for the future. Two commendable examples are the strategic initiative fund for higher education and the measures the Minister proposes with regard to SSIA's and pensions. Education is the bedrock on which our economic prosperity has been built. As with the advances

in second level education in the 1960s, the new fund for higher education will turn out to be just as important a measure as we advance.

Given the demographics of the country, pension provision for the future is a challenge. Prudent management of the economy involves providing for the citizens' financial well-being in the decades to come. The National Pensions Reserve Fund was the result of one commendable measure in this area and the Minister's SSIA pension contribution plan is another. Lack of pension provision for the future, especially among women, is a real problem which the Government needs to keep an eye on. The Finance Bill measures are a start but with regard to public sector pensions and the benchmarking issue, we need to be fully aware of their true value.

I commend the Minister's vision in solving these problems of tomorrow with the prudent management of today. That is a virtue often overlooked and seldom rewarded. Aristotle said that economics is merely a means but what is important is the aims we wish to serve. This budget has demonstrated that once one has provided the money and the wherewithal to generate income, we can deliver for our citizens economic prosperity in which they can all share. That is what they deserve.

Mr. Naughten: I welcome the opportunity to speak on the Finance Bill and to highlight some areas where the Government could have taken further steps to address some anomalies in the Bill.

Regarding the publication of the Finance Bill and the budget, it is clear that the situation continues whereby one third of taxpayers pay the highest rate of tax of 42 cent in the euro. That is unacceptable and is a long way off the target set by the Government, namely, 20% of taxpayers paying at the higher rate of tax. While the Government says we have a low-tax regime, that is a long way off considering the 41 stealth taxes in place and the fact that one third of all taxpayers pay at the top rate of tax. The Government is far from being a low-tax one. In 2005, almost €2 billion in excess tax was taken from taxpayers.

The 2006 budget sets a number of targets. One relates to carers and care of the elderly. The total package involved is €150 million, which does not even come to the amount the Government has squandered on the PPARS electronic payment system. It all seems to be a mess. The Government is rudderless and cannot deliver on projects. For example, €2.5 billion in the capital spending programme has been left unspent. In the capital spending programme of the Department of Health and Children, €54 million has gone missing. We do not know if it has been spent. The budget and the Finance Bill reveal a litany of missed opportunities by this Government and no coherent action has been taken to address the

ongoing wasteful expenditure. That is a major disappointment.

I am disappointed that the Minister of State, Deputy Parlon, did not stay in the House because I wanted to address specific points to him. However, some of them are close to the heart of the Minister of State, Deputy Treacy, and I am sure he will take note of them. There was no mention in the budget speech of the Minister for Finance of the grand plan for decentralisation.

Mr. Treacy: It is decided and it is proceeding.

Mr. Naughten: I know that the decentralisation to Carrick-on-Shannon and Athlone is moving along at a snail's pace but decentralisation to Ballinasloe and Roscommon seems to have stalled. We have been informed that approximately 200 Land Registry jobs will not be relocated to Roscommon town until mid-2009. That is greatly disappointing. The demand exists and there are more than enough civil servants willing to relocate. I am aware of quite a number of public servants from County Roscommon working for the Land Registry who are willing to relocate to Roscommon. We have the technology, the expertise and the skill there and the General Register Office in Roscommon town is fully automated. It is a great disappointment that the Government has long-fingered the decentralisation proposal which would have benefited not only people in my constituency of Roscommon-South Leitrim but also the Minister of State, Deputy Treacy, in his constituency across the River Suck.

I want an explanation why the Railway Safety Commission has not already been decentralised to Ballinasloe. When I asked the Minister for Transport last year when the commission would be established in Ballinasloe, he said it was not an early mover. I would like to know why not considering the legislation establishing the Railway Safety Commission was only passed into law late last year. If the commission was not established statutorily until late last year, why can it not be an early mover? It is a new State or semi-State agency. There is no reason it should not be initially formed in Ballinasloe.

Someone needs to explain what is happening as there does not seem to be a political push in the Minister of State's office or the constituency for the relocation. It is a small number of jobs, approximately 20 in total, but there is no impediment to this happening. The agency is new and the people going into those positions knew it would be decentralised to Ballinasloe. The announcement of its decentralisation took place before the establishment of the commission. There is no excuse whatsoever.

One aspect of the Finance Bill 2006 to deal with tax evasion is that of giving Revenue powers to access bank accounts. This worries me, as I am sure it worries the Minister of State. We know of

[Mr. Naughten.]

people in the west who were assaulted and robbed because they kept money in mattresses and biscuit tins. The Minister of State and I went on the public airwaves and dealt with people on a one-to-one basis to actively encourage them to put their money into bank accounts. We explained that the Department of Social and Family Affairs would deal with the matter in a sympathetic manner, which it and the Revenue Commissioners have done.

In many cases, the few euro the people had were purely to pay for their funeral expenses. We are now telling them that, after their money has gone into bank accounts, we will refer them to the Revenue Commissioners. It should be pointed out that all these accounts have had DIRT paid on them already. We are encouraging people, especially the elderly, to take that money out of their accounts. It is a retrograde step and it will undo the good work that has been done.

The big difficulty between today and when the Government took office nine years ago is that we no longer have rural gardaí. It has been the active decision of the Government over the past nine years to close down rural Garda stations. They are there in theory as they are open a couple of hours per month. As the Minister of State knows, anyone trying to renew a gun licence will not find a garda in the local rural station. Through the Minister for Finance's decision, we are encouraging people to take the money in their bank accounts out again even though DIRT is being paid on it.

It is not just me who is highlighting this problem. The OECD in a 2004 report raised serious concerns about the Department of Finance's proposed policy. It stated that citizens "may feel a certain unease at the powers that such techniques would provide to the tax authorities". Will the Minister of State examine this matter from the point of view of elderly people in our community, especially when the Government is not prepared to fund the maintenance and policing of rural areas?

I wish to make a number of points on agriculture. One relates to a very positive decision taken by the Minister for Finance in budget 2005, namely, allowing farmers to average their income tax liabilities over a three-year period from 2005 to 2007, the reason being that farmers were going to get a double payment in 2005, that is to say, their 2005 and 2004 single farm payments. They would have applied in 2004 and drawn on the entitlements in 2004 but the payments only issued in the subsequent year. As they got double incomes in one year the Department of Finance rightly agreed to average it out. It made more sense.

However, there are 5,000 farmers at present who still have not received their single farm payments. Approximately 5,000 farmers received their payments since 31 December, are now

losing out on the average liabilities and will be stuck with a double single farm payment in 2006. Their 2005 payments will be made at the start of 2006. Hopefully, their 2006 payments will be made in the first week of December this year. Those people are caught in the situation of being unable to average their income tax liabilities over three years. They can only average it over a two-year period. Will the Minister for Finance review this matter on Committee Stage and ensure those farmers can, like every other farmer, average their liabilities over a three-year period?

The Department of Agriculture and Food has failed in responding to and addressing the queries made by farmers. Will the Minister of State, who was previously a member of that Department, get in contact with his colleague, the Minister for Agriculture and Food, and ask her to ensure that each and every one of those 5,000 farmers receives an explanation about what the difficulty is? None of us can get through to the Department to determine where the problem lies. If farmers telephone, many cannot understand where the problem is due to the amount of double Dutch spoken to them. Talk of swapping, changing and transferring entitlements is extremely confusing. It would be easier for a letter to be sent to each of the 5,000 farmers to explain where the difficulty lies and what must be done to resolve it.

Another issue that should be examined on Committee Stage is the position of farmers who purchased suckler cow premium quotas. There are many such persons in the Minister of State's constituency, as there are in mine. These farmers purchased suckler cow quotas but, because there is no provision in the tax code for writing off the quotas, they cannot receive tax relief against their purchasing costs. This is unlike the circumstances of people who purchased milk quotas, which is still an asset. Its value has reduced over recent years but the suckler cow quota has no value whatsoever now. Farmers spent much money but are getting no reliefs.

As the Minister of State is aware, since the mid-1990s there has been a requirement for livestock farmers to have suckler cow quotas to draw down the entitlements based on the premium payments. Farmers paid between €200 and €750 for those quota rights, which needed to be approved by the Department of Agriculture and Food at the time and was the State's recognition of the matter. However, since 2005 and the introduction of the single farm payment and due to the decoupling policy, those quotas have no actual value.

For example, a part-time suckler farmer with 20 suckler cows purchased ten new suckler cow premium quotas in 2001 at a cost of €600 each amounting to a total cost of €6,000. It is likely that this farmer borrowed most if not all of that money. The expenditure was made from his after tax income. The quota has now been abolished and is worthless but the farmer must still repay

most of the borrowing associated with the purchase.

The farmer should be able to write off the €6,000 expenditure against his income tax as a balancing allowance. It is the case in respect of the milk quota and it makes sense that it would be the case for the suckler cow quota. There is a precedent, not only in the form of the milk quota. The case of the buddies of the former Minister of State at the Department of Transport, Deputy Callely, who were also close buddies of the Taoiseach — taxi drivers — was sorted out quickly. Their licences were worth nothing overnight and they have received income tax relief on the purchase price of licences. Why should taxi drivers be given the benefit of relief when farmers in a similar situation are not given this benefit? I hope Deputy Treacy will bring this to the attention of the Minister for Finance and officials at the Department and table an amendment to ensure farmers who have purchased suckler cow quotas receive the same benefits as farmers who have purchased milk quotas or receive the relief provided to taxi drivers.

The farming community has received the thin end of the wedge from this Government. When a similar situation arises in another Department, a different interpretation is taken. This is a litmus test for the Government and I hope the Minister will address this on Committee Stage.

I also hope the Minister will address the issue of compulsory purchase orders. The Minister of State, Deputy Treacy, is familiar with this and the notice to treat has been issued to farmers.

Mr. Treacy: I am sure Deputy Naughten is pleased.

Mr. Naughten: I would be pleased if the Government abolished the 20% tax and if the capital gains tax roll-over relief had not been removed.

Mr. Treacy: It was 40%.

Mr. Naughten: No, it was zero.

Mr. Treacy: It was 40%, reduced to 20%.

Mr. Naughten: I will explain this for the benefit of the Minister of State, who has many irate constituents because of this.

Capital gains tax was levied at 40% but farmers who were forced to sell to the State under a compulsory purchase order paid no capital gains tax if they reinvested the sum prior to, or within a subsequent five-year period of, the compulsory purchase order. The majority of farmers in this situation, including my constituents in south Roscommon, want to reinvest this sum in facilities or additional land for the farm. They will have to pay 20% tax rate regardless of whether they do this.

As president of the IFA, the Minister of State, Deputy Parlon, struck a deal with Charlie McCreavy on these issues, including an agreement that the capital gains tax scheme would not be changed. This was changed in the following budget when Deputy Parlon was Minister of State in the Department of Finance.

It is morally wrong that farmers are being forced to sell land below the market price. My colleague, Deputy Paul McGrath, states that the valuation set on land in County Westmeath is between €15,000 and €17,000 per acre when land is selling at €24,000 per acre on the open market. Not only are farms being undervalued, the Government is taking 20% from farmers after forcing them to sell land. It is morally wrong that this Government has made a U-turn on this decision and it is worse that the man who claimed to represent farmers was involved in the U-turn when he was Minister of State at the Department of Finance. I hope this scheme is amended on Committee Stage as this is the last chance for farmers in counties Galway and Roscommon. I ask the Minister of State to use his influence to remove this unjust tax and ensure farmers receive a fair price for land forcibly taken from them.

Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach (Mr. Treacy): Ba mhaith liom mo chuid ama a roinnt le mo chomhghleacaithe, an Teachta Devins agus an Teachta Blaney. I value the opportunity to contribute to this debate.

This is the second Finance Bill of the Minister for Finance, Deputy Cowen, and the ninth successive such Bill that has been introduced by this Fianna Fáil-led Government, which has steered our economy, now seen as one of the most dynamic in the world, on a vigorous course of success since 1997. This Finance Bill sets into law many of the landmark policy decisions outlined in the Minister's recent budget as well as containing important new initiatives.

Over the past nine years, the Government has followed a strategic path of economic and social policies, aimed at supporting sustained economic growth and promoting improved equality and opportunity for all. We must follow a path that continues to build on our recent phenomenal success while remaining focused on the need to keep the economy competitive in an increasingly globalised world.

This Bill will give effect to the major tax and fiscal aspects of a budget that builds on its eight predecessors and brings more good news for old age pensioners, social welfare recipients and those on the minimum wage. Child care measures are of particular significance in this budget. Having addressed the concerns of many young couples in last year's budget, with significant adjustments to stamp duty, increases in child benefit and a special €1,000 supplement to all children under six years of age have been widely recognised as enlightened, far-sighted measures.

[Mr. Treacy.]

It is in sharp contrast to the voucher system proposed by Fine Gael, which would discriminate against women in the home and which was so effectively rebutted by the Taoiseach last week in this House. Does the main Opposition party have so little regard for mothers who have chosen to stay at home to raise their small children?

The taxation and fiscal measures announced in the budget for 2006 and given legality in this Finance Bill are designed to stimulate equality and fairness while sustaining an economic climate built on competitiveness. Among the most notable measures in this Bill are increases in the personal and PAYE credits to ensure the removal of all those on the minimum wage from the tax net, increases in the standard rate bands to ensure the exclusion of workers on the average industrial wage from the higher tax rate, the restriction on the use of tax reliefs by high income taxpayers, the phasing out of various tax schemes and exemptions, the ending of the remittance basis of taxation for certain non-domiciled employees, the continuation of the stamp duty exemption for young trained farmers for a further three years, the increase in the tax exemption limits for income from farm leasing for over five years, the extension of certain existing capital acquisitions tax, capital gains tax and stamp duty reliefs to cover the EU single farm payment entitlements in appropriate circumstances, the introduction of a new scheme of tax relief for heritage property donated to a proposed new Irish heritage trust, the introduction of a tax disregard for certain childminders who mind up to three children in their homes, adjustments to rules governing top-hat pension provisions and approved retirement funds, increases in VAT registration thresholds to help small business and an exemption from excise duties for biofuels and reductions in excise duties on certain home heating oils, such as kerosene and liquid petroleum gas, LPG.

Building on the unprecedented success of this Government's initiative to engender a saving culture among the population, this Finance Bill also outlines a further initiative aimed at encouraging lower income holders of SSIA's to transfer funds into pension schemes. Despite being pilloried by the Opposition, the National Pensions Reserve Fund has been an outstanding success in investing for the future but we know we must do more. I hope we will have the support of the Opposition parties to achieve more.

This SSIA initiative will mean a person transferring €7,500 from an SSIA into a pension scheme could receive a top-up of €2,500 from the Government to give a total pension contribution of €10,000. In addition, the exit tax to be paid on SSIA moneys transferred to pensions will be waived, giving a further top-up to the overall contribution.

I am long enough in this House to remember what it was like when the main Opposition par-

ties, Fine Gael and Labour, were last elected to Government.

Mr. Naughten: That is a broken record. We were creating 1,000 jobs per week.

Mr. Treacy: The economy was on its knees, a real basket case, and we were described as the poorest of Europe's rich in 1987. Deputy Naughten is very young and may not remember this period. Thankfully, Fianna Fáil returned to Government that year and set about pulling the country out of the doldrums.

Mr. Naughten: I remember the by-election in which the Minister of State was elected.

Mr. Treacy: Excellent. I remember it fondly.

Due to utter mismanagement and incompetence, Fine Gael presided over a situation where taxes went through the roof, inflation was rampant and industrial unrest was widespread, while our young people were leaving in search of jobs in numbers not seen since the bad 1950s.

Mr. M. Higgins: The glory days of de Valera.

Mr. Treacy: The facts of history also show that in 1987, faced by an economic wasteland of incompetence and mismanagement, the Taoiseach, Deputy Bertie Ahern, then Minister for Labour, crafted the first social partnership agreement. This first historical agreement became the template model on which stability and prosperity were built and it continues to be a crucial aspect of economic and social policy.

Mr. Naughten: If the Deputy is going through history he should remember the Tallaght strategy.

Mr. Treacy: We certainly remember the Tallaght strategy with great respect. What happened to the great man who collaborated with us? Fine Gael decided to destroy him and take him out of politics. It was a terrible thing to do.

Mr. Naughten: Fianna Fáil broke its agreement as usual.

Mr. Treacy: I listened with interest to what Deputy Naughten stated. He discussed a low tax situation and stated that this is a high tax Government. He forgets that we have a minimum wage and that due to training and retraining our workers—

Mr. Naughten: Surely the minimum wage should not be taxed.

Mr. Treacy: With their high intellectual capacity, they earn much more than ever.

Mr. Naughten: Do not tell me the Minister of State proposed that.

Mr. Treacy: Deputy Naughten mentioned PPARS. Consider the success of PPARS in St. James's Hospital. It will roll out elsewhere throughout the country.

Mr. Naughten: The people of Ballinasloe and east Galway would not be impressed with that.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Naughten had his opportunity and he should allow the Minister of State to speak.

Mr. Treacy: Deputy Naughten said that money went missing. He might not understand accountancy. There is no money missing. Deputy Naughten mentioned decentralisation, but he never mentioned that we gave the GRO to Roscommon and he never stated how good it is for Roscommon, for his constituency and for his county.

Mr. Naughten: I did mention it.

Mr. Treacy: We will deliver decentralisation. As we have done for Carrick-on-Shannon we will do for Ballinasloe and Roscrea.

Mr. Naughten: What about the railway safety commission? What is the Minister of State at? Is he asleep?

Mr. Treacy: It is in law. It is being created and constructed. Be assured, it will be located——

Mr. Naughten: It is already in law. Is the Minister of State asleep?

Mr. Treacy: Deputy Naughten also mentioned that the banks and the Department of Social and Family Affairs do not treat people generously. We will continue to treat people generously. Deputy Naughten said that 5,000 farmers are still awaiting money to be paid to them. These cases involve accounts and applications with certain technical difficulties. They are resolved at the rate of 500 per week and will soon be concluded. The decision we took on the last budget means that people will have the opportunity to average the income over three years. The Revenue Commissioners will deal with it. People will continue to be treated fairly.

The Government consistently shows that it has the vision and the resolve to keep our country competitive and sustain the conditions that give us low taxes, low unemployment, low inflation and low interest rates. This Finance Bill continues the policies of a Government deeply conscious that in an increasingly prosperous Ireland, no boundaries should be placed on giving people the opportunity to enjoy the fruits of this prosperity.

I congratulate the Minister for Finance, Deputy Cowen, on his budget and this Finance Bill, which continues a spectacularly successful approach to the governing of this country, by any yardstick.

The Opposition might be in denial, but it is becoming increasingly clear that the Irish people are convinced that only the present Government has the capacity to marshal the economy and continue this success.

Mr. Naughten: The capacity to squander money.

Mr. Treacy: This Finance Bill is fair, balanced and very much in keeping with the visionary strategic approach of the Government to the economy. I commend it wholeheartedly to the House for its full and final approval. I am sure it will be endorsed.

Dr. Devins: I thank the Ceann Comhairle. I am delighted to have this opportunity to speak on the Finance Bill 2006.

Mr. Bruton: Deputy Devins will speak much more sense than the man who just sat down.

Dr. Devins: There is no doubt in my mind that this budget was universally accepted as one of the most successful budgets in the history of this country. I congratulate the Minister, Deputy Cowen, for the thought and diligence he put into preparing and presenting the budget. There has been a lot of media coverage during the past few days regarding the tax exemption schemes, in particular the urban and rural renewal schemes. Most of the coverage, I am afraid to say, has been from a purely economic point of view, which tends not to take into account the human and sociological aspects of life.

In my constituency of Sligo-Leitrim, I see at first hand the dramatic impact of both schemes. In the first instance, Sligo city is unrecognisable today from what it was ten years ago. It was then a town which, by common consent, had not achieved its full potential. Most of its shops, offices and streetscapes had not changed for 80 to 100 years. Commercially, there was a fear that Sligo was dropping behind many of the towns and cities within a 90 to 100 mile radius. People from Sligo started to shop and do their business elsewhere.

I would like the House to contrast that picture with the one we have today. We now have one of the largest shopping centres in the north west, which opened last year. A massive reconstruction is occurring throughout the city centre, with new shops, offices, hotels and retail parks opened or about to open. A great sense of excitement and prosperity is in the air. The city has been re-focused towards having the river Garavogue as its focal point, with cafés, restaurants and modern buildings housing a host of activities. A key component of this regeneration is the impetus supplied by the urban renewal scheme. It is not the only reason for the transformation that has taken place in Sligo. However, it is an extremely important component.

[Dr. Devins.]

Likewise, many areas of County Sligo and the entirety of County Leitrim have benefited from the rural renewal scheme. Villages which were literally dying on their feet have been reinvigorated and many small towns and villages show an increase in population for the first time in more than 100 years. It may not mean much to people who live along the east coast, where population densities can be quite high. However, when the population in a small village or townland increases from 30 to 60 or 70 people, it represents an increase of more than 100% in numbers. Sociologically, that small increase can mean the difference between life or death for that area.

The Minister pointed out that life has been restored to the west and north west by the success of these schemes. There is an indication that these schemes will be tapered off. The Bill also includes many other changes, which will ensure that growth and employment continue, while at the same time making sure that those on low to middle incomes are major beneficiaries. Nobody on the minimum wage will pay tax. Those on the average industrial wage will pay tax at the lower rate, not at the upper rate as is currently the case. The closing off of tax advantages to high income earners is most welcome. Everybody will now pay their fair share of tax according to their means.

The provisions relating to child care have been well discussed and well flagged. I commend the Minister for his vision in introducing them. The Bill also contains many more provisions that are welcome, but time does not permit me to refer to them. I commend the Bill to the House.

Mr. Blaney: I support the Finance Bill 2006. Incentives in the budget such as the extension of maternity leave, child benefits, extra resources for the elderly and social welfare top-ups are extremely welcome. Anyone who thinks it is not a good budget is not too wise. It is an excellent budget.

I wish to bring to the Minister's attention anomalies regarding access to the north west of Ireland that have continued for quite some time and can no longer continue. I wish to mention my dismay and disgust at the recently announced Transport 21 Government policy document. With colleagues from my county, I met the Taoiseach and the Tánaiste on several occasions during the past five years. We outlined that we do not get a fair share of the cake regarding infrastructure and access to the north west. We always receive the same old reply, that the Northern Ireland authorities are not in favour of co-operating on transport. However, during that period the final parts of the M1 motorway were constructed. I want to mark the cards of the Government, particularly the Minister for Finance, on this issue.

I come from a county with four out of six Government Deputies and I vote with the Government on the majority of occasions. We

have no deep sea port. There is a greater volume of traffic on the N2-A5 roads between Dublin and Derry than on the Galway, Limerick and Waterford routes. However, those three routes will be upgraded to motorway status whereas the N2-A5 is completely forgotten about. If this was the Minister's constituency he would not stand for this response, and I can no longer stand for it. We did not even get a mention in the Transport 21 document.

We have had the highest unemployment level in the country for many years. It is currently running at four times the national average and we can forget about that figure getting any better with the current Government proposals.

I will inform the Minister of what is coming down the track in regard to access to the north west. The Irish Central Border Area Network has done much groundwork on infrastructure in the north west. It has consulted all relevant authorities along the Border as well as all the county and city managers on both sides of the Border with a view to seeking funding from this Government, the British Government and the relevant European bodies for two motorways — one from Derry to Dublin and another from Sligo to Larne — and a rail line to the north west. The cost of the three projects is estimated at €5 billion between now and 2017. The well known Peter Quinn of the Quinn Group is leading this lobby and the whole Border region is behind him, North and South. The argument about the Northern bodies not being consulted and not co-operating has changed. If we are serious about North-South co-operation, this is the ideal project to consolidate this idealism if it truly exists.

I have strayed a bit from the Finance Bill but this issue needs to be brought to the fore to ensure moneys are included in the budget as and from this year for the projects mentioned. Nothing less for the north west is acceptable. I very much support the Bill but I ask the Minister for Finance to seriously look at the north west to see why we are lagging behind and to bring us up to the same level as the rest of the country.

Mr. M. Moynihan: I welcome the opportunity to speak on the Finance Bill 2006. Following on from what Deputy Devins said on the recent analysis of the rural renewal and the town renewal schemes, those schemes go far beyond the issue of economics, the economy and value for money. In the towns of Kanturk and Charleville, the town renewal scheme provided a huge impetus to re-energising and putting money into properties which had fallen derelict, particularly in the town centres. It is vitally important that tax incentives put in place have far more than economic value because for years, the life was being sucked out of some of these towns for one reason or another. We can look back over the 1950s, 1960s and 1980 when all our young people were exported out of towns and villages in rural areas.

Thankfully, for the first time in many years, our population is growing.

Provision has been made in the budget and by the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment for community enterprise centres. These centres are vital as incubation units in small towns and villages and should be tax incentivised. Will the Minister look at this to try encourage people to construct community enterprise centres? They are used to try to foster employment in small scale facilities. Some villages and towns in rural areas, including in my constituency of Cork North-West, would benefit greatly from community enterprise centres.

Decentralisation and the pros and cons of it have been mentioned. I am a huge supporter of decentralisation and for the past ten years, I have advocated the idea. The belief that the Government can only work if everything is centralised in one location, such as Dublin, is ludicrous. This is a small country and peripheral parts can communicate easily with the capital. The national parliament and parliamentarians from rural constituencies far from Dublin should advocate the merits of decentralisation and inform Government policy. People must work and live in rural communities. We must influence Government policy so that everything is not centred around Dublin, as we would say in Duhallow in Cork North-West, and that there is decentralisation. There is plenty of room for decentralisation in constituencies such as this. I congratulate the Minister on a fine Bill and budget.

Mr. M. Higgins: In the short time available to me I wish to raise a few fundamental questions about the Finance Bill. Debate on the Finance Bill is one of those very few occasions when Members have the opportunity to ask questions or reflect on the performance of the economy and particularly the relationship of the economy to society. This afternoon we have had a type of outing by Fianna Fáil backbenchers who got so carried away as to describe the Minister, Deputy Cowen, as a visionary, which perhaps is a step too far.

I would like to speak about the vision which lies behind the Bill and I do so by seeking to answer a simple question. How can the economy do so well with so many people unhappy? The manner in which the economy has expanded — I listened carefully to the speeches which described its expansion — raises some fundamental questions. For example, we must ask how much time is spent on survival and by what proportion of our population. It is unrealistic not to take into account that the housing market has so torn a hole in the economy that there is now no longer a choice for one or both partners to work. Both partners must work in an inflated housing market which has been driven by speculative tax allowances to those who want to own multiple homes.

Again, it seems like puncturing the heady nonsense we have had for quite a while to suggest that out of 81,000 housing finishes in this current year, we built less than one quarter of the social housing we built in the 1970s. I do not have the figures but it is perhaps 6,000. In between, we have a small number of what is called affordable housing. I will not delay on that, other than to say there is no comparison between the requirements for inclusion on the social housing list and those for inclusion on the affordable housing one.

What we have witnessed is the people being driven into the economy without choice. More than 65% of the women who are available for work now work in the economy and 1.5% are over the age of 65 years. I wrote elsewhere that there is no one else left to be driven into the economy. That raises a question about what a number of speaker said. I believe Deputy Fiona O'Malley mentioned that the economy was only an instrument. However, let us examine the relationship of the economy to the society. I suggest that what was described in the Minister's speech and right through several supporting speeches is a depeopled version of the economy which raises issues. The economy is being described as a mechanistic model which is separate from people's lives. It seems irrelevant that one must work longer hours and drive longer distances, one no longer has any hope of owning one's own home and that elderly people must subsidise deposits on homes for their children. It is as if this does not matter and as if the economy has been spun away from the society.

Irrespective of which party is in power — I say this genuinely — this is a dangerous model of the economy and society. It is predicated on a type of radical individualism which has nothing to do with personal freedom or choice.

I will suggest how a social economist might have looked at this in the past. He would ask what evidence existed that the tax breaks to which the Minister for Finance referred were an incentive and if this economy was like an engine into which one must continually pour fuel to get it to start. For example, one might provide incentives to initiate a productive activity about which one could then measure productivity or its outcome. However, what kind of old engine is this that regularly needs to be primed to such an extent that it spews out a divisive kind of redistribution to the rich rather than to the poor? It is reasonable to ask, for example in respect of the model at the core of the Finance Bill, what is the distributive effect of the market worth? Then in turn, to ask what is the distributive effect of the Government's action? Can we assess the Government's action in terms of compensation for market effect, in terms of market correction, or is there an attempt at redistribution?

Let us be real. What has happened in relation to the redistribution of either income or possi-

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[Mr. M. Higgins.]

bilities for housing? If we looked at this another way, as the economy generates surpluses that are historic, could we not have afforded universalism across a range of different things if we wished to regard the economy, as Deputy O'Malley did, as instrumental to a set of social purposes? We could have had universal access to education and improvements to the capital schemes which would have improved schools at all levels. We could have had universalism in health and transport as well as having universal provision in respect of a set of securities for old age.

None of this is mentioned in either the Minister's speech or in any speech in support of the Finance Bill. It is as though the social purposes of the economy do not require mention. It describes a private world of consumption, based on a radical individualism in which for example, it is taken for granted that there is an endless amount to which an individual is entitled by way of tax incentives. There is no limit to the number of houses an individual in the Irish Republic should own. There is no limit to the amount people should put into their pension funds and millions of euros are insufficient. There is no limit to the amount that someone with a contract for gathering tolls on the roads may receive.

It behoves Members to ask how this could be so while many people still struggle with rent allowances. If the income of two working people goes a few euro above a particular level, they will lose their rent allowance and their medical cards. Consequently, a significant section of the population is locked into an economics of survival. Even if one asserts, in the manner of those 19th century ladies who visited the poor of London, that it is sufficient to scatter something in their direction, this still does not answer the question as to how one can justify an economic structure that systematically redistributes to those who already avoid bearing any burden of taxation.

There is a profound ideology behind this, which posits a certain kind of connection between the individual and the State. Since the House last discussed a Finance Bill I was interested to discover that the Taoiseach's reading material had included Professor Putnam's book, *Bowling Alone*. Professor Putnam's work was interesting in its description of what it might be like in a white suburb in the United States where people had become bored and no longer joined voluntary organisations. However, they could muse on this point while enjoying an income of more than \$200,000. However, Professor Putnam's model had very little to do with what was thrown up by events in New Orleans, where poor white and black people lacked cars to escape from what happened to their city. Huge pockets of poverty are buried deep within any society and the Finance Bill is when one has an opportunity to either address or ignore this issue. The notion that we can somehow begin a debate as to why people do

not volunteer for this or that is nonsensical, if one has conscripted people into the economy and has not given them any time to be at home with their families, never mind to join voluntary organisations. Moreover, some of the Government's ideological *gauleiters* in the PDs have suggested that we should conscript people into the economy until the age of 75.

A debate on citizenship will require a debate on rights. Such rights will include social, economic and cultural rights and the test of an economic Minister, or a Minister for Finance is the degree to which he or she has defined citizenship in terms of participation, inclusion and security in old age, the kind of housing to which one is entitled and how one can have time with one's children and in what environment. Since I entered this House almost 20 years ago, I have often heard Ministers state that while they would like to implement one policy or other aimed at inclusion or universal provision, the resources were never there. Now however, although the resources are there, they are not being allocated within a social framework that would address such issues.

The Taoiseach has been described as the midwife of social partnership. So be it. However, when he proceeds to the rebirthing that is currently under way for the new social partnership agreement, perhaps he will inform the House of his discussions with the social partners on their attitudes towards State assets and State property and the acceptability of selling State property in the capital to purchase property above the market rate in places in which staff are to be sent. Moreover, as for State assets held in the semi-State companies, what ideological force drives the compulsion to sell them? Why must we sell the Great Southern Hotel group? Undoubtedly, the trade union representatives will want to ask the Taoiseach why, under a ruling of the Competition Authority, they are not allowed to represent atypical workers in collective agreements. Moreover, when the trade union representatives consider the long history of social partnership, they might ask why the commitments to social housing provisions have never been met.

This matters because that is what people are asking on the street. In the short evenings that families currently have together, they ask how they will manage. For example, on Monday some members of a family described to me how they moved from a house which they rented for €850 per month to one for €650 per month. They paid €200 for two days in a crèche for one of the children. However, when one member received overtime in the building industry, they lost both their medical card and their rent allowance.

This took place in an Ireland with a surplus of billions. Ministers state that we have a healthy economy and we have had an economy in surplus. While it is good that those who did not previously pay their taxes now do so to some extent, it is

obvious — the Taoiseach referred to a group he called the bright boys — that some get away with a great deal. Interestingly, and the Labour Party will raise this issue later this week, the Great Southern Hotels group had a trading deficit of €6 million in the current year. At the same time, we have transferred, in terms of taxation foregone, €128 million to private hotels which do not carry the same burden of the training as the Great Southern Hotels group. Therefore, one must penalise the semi-State sector that provided the infrastructure for the private sector which must be assisted to the tune of €128 million.

People will return to consider this issue. They will ask how, in the best of times, with historic surpluses running to billions, Ireland could be unable to have a public transport system or a health system that could give security to the vulnerable. They will ask why approximately 750 schools were in a state of deterioration and how could it have a school transport system which was not entirely safe. I welcome the benefits from external circumstances and favourable trading conditions, but I found it provocative to describe what is being put before us by way of a Finance Bill as “visionary” or as something that expresses a deep social commitment. That is a great nonsense. An interesting tension arises in every aspect of Government policy to which I have referred.

This brings us back to something in which all Members are interested, that is, the tension between the two pillars at the root of the Lisbon agreement. One is competitiveness, which absorbs all the energies of Government, and the other is cohesion. Cohesion is important because citizenship is about solidarity and being able to extend beyond the self to take other considerations into account. What is at stake is the destruction of the public world and the suggestion that a private world can replace it. Citizenship is predicated on solidarity, participation, equality of provision, security and universalism. It is high time we had more space to discuss what social agenda and vision should drive the economic instrument that is the Finance Bill.

Ms McManus: The Government, particularly the Minister for Finance, has sought to convey the impression that it has moved to close off tax schemes as a result of a review but that is not true. Final closing dates have been set for many of the property-based schemes but such commitments were made previously and reasons were always found later to grant a further extension. The Government’s characteristic hallmark is the broken promise. It does not have credibility regarding these open-ended commitments. It has also sought to convey the impression that it was not the case that rich people made a killing out of the generous tax breaks, but the Minister for Finance was wrong in making this case in his contribution. Eleven millionaires pay no tax while

hundreds of people earning more than €200,000 pay minimal tax because of these schemes.

The Bill contains a list of schemes that will be restricted but the list is not exhaustive. In other words, other schemes, most notably that relating to private medical facilities, will not be subject to the proposed restriction. Investors will flood towards the medical facilities and a wall of money will fall into the laps of hospital promoters, the no tax millionaires will return and a fundamentally unjust and unsound health policy will be stitched into the fabric of Irish life. When the Minister for Health and Children who is not able to grasp the most basic elements of good health policy announced her proposals on private hospitals, one developer commented, “It is the answer to our prayers; we couldn’t have written it better ourselves.”

We have a two-tier health service where the experience of the public patient and the private patient is markedly different. The promotion of for profit hospitals is being introduced, encouraged and fuelled by Government policy. No report on the primary care, acute hospital or mental health sectors has argued for this change. That is not the way experts in health policy view the needs of the health service and patients, but because the Ministers for Health and Children and Finance have tunnel vision, a new element is being introduced, which will siphon off important resources into areas of less need.

For profit private hospitals will be established on the grounds of public hospitals. The reintroduction of the old dispensary model where if one is poor, one is directed into an inadequate sub-standard dispensary in which doctors are not encouraged to work within the field and best practice does not prevail but where if one is privately insured, one will be directed into the private hospital where, very often, if the American experience is anything to learn from, procedures will be carried out which are not necessary or a priority but which benefit hospital promoters who are in it to make money.

We cannot afford to adopt this approach in our health service. It should be recognised that the distortional effect of this policy will deepen the divide within the health service and move even primary care away from the integrated approach that has developed over years and spearheaded by a Fianna Fáil Minister, Erskine Childers. It took a great deal of courage and legislative change to introduce an integrated service at primary level. A Progressive Democrats Minister for Health and Children, assisted by a Fianna Fáil Minister for Finance, is ensuring the old divide will be deepened and strengthened at a time when we have the capacity to move in a much better direction to meet the needs of patients.

Mr. Ardagh: I wish to share time with Deputies O’Connor, Fleming and Mulcahy.

[Mr. Ardagh.]

I will forgo the platitudes justly earned by the Minister of Finance and refer to important issues relating to the legislation. The first is the 10% surcharge on undisclosed transactions, which, ultimately, are determined to be in breach of anti-avoidance rules. This is an excellent idea and I can understand why tax consultants oppose it. However, it is just and equitable that people who dream up schemes to avoid tax should inform the Revenue so that if they are found to be in breach, no surcharge would apply. It is not the intention of law makers to provide tax avoidance opportunities so that people can dream up such schemes. The opposite applies and there is a good case for increasing the surcharge.

The automatic reporting to Revenue by financial institutions of interest and other profits is also a positive idea. DIRT is applied at 20% and a number who have large deposits in financial institutions should pay tax at 42%. There is a perception that if they have paid DIRT, there is no need to mention the deposit in their tax returns. That is also just and equitable.

I am worried about one aspect of relevant contracts tax as it applies to tradesmen. To qualify for a C2 certificate, a subcontractor must be tax compliant historically. The Bill provides that Revenue must have good reason to expect that the subcontractor will also be tax compliant in the future. That is a heavy-handed approach. For example, if somebody buys IBM, he or she will never be fired from his or her job. In this instance, a tax inspector may refrain from issuing an RTC card because it is easier not to issue such a card to a subcontractor. This should be changed to ensure that if the tax inspector does not have good reason to believe the taxpayer will not be in compliance in the future, the card is issued. We must endeavour not to hamper, but to give encouragement to people in the trade who are the basis for our growth and engineering our economy.

On the Private Residential Tenancies Board, there is one line in the measures proposed which states that it is envisaged the linkage between registering and complying with registration with the Private Residential Tenancies Board and eligibility for mortgage interest relief on rental properties will improve registration compliance rates. That is the greatest understatement I have ever heard. Effectively, registration with the PRTB costs €70, but if an individual does not register and one takes a €400,000 apartment at 3% interest, it amounts to €12,000 interest a year. If this is disallowed at 42%, it will cost over €5,000. The number of investors who own and let apartments and who have not yet registered is huge. This will be an incentive to everyone to register. If one does not pay the €70 to register, Revenue will have no option but to disallow relief on the €12,000 interest, therefore, it will cost €5,000 not to register. It is important that every-

one registers and that the Private Residential Tenancies Board is allowed to operate effectively. It cannot do so unless everyone is compliant. This is a very good proposal, which should be advertised widely so that everyone is given a chance to comply fully with it.

On tax relief on pensions, the maximum allowable pension fund on retirement for tax purposes will be €5 million or higher depending on the value of the fund on 7 December. This is a very high maximum. If one works on the basis of a factor of 20, it would represent a pension of €250,000 per annum, which should be more than enough for anyone. When the budget was discussed at the parliamentary party meeting, I suggested that the limit should be €5 million, and I am pleased it has been set at that amount. Some people might say it is very high. However, there are certain people — I do not include anyone in the House at the moment — who have worked hard and built up businesses whose pensions would amount to that sum. I do not believe anything in excess of that sum would be just or equitable.

In the internal review of certain tax schemes, the current regime of relief for pensions may be perceived to be inequitable — this was a conclusion of the Department of Finance — in so far as more generous reliefs are available to those in occupational pension schemes than to the self-employed using RACs or relying on PRSAs. There is a huge divergence. There is no PRSI relief, particularly in regard to the absence of earnings caps on employer contributions or the absence of age-related percentage limits. What I have said is quite technical but I am sure the officials will take note of it. It is very important and needs to be addressed.

I am pleased to have had an opportunity to contribute to the debate.

Mr. O'Connor: I welcome the opportunity to make a brief contribution to this important Bill. I was going to spend my five minutes talking about Tallaght because it is important to correct what has been said during the week in regard to urban renewal schemes, tax exemptions and so on. Members who know Tallaght will know that the Tallaght to which I moved in 1969 was a completely different place from what it is today. Fifteen years ago it was said that Tallaght had a population of a city but the status of a village. The decision of the Fianna Fáil-led Government at the time to grant urban renewal status to the area allowed for the development of the Square and other projects. Tallaght is now a major city in its own right, with many of the facilities that one would expect. I say this because I was sensitive about some of what was said during the week. I am proud of where I live and where I represent.

The annual budget and Finance Bill are as much part of the annual winter festive season as

Christmas. Prior to the budget, our media friends often speculate whether the Minister for Finance will prove to be Santa Claus or Scrooge. That can be seen as entertaining speculation and another friendly form of Christmas fare. However, it is far removed from the work of compiling the document that will affect the lives and welfare of all those who live in the State and beyond. There has been reference to the image of the Minister, Deputy Cowen, and I have been a long time admirer of his work. I have always admired what he did in government, particularly when he was Minister for Labour and in other Ministries. I commend him and wish him well on this Bill.

The Minister is neither a Santa nor a scrooge. He is a servant of the State who is forced by circumstances to make choices between competing demands, many of them valid in their own right, and limited resources. The Minister must listen to many hard cases and at times adopt the policy, if not the persona, of a scrooge. It would be easier for a Minister to adopt the persona of a Santa and have goodies for all. He would still be criticised by the Opposition because the goodies were not good enough, too few of them went to certain places or the reindeer did not manage to cross the Shannon and so on. The one thing the Minister for Finance has in common with Santa is his range of willing helpers. These men and women are specialists, experts in the areas of economics, insurance, banking, taxation, business and highly specialised areas that now form part of a modern and well developed economy which is what Ireland is now.

Any pre-Christmas budget, whether it is the work of a santa or a scrooge, must be given legal expression. This is the task in which we are now engaged with the Finance Bill. It is not a Bill that displays outbursts of Santa-style largesse or scrooge-like retrenchment, it is a Bill which has been put together in conjunction with the budget, and by the team of men and women to whom I referred. The Bill is designed to address and remove certain anomalies in financial practices where they are known to have been identified. To address this and to ensure that no further example of high earning tax residents manipulate the system to their advantage, the Minister is granting extra powers to the Revenue Commissioners. He will approve regulations under which financial institutions and Departments will automatically report interest, profit and certain other payments to customers.

The balanced approach taken by the Minister in the Bill can be seen in the area of property. Some reliefs have been exposed as having outlived their usefulness while others, some new and some existing for some time, are being retained, and even in some cases enhanced to encourage further innovation and economic development. I gave my support in the House to what the Minister is doing in regard to the film industry. I gave my strong support last week to proposals being

brought forward by SIPTU and other agencies to produce a film about the life of Connolly. I record my strong support in that regard.

The Minister has proved himself to be neither a Santa nor a scrooge, but rather a careful manager of this country's finances. When he introduces the budget this time next year, we can be assured that there will be real goodies in his bag, goodies that will not be the product of empty promises made out of smoke and mirrors, but the result of real economic progress. I commend the Bill to the House and look forward to supporting it.

Mr. Fleming: I welcome the opportunity to speak on the Finance Bill. I congratulate my constituency colleague, the Minister, Deputy Cowen, on bringing this successful Finance Bill to the House — he became Minister for Finance more than a year ago.

It is important to reiterate the main features in the Bill. Most of them which were announced on budget day before Christmas have been forgotten with the passage of time. It is important to reiterate that the Finance Bill will remove all those on the minimum wage from the income tax net and that it will exclude workers on the average industrial wage from the higher tax rate. It will confirm the restrictions on the use of tax relief by high income taxpayers to secure greater equity in the tax system. If I was asked what the Finance Bill was all about, I would say it was about equity.

Anomalies have shown up as a result of the major reviews and reports carried out by, and on behalf of, the Minister for Finance in the past year. Once he received the relevant information he moved immediately to introduce restrictions to ensure everybody paid a fair level of tax in view of their income and the services they obtained in the State.

We are phasing out a number of other tax reliefs and exemptions. In addition, we are continuing the stamp duty exemption for young trained farmers for a further three years, have increased the tax exemption limits for income from farm leasing for over five years and are extending certain reliefs to cover the EU single farm payment entitlement in appropriate circumstances.

For the first time ever the Bill will introduce a new scheme of tax relief for heritage properties donated to the proposed Irish Heritage Trust. The new body will have an important task ahead of it. I wish it every success when it gets up and running.

The Bill will introduce a new initiative aimed at encouraging low income earners who hold SSIA accounts to transfer funds to pension schemes. The Minister referred to the Opposition's reaction to SSIA's when first introduced. They said they were a disgrace and should be cancelled. They said there was no place for them and that they were for the well-off and so on. We now

[Mr. Fleming.]

know that many low income earners, even people not in the income tax net, were careful with how they saved their money and will be getting their just rewards when the accounts reach maturity in the months ahead.

Mr. O'Connor: Hear, hear.

Mr. Fleming: This legislation will also provide for significant improvements in film tax relief aimed at enhancing Ireland's competitive position as a location for film making, a topic discussed at length by the Joint Committee on Finance and the Public Service. I am delighted with this development. The film industry is a mobile one that operates worldwide. If the tax regime is not right here, producers will just move to another country. Production companies do not have to be based here but can use this country as a base to make films. This provides a great deal of revenue, income and employment. Producers will only come here if the tax regime is sufficiently attractive to them. We must be able to compete with other countries.

I seek clarification on three or four sections and ask that they be further developed. Section 8 deals with the tax relief provisions in respect of service charges to take into account the introduction of the pay-by-use principle for local authority waste charges. The relief has been capped this year at a maximum of €400 per annum. In County Laois the waste service was privatised several years ago and the charge is in the range of €300 to €400. The relief will be capped at this rate from 2007 onwards, even though I expect the charges will increase above this in future.

I question why I and others who are in the high income bracket get tax relief whereas my next door neighbour in receipt of disability benefit is not entitled to get any from the Department of Social and Family Affairs. I hope the generosity which dictates that those who earn income are entitled to relief will also be extended to persons on social welfare, in the same way as they avail of the free schemes such as telephone rental and television licences. I say this in the interests of equity.

Most who have received their wheelie bin charges, especially from private sector operators, will have noticed the addition of 13.5% in VAT charges. This is an extra charge on the consumer. I hope the interpretation of EU rules or whatever led to this charge will ensure equity because the charge is too severe.

Section 11 provides that in future those getting relief for interest payable on borrowed money for rented property will have to register with the Private Residential Tenancies Board. This is a great idea and the provision is long overdue. It should be done. I call on the Minister to extend it one step further in order that those who receive rental subsidies through the Health Service

Executive would also have to register with the Private Residential Tenancies Board. Although they are in a minority, some landlords have poor accommodation and would not pass the registration test. Such persons should not be getting money through the Health Service Executive for their poor accommodation.

Sections 34 and 35 deal with the inclusion of mental health services in the schedule of qualifying services to be provided in hospitals that qualify for tax relief in the private sector. This has long been advocated and I welcome its inclusion in the Bill. This sector of the health service has been neglected in recent years.

Mr. Mulcahy: I welcome the Bill in general and the stewardship of the national finances by the Minister for Finance. I also welcome the important provision relating to the Private Residential Tenancies Board, as referred to by my colleague, Deputy Fleming. I agree with him that it should be extended to payments made by health authorities for private rented accommodation. It is absolutely unacceptable. It does happen that landlords renting out substandard accommodation do not register with the board. It would be a good move to extend the system to include those benefiting from Health Service Executive subventions.

I disagree with one or two points in the Bill. For example, I do not agree with section 117 which relates to the interest payable on bank accounts being automatically forwarded to the Revenue Commissioners. This is a step too far and an invasion of privacy. People are entitled to bank in confidence without anyone else knowing about it, including the Revenue Commissioners. There is an obligation on taxpayers to pay their due tax, which I fully support, but I do not agree that the Revenue Commissioners should have unfettered access to information on people's private bank accounts. This is a dangerous step. I respectfully ask that if this measure has to be brought forward, that strict safeguards be put in place because it is a breach of confidentiality.

I also disagree with the proposed change in section 15 relating to the remittance basis of taxation which is largely used by the chief executives of multinational companies coming to Ireland.

Ms Burton: Like Gama.

Mr. Mulcahy: We should accept that this is one of the principal reasons chief executives choose Ireland as a location. If, for example, the company is an American multinational, it can choose to have a certain portion of its income sent back tax free to America and will only pay tax on the income earned in Ireland. I am concerned that we would send the wrong signal to chief executives and leading business people in multinational companies on which we depend for the creation of much of our employment. This is a step we might regret.

A constituent raised with me the matter of the 3% imputed distribution of the value of assets in approved retirement funds. The reason I am a little sceptical about this is that it changes the rules to some extent. As I understand it, certain people saved up money in their retirement funds and have not yet drawn it down. Because they have not drawn it down a 3% tax is now being imposed. I urge the Minister to look carefully at this measure. Those concerned may be treated a little harshly in this case. The provision may be aimed at persons with large amounts of money but it may also apply to those with moderate savings in approved retirement funds. They should not be subject to this 3% tax.

I am delighted Deputy Burton is present because I recall her saying in her reply to the 2003 Budget Statement that the national pensions reserve fund was a failure and a fiasco. It now stands at €13 billion or €14 billion. It grew by over 19% last year and is one of the greatest successes—

Ms Burton: It is not being invested in Ireland. We have the mess on the M50 that the Government cannot address.

Mr. Mulcahy: The Deputy may be embarrassed.

Ms Burton: I am not embarrassed at all.

Mr. Mulcahy: We could bring up the words she uttered.

Ms Burton: The Deputy should visit the M50 and see what motorists have to suffer.

Mr. Mulcahy: I have the floor.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Order, please. Deputy Mulcahy should conclude.

Ms Burton: That mess was designed by the Government.

Mr. Mulcahy: It is an incredibly successful reserve fund.

Ms Burton: The Deputy should go and see the M50.

Mr. Mulcahy: The Deputy is embarrassed.

Ms Burton: No, I am not.

Mr. Mulcahy: That is why she is trying to shout me down but her words are to be found on the record of this House—

Ms Burton: Good.

Mr. Mulcahy: —that the pension reserve fund was more or less a bad scheme. It is probably the most successful scheme in the history of

the State which will secure the pensions of the people well into the future. By and large, I approve and support the Bill.

Mr. Morgan: I propose to share time with Deputies Healy, McHugh and Sargent.

This legislation fails to fulfill what should be the primary objective of tax policy, that is, to make the tax system equitable and progressive and redistribute wealth in favour of the less well-off. Under a progressive tax regime, those who have more pay more, while those who have less pay less. The system is regressive as the opposite is the case here.

The extent to which the system is regressive was demonstrated in the review of tax reliefs, finally published in recent days. It clearly illustrates that the tax policies pursued by the Government have enabled the wealthy to further enrich themselves at the expense of the ordinary tax compliant PAYE worker. It is astounding to read that certain individuals took €25 million in tax free lump sums from their €100 million pension funds. It is no wonder that the recently published NESF report entitled, *Creating a More Inclusive Labour Market*, found that we had a wealthier but more unequal society and that the richest 20% of the population earned 12 times as much as the poorest 20%. This regressive tax system is matched by an abject failure to tackle growing wage differentials.

My party, Sinn Féin, has long been critical of the Government's plethora of tax exemptions and reliefs, more accurately described as tax expenditures. We have been particularly critical of the many property based tax reliefs. We pointed out the extent to which these were being used by the wealthy to avoid paying their fair share of taxation. We now have confirmation that €3 billion in tax revenue was lost to the State as a result of such reliefs—

Mr. M. Ahern: Money-laundering and such.

Mr. Morgan: —at a time when in excess of 43,000 households remained on social housing waiting lists and young couples across the State struggled and over-borrowed to secure overpriced housing. We also pointed to the adverse effect which these reliefs and exemptions were having on property prices. The Indecon review confirmed that they had led to "an increase in site prices, financial returns to promoters and property prices", yet under this legislation, at a time when house prices continue to escalate unabated, the termination dates for many of these schemes have inexplicably been extended until 2008. That is completely absurd.

My party is also vociferously opposed to tax breaks for developers of private hospitals, sports clinics and now private mental health services. The State should not be subsidising private health care in this way. The revenue lost to the State as

[Mr. Morgan.]

a result of these tax breaks should be used to deliver a public health care service.

Tax expenditures are generally regressive because they primarily benefit the better-off — a fact clearly demonstrated by the Indecon report. Therefore, all tax exemptions should be ended, except where the economic and social value outweighs the cost to the Exchequer of the exemption. In such cases the exemption should be at the minimal rate necessary to achieve the goal which it was introduced to achieve. As my colleague, Deputy Ó Caoláin, pointed out in his contribution to this debate this morning, “the lack of social analysis across the range of reliefs is one of the major flaws in the report”.

I wish to raise the issue of tax exiles and the Minister’s utter failure to introduce legislative change to end the ability of wealthy individuals to declare that they are non-resident for tax purposes. The Department of Finance does not even collate data for the number of persons who claim to be non-resident for tax purposes. My Sinn Féin colleagues previously questioned the Minister on the number of investigations carried out by the Revenue to confirm the veracity of declarations made by those claiming to be non-resident for tax purposes, the number of days spent in the State in a given tax year and the number of cases where it had been found that false declarations had been made. This issue must now be tackled as a matter of priority.

Another issue which I am disappointed has not been dealt with in this legislation is the removal of the employee PRSI ceiling. Its removal is necessary because it is regressive and inequitably benefits higher paid workers. This view has been supported by the Department of Social and Family Affairs which, in 2002, stated:

Abolition of the ceiling would make the employee PRSI system more progressive. The current system is regressive in that those over the ceiling pay a smaller proportion of gross income in PRSI than those earning under the ceiling. Both receive the same benefits. Abolition of the ceiling would therefore strengthen the social solidarity element of the system in that a proportion of all income would be pooled for the benefit of all contributors.

If that Department cannot make the case and change the mind of the Minister, I expect my contribution will have little effect.

Mr. Healy: This Bill continues the policy which the Government has had in place since its inception and election in 1997, that is, to prioritise spending on infrastructure such as roads, bridges and broadband over spending on services such as health, education, social welfare and housing. The continued effect of this policy is that there are considerable increases in the numbers on local authority housing lists, involving approximately

50,000 families, hundreds of patients on trolleys in the accident and emergency departments of hospitals on a daily basis and some of the largest class sizes in Europe. In my constituency I have come across cases where there are 39 pupils in the fourth class of a primary school. One quarter of all primary school students are taught in classes, the sizes of which are over 20% above that recommended.

Various reports, the most recent of which is the report of the National Economic and Social Forum, have shown clearly that the position on inequality is now worse than ever. Since the Government assumed power in 1997 the gap between rich and poor has increased by approximately €300 per week or over €15,000 per annum. The recent report states we have a wealthier but more unequal society, with the richest 20% earning 12 times as much as the poorest 20%. It also states, for instance, that 14% of households are living in poverty and that these are headed by a person with a job. There is also significant child poverty, with about 16% of children living in poverty. That is a scandal, given that this is one of the wealthiest in Europe and the world. The reason for this is that the Government has prioritised spending on infrastructure rather than on services. We can do both. There is a vast Government surplus, which amounted to over €6 billion last year and is projected to amount to over €4.4 billion this year. That surplus should be allocated to expenditure on services such as health, education and housing.

The Bill does nothing for a town such as Carrick-on-Suir which has been totally abandoned by the Government. Its unemployment rate is five times that for the country as a whole. Almost 1,000 people are unemployed in a town of 5,000. The Government has washed its hands of job creation in the town by refusing to establish a jobs task force for it. The Bill does nothing for the town and the people there who are unemployed. It is indicative of the policy of the Government which prioritises infrastructure over housing.

Mr. McHugh: For many years tax incentive schemes have been favourite soundbite material for politicians. When the interest of the press wanes the interest of the politicians also wanes. That superficial interest ensured that the schemes continued. Some were good and some were inequitable and wasted public moneys without any scrutiny.

I welcomed, therefore, Deputy Cowen’s decision on becoming Minister for Finance to set up a complete review of the schemes. The report of that review has been published giving a clear picture for the first time ever on one hand of the benefits, and on the other of the shameful waste of public finances. It is important in the discussion on this topic to realise that we cannot

throw them all into the one barrow and make a global decision on them.

There are property-based incentive schemes and tax reliefs such as exemptions for artists and stallion and greyhound stud fees. Many of the property-based schemes have worked well and rejuvenated certain derelict areas. In my constituency, Galway East, investment has occurred solely because these schemes were in place. It would not have been financially viable for a developer to carry out these schemes without the bonus offered by the tax incentive.

We now hear calls for all those schemes to be subject to a cost-benefit analysis. This approach is too simplistic. For example, if all the schemes were subject to a cost-benefit analysis constituencies such as Galway East would not benefit from them. Successive Governments have neglected Galway East. The absence of a critical mass of people would ensure that the results of any cost-benefit analysis would be negative.

The logical conclusion is that the balanced regional development of which Government and Opposition parties often speak but on which they rarely act would never become a reality. In this case projects in the west must receive positive discrimination because cost-benefit analyses would confine us to the third tier for a longer period.

Some scandalous behaviour has occurred, however, under other tax exemption schemes, such as people setting themselves up with €100 million pension funds and zero tax liability because there were no effective limits placed on stashing away cash. This is an abuse of the tax paying public. Elements of our tax system are supporting some fat cats who abuse the system for their own advantage. This abuse should be stopped immediately.

Mr. Sargent: Tá áthas orm deis a fháil labhairt ar an mBille Airgeadais.

The Finance Bill reflects Government interests and an increasingly outdated reality and is not in the public interest now or for the future. I listened to the Minister's speech in which he stated, "The policies of recent years have delivered a personal tax environment that fosters and supports effort and enterprise." He could argue that for as long as energy is affordable.

Unfortunately, that situation is changing rapidly. The Bill continues in this direction which is a very short-sighted approach. He also claimed that there is much reform in this Bill. I do not see anything like the reform that is needed. A headline in *The Guardian* newspaper today shows that other countries are copping on very fast, "Sweden plans to be world's first oil-free economy". To many in the Government that might seem to be going a bit far but Ireland is more oil-dependent than Sweden, which is focused on international competitiveness, in which the Minister too claims to take a serious interest. The reality and the Minister's aspirations do not gel.

How cynical is it for the Minister to boast about a rise in fuel allowance, which is badly needed, while standing over a situation in which Ireland has the worst insulated housing stock in northern Europe, and fuel costs that will soak up the increase before the next budget is announced? There is no attempt to remove VAT on insulation to enable people to offset the fuel demand. There is no grant aid for the type of installation I and many others have added to houses, such as solar panels, which are costly. Interest free loans for such installations are available in other countries but not here.

This Minister does not see the picture presented by experts and commentators. Economist David McWilliams writes about house prices in the *Irish Independent* today. It is quite cynical for the Government to fail to address in this Bill the unaffordability of house prices. David McWilliams writes that the consumer price index gives a false read on reality, yet it guides the Government.

The all-party committee on property laid down a clear road map for the Government, if it was serious about addressing this issue. One wonders whether the Government prefers not to address the issue. The further people must go from their workplace to live, the further they must drive, and the more VAT and excise return the Government gains on the energy and transport for which people must pay. Is the Government not being extremely short-sighted in that regard? It may gain a good revenue return on those items but people will find it impossible to live. That is increasingly the case as the cost of living increases with rising fuel prices.

There was some attempt to address the issue in dealing with biofuel. The Government's audacity, however, is amazing when it says it will comply with an EU biofuel directive for 2% usage by 2008 although the legal requirement is that it comply two years before then. We are announcing to the world that we will break the law for two years and that is supposed to be good news. Perhaps it is good news when one considers that we quite often break the law for many more years but it is nothing of which to boast. It should have been done a long time ago. There should be no excise on biofuel if we are serious about kick-starting the biofuel industry and providing alternative enterprises for farmers.

We have heard many warnings from wind energy companies which have gone to other countries because they did not find this Government helpful, co-operative or understanding of the need for large capital investment in renewable energy. These companies were prepared to take the risk, yet the Government confined itself to land-based wind energy projects and the offshore projects have not materialised as they should have, given the resources here. This is another example of Government short-sightedness.

[Mr. Sargent.]

There is no escaping the fact that the Government is overseeing a giveaway in terms of tax breaks and write-offs to exploration companies.

6 o'clock We need the energy now but will need it far more in the future. To give it away now will leave us in an even more precarious position. We should not rush to give away our oil or gas, no matter how small the find. The finds are not very big to judge by geological figures. As the cost is being offset, in effect there is a zero return to the State. We simply buy it at the market price, and that is certainly not in this country's interest, either now or in future. If the exploration companies can effectively be treated as charities, then charities have a good case to ask why there is not a VAT refund, as the Green Party advocated in its pre-budget submission. Why is the section 45 threshold not brought down to €135, and why is section 45 relief not extended to cover donations of non-cash assets such as property, shares and securities? In effect, charities — not only the Society of St. Vincent de Paul or the better-known ones — carry out a considerable amount of work and fill in many of the gaps in community life not being addressed. Quality of life is not a measurement in the Government's economic calculator. GDP and GNP are not sufficiently wide to cover the work of many charities. At a cost of €40 million, which is the cost of the measures we propose — less than the loss on the electronic voting debacle, for example — we would secure a far better quality of life based on the fact that charities would be able to be more viable than they are under the Government.

Mr. Curran: I would like to share time with Deputies Moloney, Finneran and Peter Power.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Is that agreed? Agreed.

Mr. Curran: Having listened to the last speaker's contribution, I can say that, if his points had all been accurate and valid, the country would not be in the situation in which it finds itself today, with 2 million people working and a little more than 4% unemployed.

Mr. Sargent: I was thinking ten years in advance.

Mr. Curran: It is one of the best economies in Europe, and I wonder what we would say today if the Deputy's policies had been followed by the Government.

Mr. Sargent: They are policies for today.

Mr. Curran: We have changed this country radically, and the Deputy is living in the past. He referred to the Government as being short-sighted, exhibiting a lack of reform, and missing

the big picture. It is his party that is failing to see the big picture.

Mr. Sargent: Deputy Curran will see.

Mr. Curran: He keeps saying we will see, yet he fails to see where we are today. The Deputy should not read what is in the newspaper but see what is happening all around him.

Mr. Sargent: I should not read?

Mr. Curran: He should read about where real people are in employment today who were not in employment before. That is the reality, rather than the opinion or view of some so-called economic expert. My point is that the policies pursued for the last decade or so have changed this economy radically. That is why it is growing so rapidly.

Mr. Sargent: We are losing competitiveness.

Mr. Curran: That is why we have a low rate of unemployment and 2 million people in work in the economy. Despite what the Deputy might say about people's purchasing power, most if not all surveys on it indicate that while our costs are higher our real purchasing power is greater than in most equivalent countries across Europe. The Deputy might not like to recognise that, but those are the facts.

Often in politics we get up here and speak about matters and it is a long time before we see the real change. It was a little more than a year ago when Deputy Cowen delivered his first budget, referring to a review of the various tax relief schemes. That review formed a substantial part of the last budget and the current Finance Bill. He has gone into numerous parts, and if I have time, I will examine some of them. Changes have been made, and various people on the Opposition benches will say that because we have made changes, something was inherently wrong. I do not agree with that at all.

Mr. Sargent: We want more change.

Mr. Curran: I do not believe it is always possible to cost a specific scheme in advance. For many on the Opposition benches, that is what they want us to do. I will refer specifically to the urban renewal scheme. I do so because I was a member of a local authority and witnessed its implementation. One could not cost the scheme's impact on Clondalkin, part of my constituency, in advance.

When the scheme's completion date was first announced and subsequently extended, not a single developer or business person came to me to apply for it. However, local people in the community and members of the local authority did so because they could see the benefit being derived. It was slow and tortuous to deliver, but it brought benefits, not necessarily economic ones, but a

whole new social aspect. Many of those points are not reflected in simple economic terms in the various reports. If it had been so great and economically beneficial to the large property-developers, we would not have left sites that were too awkward and difficult and never fell into it.

People argue that it was right to review the schemes, and I agree with the Minister that it is correct to make changes. However, because we have reviewed the schemes and made changes does not mean they did not deliver benefits as originally presented. Many of those benefits cannot be calculated in pure or simple economic terms. Deputy Burton would agree with many of those points. The benefit cannot always be determined in advance of the scheme, and the SSIA's were a case in point. There was no way of accurately determining in advance what the take-up would be. Although the merits may be assessed, the take-up could not have been forecast.

While I acknowledge and appreciate the review undertaken by the Minister and his subsequent changes in this Finance Bill reflecting its recommendations, that does not mean we have not derived significant social benefit or made changes to our economy based on the schemes in place.

Mr. Moloney: I, too, am glad of a few minutes to refer to the provisions of the Finance Bill and, like Deputy Curran, to congratulate the Minister on delivering on commitments and, more importantly, taking on board submissions. I refer to the commitment that high earners will no longer be able to reduce their taxable income to zero. I am happy that the Bill considers such matters. As a former member of the Committee on Social and Family Affairs, I have heard a great deal about the fact that people had prepared very little for their future pension entitlements. The Minister has recognised that, and I congratulate him on his initiative aimed at the lower-income SSIA-holders, particularly those under funded for pensions. There is no need for me to rehearse every provision, but they are very important and represent a commitment clearly entered into and delivered upon.

In the past, the rural community made submissions to various Ministers, especially those who tried to advance farm development. I refer specifically to submissions made by the IFA and especially Macra na Feirme. Often the case was made to us politicians that we should encourage people to stay on the land with little inducement. I am aware that in recent years many submissions were made on behalf of young farmers.

I was in the company of the Minister when some submissions were made, and I am delighted he recognised that the way to encourage people to participate in farming is to secure land that has not been available hitherto. I welcome the fact that in this year's budget, through the Finance Bill, exemptions for long-term land-leasing have been considered. In the budget, for instance, the

Minister had allowed for individuals leasing out land on a long-term basis from €7,500 to go as far as €12,000 for leases between five and seven years and from €10,000 to €15,000. While I might welcome that as a member of the Minister's party, it is worthwhile recognising that it has also been welcomed by the president of Macra na Feirme itself. He went on to make the point that this provision in the Finance Act goes a long way toward encouraging people to stay in farming, and more particularly those of an age to consider retiring. Macra na Feirme's basis for seeking an amendment to the Finance Act was that the overall rental value of land would increase due to the fact that the value of the single payment entitlements attached to the land would be built into the rental price of land and this is to be welcomed.

Previous speakers referred to the increase in funding for the disability sector which has been in place for several years. Will the Minister take into consideration the issue of VAT relating to disabled drivers and VAT exemptions on modified vehicles? The limit on the value of qualifying expenditure was decided in 1994-95 and was set at a value of approximately €40,000, which was quite generous at the time. However, the cost of appropriate vehicles has risen over the past 11 or 12 years by almost 30% and the figures have not been adjusted to the upper limit. I acknowledge this is a very good scheme but it requires updating, as inflation has somewhat diminished its value.

Suitable vehicles for disabled persons' transport tend to be expensive. It is not a case of these vehicles being used as status symbols or as signs of outward materialism but rather it is a matter of safety, access, reliability, comfort and the promotion of an inclusive lifestyle for disabled persons. Knowing the Minister's style, I am confident he will take this submission into account. I welcome the Bill.

Mr. Finneran: I compliment the Minister for Finance on this Bill and on the recent budget in which he addresses many issues affecting everyday lives. The elderly, the disadvantaged, those with disabilities, parents of children, all are to receive their fair share of the national cake.

The taxation proposals leave citizens with one of the lowest tax demands in the European Union. Those on the minimum wage are excluded from the income tax net altogether. At the same time, business and enterprise is encouraged and supported in the national interest. Major capital investments are being made in schools, hospitals, housing, road and rail and in the general infrastructure.

Farmers and farming families are afforded less attention in a modern, affluent Ireland. My constituency of Roscommon-South Leitrim contains approximately 10,000 farmers. They contribute greatly to the local economy, not alone in production but also in the high level of employment

[Mr. Finneran.]

created through the food processing industry in both counties.

The Finance Bill demonstrates a clear commitment to farmers and to young farmers, in particular. I compliment the Minister for Finance for his initiative in this area. The changes made by the Bill will see tax exemptions in place for long-term land leasing which will encourage more young farmers to involve themselves in the industry as more land will become available to them on a long-term leasing basis. The Bill is a real shot in the arm for young farmers as it includes the single farm payment element for tax exemption purposes. This should produce a knock-on effect by encouraging farmers to lease part of their lands to young farmers. It is a progressive move which highlights this Fianna Fáil-led Government's commitment to the sector, its future and young farmers.

The Finance Bill and the budget will enable young farmers to save almost €60 million over a three-year period of exemption from stamp duty. This is a significant initiative for young farmers. The measure allows young farmers to expand their farms without incurring stamp duty tax which in some cases could amount to thousands of euro. Young farmers will be allowed full stamp duty relief on entitlements, transfer or purchase of land, with a measure worth more than €2 million in a full year.

Stamp duty measures are part of a generous package of farm-specific measures worth more than €24 million which were announced in the budget last December. This will help farmers consolidate their holdings and meet new challenges in the global market place.

The 2006 budget has made significant improvements to the rental income exemption available to land owners who lease out farm land for five or more years. The income tax exemption for leases of five to seven years has been increased from €7,500 to €12,000 with an increase from €10,000 to €15,000 for leases of more than seven years. These measures will optimise land use and encourage high productivity on agricultural soil.

From the beginning of 2006, the qualified adult rate for farm assist will increase from €148.80 to €165.80. This will directly benefit the 8,020 farm families in receipt of farm assist payments. In addition, the payment rates for the rural social scheme will be increased in line with social welfare rates. I commend the Bill to the House.

Mr. P. Power: I thank my colleagues for sharing their time with me.

I compliment the Minister on an excellent budget. It is a budget which helps families, the elderly and the disadvantaged in our community.

Mr. P. McGrath: The Deputy should keep this up and he might get the call.

Mr. P. Power: It will be regarded in years to come as being one of the most reforming budgets for the way in which it has tackled the tax breaks accumulated in the past 20 years.

I will concentrate on the debate about the phased abolition of tax breaks which will take place over the next few years. There has been much discussion on the reasons for the establishment of these tax breaks and their subsequent use. It has been suggested that various cost benefit analyses should be incorporated into the Finance Bill.

The introduction of tax breaks, specifically property-based tax breaks, is a matter for political judgment. They were introduced by parties of different colours in the 1980s and 1990s, which used the best political judgment available at the time.

I had the honour of chairing the inner city renewal committee of Limerick City Council for several years when I was a city councillor. Without any fear of contradiction I can state that the development which took place in Limerick has been one of the shining examples of the success of inner city renewal development and tax breaks. This development in Limerick city would not have taken place without these tax breaks.

Many of the criticisms voiced about the budget and the Finance Bill contain a subtext that the tax forgone amounted to dirty or grubby money in the hands of developers or those who took risks at a difficult period. I refer to individuals in my constituency such as Michael Tiernan who took huge personal risks——

Acting Chairman (Mr. O'Shea): The Deputy should not refer to individuals by name.

Mr. P. Power: ——to assemble land banks when the country was on its knees and nobody wanted to touch these properties. The titles to the properties were a shambles and they took huge personal risks in assembling these properties. They were courageous in availing of the tax breaks and building developments in Limerick such as Arthur's Quay, Charlotte's Quay and transforming the river front. None of this would have taken place otherwise. It has been suggested that somehow this is tax forgone. However, I strongly suggest — I agree with Deputy Curran on this point — that the tax contribution arising from the original tax breaks far exceeds the tax forgone on individual developments. No calculation can be made of the economic activity generated in all the buildings in all the inner city areas which have been developed.

I agree with Deputy Burton that there should be a direct correlation between future tax breaks and specifically focused Government policy. There must be such a direct connection. In that regard, the focus of this year's budget on a package for the elderly should be underpinned by tax breaks in the future. I am referring to the capital

allowance for nursing homes and qualified residential units. I ask the Minister and his officials to take note of this point because there are difficulties with the amendments to section 36, specifically, which provides that the tax breaks will not flow until such time as the units are first used, as distinct from completion of construction. That will drive away the investors who have traditionally supported such developments. Therefore, I ask the Minister to re-examine the provisions included in section 36 on Committee Stage.

Mr. Deenihan: I wish to share my time with Deputy Paul McGrath.

Acting Chairman: Is that agreed? Agreed.

Mr. Deenihan: I am delighted to have an opportunity to speak on the Finance Bill. Deputy Finneran referred to small farmers whom the Government has done more to encourage to leave the land than any previous Administration. The Government has taken hope away from the agricultural community to the extent that in most cases farming is now a secondary career option. The Bill will do nothing to stem the flow of young and old from the land which we are witnessing.

As regards Deputy Peter Power's remarks, all our party leader, Deputy Kenny, and Deputy Bruton are seeking is a cost-benefit analysis of schemes. When in government, Fine Gael and the Labour Party introduced the urban renewal scheme that changed the face of Limerick, Cork and the Dublin docklands. Subsequently, the scheme was rolled out to other provincial centres by the Fianna Fáil led Government and it certainly had an effect on the economy of such areas. Nonetheless, we are calling for a cost-benefit analysis and evaluation of schemes.

As a Minister, Deputy Kenny introduced the seaside renewal scheme which was very successful in some places but never properly evaluated. That is what has occurred recently and that is all we are seeking. As I have said on a number of occasions, I am in favour of targeted tax incentive schemes, which is the only way to secure development into many parts of the country. There is a disparity between east and west which is growing every day. I am convinced that more building occurs in Dublin in one day than in an entire year in County Kerry. The level of activity in places such as County Kerry and along the west coast, including the Minister of State's constituency of County Donegal, is minuscule compared to what is happening on the east coast, especially in Dublin. There are two economies in the country which are evolving at different speeds. Unless the Government provides incentives to invest along the western seaboard and other areas not experiencing the same economic growth as the east, we will have greater division. Future tax breaks will have to be targeted, evaluated and monitored closely to this end. The main problem is that people have become careless about tax breaks.

Deputies Kenny, Bruton, Burton and others have questioned why such schemes were rolled out and extended without being properly monitored. There is no doubt they have led to increased economic activity but they must be re-examined from a cost-benefit viewpoint.

I wish to refer to some of the areas for which I have responsibility as party spokesperson. I welcome the provisions in the Bill concerning the film industry. The qualifying budget for a film will now be €35 million — an increase from €15 million. In 2003 the Irish film industry directly employed approximately 3,400 people — technicians, beauticians, including hair stylists, and many others involved in ordinary jobs. There was a major fall-off in production last year, however, with only one film of any significance. On his return from America, the Minister made much noise over that film, "Lassie", and was photographed on television with the dog. Lassie was all that barked last summer because no other major films were made here.

During the years we had blockbuster films made in Ireland but that activity has now moved elsewhere. People have gone off and taken other jobs. The structural base that produced such films here has been dismantled. I hope, however, we will attract some films on foot of the Bill's provisions. For example, yesterday's newspapers reported that this summer the actor Jonathan Rhys Meyers who is in Dublin at the moment will be involved in filming a new eight-part film series entitled "The Tudors". While that is welcome news, there is not much more happening in the Irish film sector.

I would like the Minister's officials to note that there is still uncertainty about section 481 which has been extended to the end of 2008 but, typically, a major film has a lead-in period of one year. Next year is not far away and unless there is certainty about that provision, it will cause difficulties. The Minister should make a statement clarifying what will happen regarding the extension of section 481, otherwise there will be uncertainty. Some films may be shot here in 2007 but there will be major concerns about 2008 since the Minister has said the provision will be terminated then.

I remind the Minister that some British newspapers have reported that major incentives are to be introduced soon for the UK film industry. When the UK lost "Braveheart" to Ireland, that country became aware of our tax incentives. At the time I met members of a committee from the House of Commons who had come here to examine our incentives and discover why we were so successful in attracting film projects. As a result, the UK authorities improved their incentives which will be improved still further in April. They will be a lot more attractive than those contained in the budget here. The film sector, therefore, is becoming very competitive.

[Mr. Deenihan.]

I thought the Minister would use the budget to address the issue of VAT. There was a lobby seeking an exemption from VAT for non-resident performing artists' fees for non-profit organisations. Performing arts companies or festivals are forced to pay VAT on the fees of many artists who come here from abroad. Many such artists are Irish people who have been forced to work overseas. VAT represents a major imposition on many small festivals and could put them out of business. There was an expectation that this matter would be addressed in the budget. My understanding is that the exemptions set out in the relevant EU directive do not require a change in legislation but simply a reinterpretation of current VAT law in Ireland. This can be achieved by granting an exemption to not-for-profit cultural arts companies from the payment of VAT on the fees of non-resident performers. I am sure the Arts Council could provide a definition of such companies. I would like consideration to be given on Committee Stage to the removal of VAT on fees of non-resident artists.

The issue of VAT on many of our tourism products must be addressed. The VAT rate of 13.5% is one of the highest in the euro zone, the second highest after that in Germany. This makes our tourism product less competitive. If one goes to Portugal, France or Spain, for example, one pays on average about 5% in VAT on accommodation and meals, whereas the rate in Ireland is 13.5%. That is a considerable amount of money, even if one is only talking about a bill of €100.

I wish to bring the issue of business tourism to the attention of the Minister of State. People who come to Ireland for conferences are charged VAT on their accommodation, food and so on. In other countries, they can reclaim VAT paid. If, for example, they attend a conference in Northern Ireland, they can reclaim the amount paid. One cannot reclaim it here. This matter should be re-examined.

Mr. P. McGrath: I thank my colleague, Deputy Deenihan, for sharing his time with me.

Listening to some Fianna Fáil backbenchers earlier, I felt I was living in a different area from them. Some of them seemed to lose the run of themselves because they were talking about the budget being family-friendly and farmer-friendly. I will combine the two and point out a couple of items in the budget which are anything but family-friendly.

While I welcome the increased income disregard for the leasing of farmland, I remain disgusted that the Government will not change the system in order that one can obtain tax relief in leasing a farm to a family member. If farmer Murphy in County Waterford or County Westmeath wants to retire and hand over his farm to his son, he cannot lease it to him and gain the advantage he would get if he leased the farm to

someone down the road, a total stranger. If we are trying to encourage farming and young people to enter it, as well as succession, it is very strange that a young farmer cannot lease the farm from his parents and see them receive the same tax relief as they would if they leased it to a stranger. That is awful. I looked up to see why this happens and when it first happened. The reason given for the ruling is that the provision is in place to avoid abuse. Who introduced this anti-family rule in respect of farm leasing? No one other than the Taoiseach when he was Minister for Finance. He brought forward the rule. That is disappointing.

Deputy Finneran told us what a great budget this was for young farmers and others. Has he gone deaf to what farmers are saying? Does he not hear the clamour from farmers with regard to EU directives, about which we heard much about last night and will hear more tonight? Unfortunately, because of time pressures, I will not be able to join in the debate.

There is one aspect of the directive which has not received much mention, namely, the cap on nitrogen usage levels on farms. This evening I spoke to a well informed farmer who told me that one of the greatest difficulties in the introduction of the nitrates directive was the way in which the spreading of nitrogen on farms would be curtailed, that it would bring to an end commercial farming or play a major part in its ending. That will have a further effect on farm families.

Let us look again at the tax credits awarded in the budget. The Minister made much of the fact that he was increasing the tax credit for the coming year from €29,400 to €32,000. He must have forgotten that he had not increased it for a long time and that just to keep pace with wage increases and so on he needed to bring the figure up to €34,000.

We are failing to hear about a certain matter from the Government back benches. The Minister of State is a very busy man and is aware, just as I am, of the following. Let us imagine two families living beside each other, one with two earners and the other with one. Let us say income between the two is €64,000. However, the household with one earner is penalised to the tune of €140 per week, or €7,000 per annum. It is penalised because the second member will not go out to work. Is that fair? It is anti-family. It is driving people out to work. That is not right.

I am glad the Minister for Finance has joined us because I want to mention a couple of particular items. In the budget he clamped down on investment in pension funds. That is a complex area which is difficult to fully understand. In fairness, he has tried to counter some of the difficulties and — let us be honest — abuses which have emerged. The approved retirement funds provision was introduced by the Minister's predecessor in 1999 and there was a big uptake but, of course, people began to abuse it. As the case

studies show, some invested about €100 million in such funds. Who first designed this system? Did the designers not see that such difficulties could arise? Was it copied from some other country which had introduced it and, if so, did they not learn from its experience, or was it only the Irish Paddy who was going to abuse the system?

I understand the reason the Minister wants to close the gate. He is right and I agree with him. However, there are many at the lower end of the approved retirement fund investments scale who do not have €100 million invested in them but will now be penalised by virtue of this rolling tax which the Minister will impose on them, whereby 1%, 2% and 3% will be taken. This will affect those who are not well off but comfortable; individuals who have planned well for their retirement. It will affect them in how they plan for nursing home care and so on. While I agree with the Minister in introducing a cap at the top end, I do not agree with him in hitting those who have modest sums in such accounts. Before the Minister finalises it, perhaps he could examine this matter again. I have come across people with relatively modest sums. They made a wise investment. They did not abuse the system but they are annoyed because they are being clobbered because others abused the system. It is not fair.

The second matter I will ask the Minister to examine is the disclosure on bank accounts. I do not know how it will work or be enforced. Quite frankly, the Minister is using a sledgehammer—

Acting Chairman: Gabh mo leithscéal leis an Teachta ach tá nóiméad amháin fágtha aige.

Mr. P. McGrath: No one else is offering. Perhaps I could steal a couple of extra minutes if the Minister agrees. He is enthralled.

Mr. Cowen: Midlands solidarity.

Mr. P. McGrath: I thank the Minister. I appreciate it.

The mandatory reporting on bank accounts is over the top in terms of personal freedoms and so on and I wonder where it will stop. The Minister might examine a number of issues in this context. He is not very long in the job but he is making shapes in the right direction.

The discrepancies that appear in terms of different means tests and treatments of accounts for different scenarios bug me on a regular basis. For example, if I run a taxi business, lease a taxi rather than own it and return my accounts for the taxi business to Revenue, it will tell me that I have run my business properly, what expenses are allowable and that my income is €20,000. If I have a child going to higher education and send in my accounts approved by Revenue and stating my income to my local authority to ask for a higher education grant, it will tell me that this is not the situation. Revenue might believe I have an

income of €20,000 but the local authority knows that I have leased my taxi and will add the money I am paid for it as an income.

In marginal situations this could put a family above the threshold to qualify for higher education grants, which is unfair. Where Revenue agrees there is legitimate expenditure by way of leasing, why should a local authority — in fact, it is the Department of Education and Science — not recognise leasing in accounts? In effect, the Department is telling Revenue that it does not trust it to do its job well. This matter should be ironed out.

Another example would be for me to be a self-employed person on a relatively low income looking for a family income supplement, FIS. The Minister is from a rural area and will be aware of many people operating small post offices and shops who are on relatively low incomes. If that income is PAYE, they would qualify for FIS. However, as soon as they put in their applications and state that they are self-employed, the answer is no, they should forget it as they cannot have it. In other words, the Department of Social and Family Affairs is saying that it does not trust the Revenue, that they are not able to do their business. The low income of the person in question might be recognised by Revenue but the Department does not recognise it. This is not fair. The Government is treating people differently. This situation should not continue.

In the same vein, the Minister should examine what happens in terms of assessing capital for various schemes. There is no uniform approach. If one is looking for an old age non-contributory pension, there is an income disregard of €20,000 of capital. If one is looking for a nursing home subvention, there is an income threshold of €7,500. Anything over that amount counts in income terms. Why can we not standardise these types of income disregards, which would be fair in this day and age?

Acting Chairman: The Deputy to conclude.

Mr. P. McGrath: I thank the Acting Chairman and the Minister for allowing me these extra few minutes.

Minister for Finance (Mr. Cowen): I thank the House for the many interesting contributions to the debate on the Finance Bill 2006. I look forward to a constructive and informed discussion on Committee Stage on the many matters raised.

Much of the debate on the Finance Bill has focused on the question of tax reliefs. Unfortunately, there is no shortage of misinformed comment on this issue. First, let us be clear about who benefits from tax reliefs. Some tax reliefs are specially designed as incentives to favour development in particular geographical areas or sectors and it is principally these that have been the subject of our discussion.

[Mr. Cowen.]

However, tax reliefs must be seen in a wider context. The cost of tax reliefs and the question of who benefits from such reliefs were raised by many Deputies, including Deputies Bruton, Burton and Ó Caoláin. The comments made by Deputy Burton suggested that tax equity was being compromised because of a two tier tax system, one for the wealthy and one for ordinary taxpayers. This is quite untrue. I refer the Deputies to page B.23 of the Budget 2006 booklet, which contains a table detailing where tax reliefs go. They will see that, of the €10.8 billion in relief for the tax year 2002, €5.6 billion or 52% went on personal tax credits and reliefs, €3.4 billion or 31% to help fund pensions and savings and well more than €1 billion or 10% on capital allowances for traders, including farmers, to ensure their viability and job creation capacity. The vast bulk of tax relief each year thus goes to ordinary taxpayers at all income levels and to sustain business investment and jobs.

Tax reliefs should be kept under review, most particularly those that are of benefit to particular sectors or groups within the economy. Deputy Devins quite rightly pointed out that policy makers must take account not only of economic measures but also of the sociological benefits that can accrue to regions from these schemes. When these are reviewed properly and carefully, the results must be treated with an open mind. I have had carried out a detailed and sophisticated analysis of a very wide range of tax reliefs and incentives. I have published those reports and have, in substance, accepted what they are telling me.

Deputies Burton, Ó Caoláin and others are happy to accept the conclusions of these reviews where they support their own views but not otherwise. The Deputies argue against a tapered run down of those of the reliefs that are being terminated. They want them stopped straight away. However, this is not what was advocated by the consultants, who are rightly concerned about the economic effects of a sudden change. I am happy to follow the consultants' views in doing away with reliefs but I, too, am determined not to damage our very successful economy in so doing. For this reason, subject to the relevant EU clearances, I intend that reliefs should be abolished on a tapering basis.

I am also criticised for "bringing in new reliefs" for psychiatric hospitals. What I am actually doing is extending a system in place for general hospitals which has just been reviewed in order that it can also apply to psychiatric health providers. I do not believe the current discrimination in this regard should be sustained but I will keep the extended relief under review.

Deputy Bruton and others have argued that I should put into the Finance Bill statutory provision for further reviews of tax reliefs and for prior assessments of new reliefs. I have told the

Deputies concerned that I am committed to doing this where appropriate but that there seems to be no requirement to put this into legislation. It is suggested that I am somehow recalcitrant on this issue but I cannot see how, as the Minister who has just commissioned and published a very wide ranging review of such schemes, I can be tarred with that brush. I have proven my bona fides in this regard.

The Government is not afraid of properly conducted policy reviews or making changes when appropriate. Incidentally, while on the subject of reliefs, I note that Deputy Burton suggests that I have introduced a special roll over relief by virtue of the provisions of section 38. This is not at all the case and I will be happy to expand on the issue on Committee Stage but what is actually being done is some tightening up to close off a possible opportunity for abuse. I would also point out that I have extended the holding period generally for all health related facilities and child care facilities to 15 years for new facilities put in use from 1 August 2006. These provisions are included in sections 34 to 37.

As I mentioned yesterday in the House, I am addressing in the Bill the issue of a small number of individuals with very high incomes who, up to now, by aggressive use of tax reliefs, have been able to reduce their income tax liability to a very low level or zero. From 2007, such individuals will not be able to do so.

I have covered all the incentive type reliefs likely to be used in this way by those on high incomes. Accordingly, the specified list contained in section 17 covers a broad range of reliefs and incentives. The scheme has been tested by the Revenue Commissioners using real cases to ensure it will be effective and such taxpayers will have an average tax rate each year of not less than approximately 20%.

Contrary to what was asserted yesterday by Deputy Rabbitte and today by Deputy McManus, the new tax relief for investment in private mental hospitals is one of the specified reliefs covered by the new restriction. I refer the Deputies to pages 71 and 73. While Deputies Bruton and Burton may believe the new restriction on the use of reliefs does not go far enough, I consider it to be a significant step towards promoting tax equity and getting the balance right by ensuring those on high incomes pay their fair share, while at the same time maintaining the incentive effect of the various tax reliefs introduced to achieve a particular public benefit.

A number of Deputies referred to the new income disregard for childminders and whether such minders would have social insurance cover. As I indicated yesterday, the issue of PRSI is being examined by the Minister for Social and Family Affairs for the forthcoming Social Welfare Bill. The adequacy of the €10,000 threshold and the possibility of a tapering arrangement were also raised. A tapering arrangement would

considerably complicate the scheme designed with simplicity as a priority. I consider the €10,000 threshold to be reasonable, considering the other child care measures included in the budget. It can, of course, be reviewed in future budgets.

I am satisfied that a straight cut-off from the scheme at an income in excess of €10,000 is the simplest and most practical option and will I hope encourage people to provide such services and also encourage existing minders out of the black economy. Where a childminder's income exceeds €10,000, the total amount will be taxable, as normal, under the self-assessment system. The income limit of €10,000 refers to gross income. In determining the individual's income level no deductions will be allowed for expenses, for example, whereas they would be allowable if the individual declared the income as normal under the self-assessment system.

Deputy Burton referred to the tax position of those earning the average industrial wage, approximately €32,000 in 2006. The reality is that since 1997 a single person on the average industrial wage will have seen his or her pay rise by over €12,600 and the tax bill cut by over €400 per annum as compared to that year. In the same period the person's average tax rate has dropped by 12 percentage points from 27% to 15%. In real terms, when the cost of living as measured by the CPI is taken into account, the person on the average industrial wage will have seen his or her take home pay rise by 44%, of which about half is due to tax reductions. Year after year, independent data from the OECD indicate that for those on average pay we have the lowest tax wedge in the European Union and one of the lowest in the entire OECD. The fact that our unemployment rate is half the EU average is no coincidence.

Those who earn more contribute more to the income tax yield than was the case in 1997 when we took office. It is estimated that in 2006 the top 1% of income earners will pay approximately 20% of all income tax collected, whereas in the 1997-98 tax year, they paid less than 15% of all income tax collected. In the same period the contribution of lower earners to the income tax yield has reduced significantly. Those earning at or under the average industrial wage will pay 6% of the expected income tax yield for 2006 as compared with over 14% in 1997 when the Government took office. It is a source of amazement to me that the Government is accused of favouring the wealthy when the facts speak for themselves.

In its recently published quarterly economic commentary the ESRI observed that "the direct tax and welfare provisions in budget 2006 — including the new early child care supplement — were strongly progressive". It also observed that "budget 2006 strongly favoured low-income groups, with smaller percentage gains for those on higher incomes". The provisions of section 17 will also ensure that from 2007 the small number

of high income individuals who have been able to reduce or eliminate their income tax liability through the use of tax incentives and reliefs will generally have an average tax rate of not less than about 20% each year. As a higher percentage of the tax take is paid by high earners and a lesser percentage is paid by lower earners, this is a strongly progressive budget with limits on tax reliefs and their use for the wealthy. In the face of the evidence, how can the Opposition mantra retain any credibility? Political attacks are not facts.

I reject Deputy Bruton's assertion that no serious effort is made to give tax refunds to compliant taxpayers. The Revenue Commissioners make every effort possible to inform taxpayers of their entitlements using every available means at their disposal, including leaflets, the Internet and media campaigns. They have recently introduced a range of self-service facilities aimed at allowing PAYE workers claim certain reliefs on the Internet or telephone. This service is being extended further in 2006. A number of years ago the Revenue Commissioner introduced a tax relief at source system for items such as pension contributions, permanent health insurance, medical insurance and mortgage interest payments. The difficulty lies in areas where expenditure cannot be quantified until year end such as medical expenses. The taxpayer must submit a claim to the Revenue Commissioners telling them what was spent in the previous year. I remain open to suggestions that will improve the take-up of various relief schemes. Deputy Bruton has suggested the establishment of a tax ombudsman with the remit to take cases on behalf of ordinary taxpayer to the Revenue Commissioners in the event of overpayments. I do not agree with this approach as we should concentrate on making the system as effective as possible rather than inventing a new bureaucracy.

Many Deputies referred to pensions and I am glad to have the opportunity to clarify a number of points. The Government has been criticised because it is suggested an individual can take a large lump sum payment out of his or her pension fund without paying tax. This cannot be done as the Government has closed off that possibility since the budget. The Government reviewed the use of pensions by high earners, identified the issue and closed off the possibility for abuse.

I have been asked why individuals who have built up large pension funds can continue to hold them tax free. This is a misconception. We cannot tax a pension fund retrospectively but have ensured these moneys which are kept in approved retirement funds will be taxed at the individual's marginal rate as they are drawn down, or by reference to a notional rate of draw down. For the future the size of fund allowable has effectively been capped.

I have been asked why I have not prevented individuals who control companies from arrang-

[Mr. Cowen.]

ing to have those companies make unlimited payments into the fund. On the basis of evidence arising from the review which I commissioned, we have effectively placed a cap on the size of the fund which can be built up for an individual and any excess is taxable at prohibitive rates. An individual can no longer take enormous lump sums tax free, cannot use tax incentives to build up an unreasonably large fund, or indefinitely defer payment of tax on such funds. Deputy Burton suggests there is some way a person can take €250,000 in tax reliefs under the new capped arrangements and also an additional €250,000 in pensions relief but that is not the case. An earnings limit of €254,000 applies to tax relievable pension contributions. The tax benefit for pension contributions paid is limited to a percentage of €254,000, between 15% and 40% per year, depending on age, and relief is payable at the marginal rate. There is no question of an individual putting €250,000 into pension schemes, let alone getting a tax break of that value. Those who have build up pension contributions using tax reliefs will eventually have to draw down a pension and pay tax on it. Pension tax breaks are, to an extent, a deferral of tax, rather than an absolute exemption. Our recent analysis has shown that the use of approved retirement funds to defer tax and the taking of large lump sums tax free was capable of undermining that position, but we have taken steps to set this right.

Deputies Burton, Boyle and Ó Caoláin have criticised the scheme for incentivising the conversion of SSIA's into pension contributions. I seem to be in a no-win situation as I am criticised for not giving the benefit of this scheme to the 42% taxpayer, but the 42% taxpayer already has considerable incentives available to him or her. I am also criticised for not being more generous in regard to the scheme but this is the first time any Minister in any Government has taken a step to incentivise pension provision for lower earners. This is a good scheme and the cost will be determined by the take-up but I am hopeful large numbers of individuals will see that there is a real long-term benefit in continuing the savings habit developed under the SSIA scheme and that the availability of this once-off bonus will give an extra impetus. This will help with pension coverage and the take-up of PRSAs, as mentioned by Deputy Andrews.

The question of pensions provision in the longer term is a separate one. Deputy Bruton pretends that I do not believe in studies or analysis, never mind that the evidence——

Acting Chairman: I must interrupt the Minister. It is 7 p.m and the order of the House requires that I put the question. However, if there is general agreement, I will allow the Minister some latitude to conclude. Is that agreed? Agreed.

Mr. Cowen: I thank the Acting Chairman. I am obliged to him.

Regarding pensions, Deputy Bruton has no doubts about the answers. However, does he not want us to study and analyse these issues also? The national pensions review produced by the Pensions Board provides a good base for the consideration which the Government is giving to the overall pensions situation. However, that consideration is a work in progress. As the chief executive of the Pensions Board said of the review:

its detailed analysis and costing of the pension situation are at least as important as the recommendations and should continue to be used as a frame of reference going forward. The board understands that further decisions must be made in the context of employment interests, competitiveness and overall economic and social considerations.

The Pensions Board itself sees that its analysis and recommendations must be considered by Government in a wider context.

Deputy Boyle referred to the new biofuels scheme which is included in the Bill but implied that the provision was simply an enabling provision. Perhaps I can clarify that. The provision is subject to a commencement order but this approach is required because the scheme requires EU state aid approval. While this can take some months, I assure the Deputy that the process has commenced and exploratory discussions have taken place between my officials, officials of the Department of Communications, Marine and Natural Resources and the European Commission.

The Deputy might wish to know that I have budgeted for excise relief of €20 million this year under the scheme, rising to €35 million next year and €50 million in each of the following three years. This relief scheme, when fully operational, is expected to support the use and production in Ireland of approximately 163 million litres of biofuels per year, which is 20 times the current level of biofuels that is excise-relieved.

I note what Deputy Naughten and others stated regarding the proposal in the Bill on automatic reporting to Revenue by banks and others. The provision is an enabling one and before the regulations are drafted there will be appropriate consultations, which will allow account to be taken of the points made by Deputies. There are differing views on this and we can have a useful discussion on this on Committee Stage.

Deputies Ardagh, Naughten and others referred to tax issues of interest to farmers. Under this Finance Bill, disposals of the single farm payment entitlement is exempted from stamp duty in its entirety. This entitlement will be regarded as an asset for capital gains tax and capital acquisitions tax retirement reliefs, which are very generous. The young trained farmers scheme

is extended for another three years. This is a generous scheme which facilitates the transfer of land to young farmers by exempting the transfer from stamp duty.

Deputy Bruton referred to what he called the "collapse" of the expenditure review initiative. That is simply not the case. I informed the Deputy last November of the 54 expenditure reviews completed or under way in 2005 under the existing round of the expenditure review initiative, covering indicative total expenditure estimated at €3.8 billion. At that stage, 12 of the reviews had been completed, 14 had been quality assessed and were close to completion, seven were at quality assessment stage and 21 were ongoing. I will bring proposals to Government shortly for the approval of topics for review in 2006-08, to include the outstanding reviews carried forward from the previous round.

As regards the position of the Department of Health and Children and the OPW, I accepted the view of the expenditure review central steering committee that both bodies should be temporarily exempt from participation in the expenditure review initiative owing to the exten-

sive reform programme being undergone in the case of the former and the demands of decentralisation in the case of the latter. Both bodies will be asked to carry out expenditure reviews under the 2006-08 round of the initiative.

On infrastructure, a statement was made that we have not brought forward decent projects to tackle the infrastructure deficit. It is clear that more than €43 billion will be available under the capital envelopes for 2006-10, more than €34 billion of which is for transport over the next ten years. This investment is making a real difference through better roads, better public transport, more houses and more child care places. In health and education too there has been real enhancement in services. I accept that value for money in expenditure must be a paramount objective. The multi-annual framework provides a much better way of having better planning and management of capital projects.

I thank Deputies for their attention to this important Bill and for their contributions. I look forward to Committee Stage when we can elucidate and detail some of the more important provisions highlighted on Second Stage.

Question put.

The Dáil divided: Tá, 78; Níl, 56.

Tá

Ahern, Michael.
 Ahern, Noel.
 Andrews, Barry.
 Ardagh, Seán.
 Blaney, Niall.
 Brady, Johnny.
 Brady, Martin.
 Brennan, Seamus.
 Browne, John.
 Callanan, Joe.
 Callely, Ivor.
 Carey, Pat.
 Carty, John.
 Cassidy, Donie.
 Collins, Michael.
 Cooper-Flynn, Beverley.
 Coughlan, Mary.
 Cowen, Brian.
 Cregan, John.
 Cullen, Martin.
 Curran, John.
 Davern, Noel.
 de Valera, Síle.
 Dempsey, Noel.
 Dempsey, Tony.
 Dennehy, John.
 Devins, Jimmy.
 Ellis, John.
 Finneran, Michael.
 Fitzpatrick, Dermot.
 Fleming, Seán.
 Gallagher, Pat The Cope.
 Glennon, Jim.
 Hanafin, Mary.
 Haughey, Seán.
 Hoctor, Máire.
 Jacob, Joe.
 Keaveney, Cecilia.
 Kelleher, Billy.
 Kelly, Peter.

Kirk, Seamus.
 Kitt, Tom.
 Lenihan, Brian.
 Lenihan, Conor.
 McDaid, James.
 McDowell, Michael.
 McEllistrim, Thomas.
 McGuinness, John.
 McHugh, Paddy.
 Moloney, John.
 Moynihan, Donal.
 Moynihan, Michael.
 Mulcahy, Michael.
 Nolan, M. J.
 Ó Cuív, Éamon.
 Ó Fearghail, Seán.
 O'Connor, Charlie.
 O'Dea, Willie.
 O'Donnell, Liz.
 O'Donovan, Denis.
 O'Flynn, Noel.
 O'Keeffe, Batt.
 O'Keeffe, Ned.
 O'Malley, Fiona.
 O'Malley, Tim.
 Parlon, Tom.
 Power, Peter.
 Power, Seán.
 Sexton, Mae.
 Smith, Brendan.
 Smith, Michael.
 Treacy, Noel.
 Wallace, Dan.
 Wallace, Mary.
 Walsh, Joe.
 Wilkinson, Ollie.
 Woods, Michael.
 Wright, G. V.

Níl

Allen, Bernard.
Boyle, Dan.
Breen, James.
Breen, Pat.
Broughan, Thomas P.
Bruton, Richard.
Burton, Joan.
Connaughton, Paul.
Connolly, Paudge.
Costello, Joe.
Cowley, Jerry.
Crowe, Seán.
Deasy, John.
Deenihan, Jimmy.
Durkan, Bernard J.
English, Damien.
Enright, Olwyn.
Ferris, Martin.
Gregory, Tony.
Hayes, Tom.
Healy, Seamus.
Higgins, Joe.
Higgins, Michael D.
Hogan, Phil.
Howlin, Brendan.
Kehoe, Paul.
Lynch, Kathleen.
McCormack, Pádraic.

McGrath, Finian.
McGrath, Paul.
McManus, Liz.
Mitchell, Olivia.
Morgan, Arthur.
Murphy, Catherine.
Murphy, Gerard.
Naughten, Denis.
Noonan, Michael.
Ó Caoláin, Caoimhghín.
Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.
O'Keeffe, Jim.
O'Shea, Brian.
O'Sullivan, Jan.
Pattison, Seamus.
Penrose, Willie.
Perry, John.
Rabbitte, Pat.
Ring, Michael.
Ryan, Eamon.
Ryan, Seán.
Sargent, Trevor.
Sherlock, Joe.
Stagg, Emmet.
Stanton, David.
Timmins, Billy.
Twomey, Liam.
Upton, Mary.

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Kitt and Kelleher; Níl, Deputies Kehoe and Stagg.

Question declared carried.

Finance Bill 2006: Referral to Select Committee.

Minister for Finance (Mr. Cowen): I move:

That the Bill be referred to the Select Committee on Finance and the Public Service, in accordance with Standing Order 120(1) and paragraph 1(a)(i) of the Orders of Reference of that committee.

Question put and agreed to.

Private Members' Business.

Future of Irish Farming: Motion (Resumed).

The following motion was moved by Deputy Naughten on Tuesday, 7 February 2006:

That Dáil Éireann condemns the Minister for Agriculture and Food for her abject failure and gross negligence in failing to defend the interests of Irish farmers, by not:

- ensuring that the nitrates directive is implemented in a workable and practical manner;
- securing a future for Irish beet growers; and

- ending the abuse of Irish food labelling law to prevent inferior imported foods being passed off as Irish;

calls on the Government to:

- acknowledge the crisis within the farming sector;
- immediately suspend the implementation of the full nitrates directive, to allow for revised scientific information to be presented by Teagasc and a comprehensive public information campaign to inform farmers about their responsibilities under the nitrates action plan prior to its implementation;
- provide clarity on the implementation of the restructuring levy and distribution of the compensation package for the sugar industry;
- establish a forum to bring together beet growers, Greencore, workers and all beet industry interests to reach an early agreement on the future of the sugar sector;
- immediately introduce country of origin food labelling within the catering and processing sectors; and
- develop a survival action plan for the future of farming, which will deal with the key farming sectors of Irish farming

and will be fully resourced and implemented on the ground.

Debate resumed on amendment No. 1:

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

“recognising the need to implement EU policies designed to ensure the development of agriculture and the agrifood sector in a sustainable and more market oriented manner, supports the Minister for Agriculture and Food in:

- seeking the early agreement of the European Commission on her proposals for major improvements to the farm waste management scheme specifically intended to assist farmers in meeting the requirements of the nitrates directive;
- working with the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government to explore with the European Commission the possibility of some changes to the European Communities (Good Agricultural Practice for the Protection of Waters) Regulations 2005 in relation to phosphorus limits on the basis of a review at present under way in Teagasc of the science underpinning these limits as well as working with him in pursuing a derogation for certain farmers;
- having secured modifications of the sugar reform proposals to take account of Irish interests which, when adopted by the Council, will be implemented in consultation with the stakeholders; and
- implementing the recommendations of the food labelling group and, in the absence of EU legislation, advancing national legislation to regulate the labelling of meat in restaurants and the catering trade and securing voluntary agreement for the implementation of origin labelling in advance of the mandatory requirement;

while at the same time ensuring the successful implementation of the most fundamental change in EU support arrangements for agriculture since the inception of the CAP, forcefully representing Irish agricultural interests in the ongoing WTO negotiations and preparing a national action plan to drive the future development of the agrifood sector in a more competitive and liberalised market.”

—(Minister for Agriculture and Food).

Minister of State at the Department of Agriculture and Food (Mr. Browne): I wish to share time with Deputies Callanan, Finneran, Moloney, Michael Moynihan, Wilkinson and Hocht. The

past year has been busy and fruitful for forestry. At the start of the year, we faced the prospect of a new rural development regulation which would have seriously damaged Ireland’s afforestation programme. Negotiations were long and difficult and Ireland was frequently isolated in its position on forestry. Ultimately however, we achieved significant improvements to the text and while the final package is not everything we would want, it is a basis upon which to build. In addition to the more traditional support measures, there will be opportunities to benefit from a wide range of new measures included in this regulation for the first time, including measures aimed at innovation and technological improvement, amenity investment and agri-forestry. I look forward to the drafting of a new programme in the next few months, in consultation with the sector, which will guide the development of forestry to 2013.

This Government is committed to a long-term forestry strategy. It knows this requires investment and has provided the funds. Last year’s allocation for forestry was the biggest financial package ever put together for the sector and this year it has been increased again. The total voted allocation for forestry in 2006 is €125 million, which is an 18% increase on the voted allocation last year. Moreover, I will assign a further €12 million to this area from my Department’s capital carry-over. These funds will support the afforestation and premium schemes in addition to capital development work such as roads, reconstitution, native woodland development, amenity schemes and woodland improvement, as well as research and development.

Following the CAP reforms, I believe forestry represents a real alternative land use in Ireland, which will provide a sustainable source of income for rural communities and raw material for local industrial use, processing and energy. Research by the European Forest Institute has emphasised Ireland’s competitive advantage in this regard, having one of the highest growth rates for a range of tree species in Europe. This enables faster returns on investment, in terms of both timber and carbon sequestration, than in most competing economies in Europe, and indeed worldwide.

Renewable energy has become a very relevant topic. There is great potential in Ireland for wood biomass to displace imported fossil fuels as a source of energy. I have made a start in the promotion of wood biomass by introducing a wood heating system to the Department’s buildings at Johnstown Castle. This conversion is now underway.

My Department is funding a number of pilot projects in this area, including the development of a thinning protocol with the Forestry Development Association and an integrated forest-to-energy project in County Clare, which will become a model for the entire country. Teagasc will also organise a number of practical thinning field days during the coming year. However, one

[Mr. Browne.]

of the main obstacles to be overcome in terms of wood energy is the high cost of installing wood-fired boilers at a scale where they can strongly tilt market demand. Another challenge is to increase and maintain the supply of raw material, particularly wood chip.

If the wood energy market is to develop to its full potential, substantial investment will be required and with this in mind, a number of new initiatives have been announced. A new scheme to grant aid the installation of wood-fired boilers, especially by heavy heat users, has been launched and will operate under the aegis of the Department of Communications, Marine and Natural Resources. This new scheme was developed by the Minister for Communications, Marine and Natural Resources, Deputy Noel Dempsey, and me. It will create a network of real markets for wood chip countrywide. I also plan to seek EU approval to introduce a special scheme to support the major investment required for the purchase of biomass harvesters and chippers. A further scheme to grant aid the planting of willow and miscanthus grass as a short-rotation fuel source is also being drafted. The stimulation of new markets and creation of new harvesting capacity is good news for all involved in the sector. Recognising the important role which the sector itself can play in this area, I recently announced a second call for proposals from interested parties, which will look in particular for innovative proposals for the development and promotion of sustainable forestry.

Last night, the Minister for Agriculture and Food, Deputy Coughlan, gave a comprehensive update on developments regarding reform of the sugar regime. She explained why reform was inevitable and could not be deferred any longer, due to pressures both within the EU and internationally.

Having been personally involved at all stages of these negotiations, I can testify to the enormous difficulties we faced in achieving an acceptable outcome for Irish interests. Throughout this negotiating process, the Minister for Agriculture and Food, Deputy Coughlan, engaged with the stakeholders and had their backing for the stance we took in Brussels. Consequently, I support the amended motion, as ably proposed by the Minister last night.

Mr. Callanan: I am delighted the Opposition tabled this motion on Agriculture, because it gives Members on the Government side an opportunity to let farmers know how good is their Minister for Agriculture and Food. Farmers know the Minister for Agriculture and Food, Deputy Coughlan, has represented and will represent them both in Europe and at home, in the best possible manner.

The past year has been an eventful time in agriculture. The introduction of the single payment

in 2005 was a major milestone in the development of Irish agriculture. It was a massive undertaking by the Minister for Agriculture and Food and her Department and I congratulate her for a job well done. It also involved a considerable learning curve for Irish farmers. Much preparatory work was required in establishing a database of farmers' entitlements base on their farming activities in the reference years. It was necessary to put systems in place to invite and process applications for *force majeure*, new entrants, private contract clauses, consolidation of entitlements and the national reserve.

An important part of the process was the establishment of an independent appeals system to ensure farmers seeking a review of their circumstances could have their cases dealt with fairly and efficiently. I wish to provide Members with some sense of the many tasks which were undertaken to deliver the new scheme on target. Briefing sessions were held throughout the country on various elements of the scheme and information booklets were sent to all farm households. Farmers were informed of their individual entitlements and were supplied with pre-printed area aid details to assist them in making their 2005 single payment applications. In all, more than 140,000 applications were submitted in April and May 2005, ensuring a demanding processing effort was required by the Department of Agriculture and Food in the following months.

A massive effort went into ensuring, in the first instance, the delivery of the disadvantaged areas scheme, starting in September, when 85,500 farmers were paid almost €196 million. The current position is that some €233 million has been paid to more than 100,000 farmers. Payments under the single payment scheme commenced on 1 December. While many people thought that would not happen, it was the earliest date allowed under EU regulations.

Mr. Naughten: When will it finish?

Mr. Callanan: Some 110,000 farmers were paid €970 million on that date. By the end of 2005, more than 118,000 farmers had received €1.058 billion under the single payment scheme.

Currently, total payments amount to €1,114 million, with 95% of farmers paid. It is of course necessary to pay all farmers as their files are cleared and a number of payment runs are made each week to ensure this. In the main, those farmers who have not yet received payment are difficult cases. In some situations, there are complicated issues relating to inheritances and in many others, applications for transfer of entitlements under the single payment scheme were only submitted to the Department in recent weeks, or the transfer documents have yet to be submitted.

The achievement in terms of payment delivery in the first year of a major scheme shift has been widely recognised. Ireland's performance in suc-

cessfully gearing up for change and in making the vast bulk of payments at the earliest opportunity provided for in the EU rules, places us in the leading group of member states. This did not happen by chance. It resulted from careful planning and resourcing, not least an investment in the necessary information technology-based systems. The Minister's aim for 2006 is to build on her achievements to provide an even better single payment service for farmers.

Another important issue for which the Minister can claim credit is securing funding for the CAP supports from 2007 to 2013. This will allow farmers to plan ahead with the assurance that their payments will continue. The supports were threatened by some EU leaders who do not support agriculture. The rural development package was agreed and REPs payments were increased. REPS has been an extremely successful scheme, for both farmers and the environment. We achieved the highest level of entry into REPS, with a record level of 48,000 farmers receiving almost €283 million in payments in 2005. This is the highest figure since REPS began in 1994, and represents an increase of 33% from previous years.

The nitrates directives will cause problems for some farmers with high stocking rates of one cow per acre or more. However, it is important we secure a derogation in the organic nitrogen limit from 170 kg per hectare to 230 kg per hectare for such people.

The Minister for Agriculture and Food, Deputy Coughlan, is extremely positive and forward looking, as can be seen from her support of crops such as biofuels, where I can see a huge market which may replace the sugar beet industry. It makes sense to produce crops that can reduce oil imports. We must also support a way of dealing with pig slurry, which could be a valuable fertiliser for grain farmers.

I was proud to visit Hong Kong for the World Trade Organisations talks, which was my first trip outside the State since I was elected. I was proud of the Minister—

Mr. Naughten: I hope the Minister of State, Deputy Browne, was as proud as the Deputy.

Mr. Callanan: I was delighted to be there to support my Minister. I did not realise how successful she was until I was in Hong Kong.

Mr. Naughten: The Deputy should not return to Galway to say that. He will be lynched. The farmers there will wait for him in the long grass.

Mr. Callanan: I will support my Minister in Galway and I hope she will visit everybody there. The only people who have a problem with her are Opposition Members, but many Fine Gael supporters say she is the best Minister ever.

Mr. Naughten: The Minister is embarrassed.

Mr. Stanton: Why did the IFA walk out of the partnership talks earlier?

Mr. Callanan: The problems ahead in the WTO talks concern the tariff cutbacks. The Minister will fight them because it is not in the EU's interest to have too many of them. I commend Deputy Coughlan, who is one of the best Ministers for Agriculture and Food we have ever had.

Mr. Stanton: Dream on.

Mr. Finneran: I support the amendment. I am amazed at the attack on the Minister and the tabling of a no confidence motion by Fine Gael, which beggars belief.

Mr. Naughten: The Deputy should read the motion.

Mr. Finneran: Deputy Coughlan has been a brave and effective Minister who has stood up for the interests of the Irish farmer. I refer to a number of notable achievements since her appointment. A successful outcome was achieved in the special beef premium overshoot issue with continued buoyancy in beef and live exports, the live sheep trade to the Continent was reopened and the horticulture sector received a major investment boost in 2005. The Minister also secured European Commission approval to retain the REPS payment of €242 per hectare for commonage farmers without affecting their single payment entitlements. In addition, the farm waste management scheme has been boosted massively with grant aid of up to 70% available with an additional top up for young farmers. I welcome the new Finance Bill, which will retain stamp duty exemption for young trained farmers for a further three years, increase the tax exemption limits for income from farm leasing to more than five years and extend certain existing capital acquisitions tax, capital gains tax and stamp duty reliefs to cover EU single payment entitlements in appropriate circumstances.

I highlight the Government's successful defence of the 2003 Common Agricultural Policy reform deal in EU budget negotiations before Christmas. Under the terms of the deal, our CAP receipts are estimated to be more than €10 billion. On the nitrates directive, the priority is to ensure flexibility in the operation of the regime. We should all work to assist farmers in meeting the new requirements through information, advice, grant assistance for additional storage and the provision of new methods of disposing of excess slurry and other measures.

I thank the Minister for her support in reversing the decision to close the Teagasc office in Boyle in my constituency. It will continue to service 500 farmers in north Roscommon. I reject the Fine Gael pretence to be the friend of the farmer and rural Ireland. Fine Gael can only get

[Mr. Finneran.]

into Government with Labour and the Green Party, neither of which is a friend of the farmer.

Mr. Naughten: Who will Fianna Fáil go into Government with? Will it be Sinn Féin?

Mary Coughlan: Not the Greens.

Mr. Finneran: Rather than attack a Minister who is doing her best to protect our interests, Fine Gael should explain——

Mr. Naughten: Fianna Fáil members should make up their minds.

Mr. Browne: Fine Gael, Labour and the Greens still will not have enough to form a Government.

Mr. Finneran: I refer to the Labour Party statement earlier in which the party proposed to transfer the rural development portfolio to the Department of Agriculture and Food. That proves a rainbow coalition of Fine Gael, Labour and the Greens would be no friend of the farmer and rural Ireland.

Mr. Stanton: There will not be any farmers left by the time the Government is finished.

Mr. Moloney: As I drove to the House from home on Tuesday morning, I was astonished when I heard Deputy Naughten calling for a vote of no confidence in the Minister. I thought that perhaps Fine Gael was looking for the softest touch in the Cabinet.

Dr. Twomey: Fianna Fáil Members would want to get rid of the magic mushrooms. I do not know what they are on.

Mr. Moloney: I called the Chief Whip's office wondering whether I could make a brief contribution to the debate and discovered that approximately 60 backbenchers wanted to contribute, which is a record.

Mr. Naughten: Not many of them are present.

Mr. Moloney: We must share time and they are following the debate on their monitors. The Minister has secured a number of achievements and successes. Many party election manifestos over the years referred to encouraging people to participate in agriculture. Opposition parties usually paid lip-service to this but, thankfully, the Minister secured amendments to the Finance Bill to provide tax concessions to Macra na Feirme members and other young people with ability and drive who want to farm.

Mr. Naughten: Is that why the IFA walked out of the partnership talks?

Mr. Moloney: I am not sure why the delegation walked out. The president of Macra na Feirme issued a statement congratulating the Minister because at long last the body had been heard and a positive response rather than lip-service received regarding support.

The Minister deserves congratulations in many areas. It was a tough challenge to deal with the CAP, which despite extensive reform, came under sustained pressure. The Minister ably represented the Irish and EU interest in WTO negotiations on agriculture. The single payment scheme marked the commencement of a new era in agriculture. When people are happy with such achievements, they are easily glossed over but it is important to acknowledge the investment provided under the scheme. On 1 December 2005, the earliest start date under the EU regulation, the scheme commenced, as planned, with almost €1 billion in payments to 110,000 farmers, representing approximately 85% of applicants. Payments at the end of the year amounted to in excess of €1 billion. The Minister delivered to the farming sector.

I refer to the overshoot in special beef premiums about which we all came under pressure from the IFA. When the issue was resolved, the package included funding of €17.5 million benefitting 25,000 farmers. Among the Minister's other achievements is the record number of farmers participating in environmental schemes and a rural development package. The Minister has proved a success across the board but it is more important to be successful outside the House than inside. I support her and recognise her achievements.

Mr. Wilkinson: I welcome the opportunity to contribute to the debate. Deputy Coughlan is a wonderful Minister for Agriculture and Food.

Dr. Twomey: The Minister will receive many Valentine's cards next week.

Mr. Wilkinson: Last week, I had the pleasure of a visit from the Minister in my constituency. She spent six hours with numerous delegations representing people connected with farming. All the main bodies and each of the delegates were more than impressed at her knowledge of farming and her commitment to it. She has done wonderful work since taking up office. She now deals with three issues, one jointly, namely, the nitrates issue.

We live in a time of change and challenge. Contrary to the message we get from Opposition benches, we have a strong and vibrant farming industry because farmers are very pragmatic people. However, we are faced with the nitrates question, particularly for the pig and poultry sector. I wonder if the pig and poultry sector were forgotten up to now by their representatives. The nitrates directive, as it currently stands, would not be helpful to these two industries. I have confidence

in both Ministers that, with the help of scientific advice, they will reach a solution to the problem.

On the sugar beet issue, there is no doubt that sugar beet is part and parcel of the Irish farming scene. There were shock waves when the word came through that we were not to have a sugar beet industry in the future. It is amazing that farmers were divided when the word came through. Some want to continue growing beet while others are emphatic that the compensation must be maximised, which I understand. Last week, in Waterford, farmers from both sides of the divide spoke to the Minister, Deputy Coughlan. It is a difficult issue. It is a great loss to farming but we must move on. We must consider new crops that will take the place of sugar beet.

I watched "Prime Time" last night and I think the Fine Gael and Labour parties have a massive problem. I listened to the Green Party representative, and whatever about the situation at the moment in regard to the nitrates directive, if that party has its way, I do not know how the Fine Gael and Labour parties will be able to reconcile their views with the views of that party.

Mr. Connaughton: They are very close to what the Minister is proposing. Stay in bed, Mary.

Mr. Wilkinson: It is not for me to say, but it will make for interesting times. We will watch and see what happens.

(Interruptions).

Mr. Connaughton: The two Marys have delivered well.

Mr. Wilkinson: As the Minister indicated, labelling is an important issue. Consumers are demanding full information and assurance about the food they eat. I commend the Minister for her proactive approach to beef labelling since being appointed.

Mr. Stanton: What about the chickens?

Mary Coughlan: The Deputy's party contemplated for long enough and did nothing.

Mr. Wilkinson: Legislation is well advanced and it is expected to be enacted soon. This will require hotels, restaurants, pubs and all those involved in catering to provide their customers with information on the country of origin of the beef they are serving. While labelling of beef is already compulsory at retail level, it has not been mandatory in these sectors. The drafting of the subsidiary beef regulations are well advanced and consultation with the Department of Health and Children and the Food Safety Authority of Ireland is under way on the details, including enforcement. While the regulations will have to be submitted to the EU for approval, it is hoped

this process will not delay the making of final regulations.

Mr. Naughten: I hope it is quicker than the waste management grants.

Mr. Wilkinson: While the legislative process is being completed, the representative bodies for hotels, restaurants and pubs have agreed to recommend to their members to provide information on a voluntary basis. The next step will be to extend the process of labelling of country of origin to other meats, primarily poultry meat, pig-meat and sheep meat at retail and catering level. Because of different traceability systems, and some import-export complexities, it would not be as straightforward for other meats as it is for beef, and EU approval has not yet been given for this in any other member state.

The Minister for Agriculture and Food is certainly representing farmers well, both at home and abroad. I have no problem supporting the amendment to the motion.

Mr. M. Moynihan: Thank you, a Cheann Chomhairle, for the opportunity to contribute to the debate. I thank the Minister for Agriculture and Food, Deputy Coughlan, for visiting Cork North-West in October. We met many delegations from the farming community from right across the industry, including the co-operatives. It would be remiss of me not to mention New Zealand Genetics, one organisation we met at that time. We had a great day with the Minister, Deputy Coughlan, Peter Daly, its chief executive and his family. They had a great industry built up over a ten year period. It made a great contribution to the Irish Breeding Society and so on. Mr. Peter Daly, who was a neighbour of mine, lost his life in a tragic farming accident in January. I take this opportunity to extend our sympathy to his wife and family, and to all who mourn his passing.

The Minister, Deputy Coughlan, has been a great ambassador for agriculture. On many occasions since her appointment she has encouraged agriculture. She is ably assisted by her two Ministers of State, Deputy Browne and Deputy Brendan Smith, who know the agricultural scene well and have its future at heart.

In the few minutes allotted to me tonight, I will talk about the sugar reforms and where Irish Sugar stands at this stage. A decision on the future of beet growing in Ireland will be a commercial decision taken by the stakeholders concerned, having regard to the reform of the EU sugar regime, which was agreed by the Council of Ministers in November. The regime has remained largely unchanged for 40 years but its reform was inevitable and could no longer be postponed for reasons that are well known to and accepted by all in this House.

There were increasing internal EU pressures to bring sugar into line with all other agricultural

[Mr. M. Moynihan.]

sectors. There were largely international pressures arising from the Everything But Arms Agreement, the WTO round of trade negotiations and the ruling by the WTO panel against aspects of the EU sugar regime, following a complaint by Brazil, Thailand and Australia. The decision by the WTO arbitrator that the EU must implement the panel's ruling by 22 May 2006 added to the pressure for early action. There was considerable support for the ambition of the UK Presidency to achieve political agreement ahead of the WTO ministerial meeting in Hong Kong in December. As the sugar regime in its current form expires at the end of 2006, there was need for an early decision on future arrangements to avoid a legal vacuum from next July.

The political agreement in November in regard to reform of the regime was the culmination of a protracted and difficult negotiating process. During that negotiating process, the Minister engaged with the stakeholders on a regular basis and had their full support for her negotiating stance. The outcome from Ireland's perspective was the best possible deal in very difficult circumstances. The main features of the reform package have already been widely publicised. The Minister succeeded in having the proposals changed to provide a longer phasing-in period as well as a number of options to enable the sector to adapt to the new regime. There will be a lower reduction in the support price of sugar than originally proposed, 36% instead of 39%, as well as phasing in of the corresponding reductions in the minimum sugar beet price over four years instead of the two-step reduction originally proposed.

The Minister also secured an enhanced compensation package. Beet growers will be compensated for up to 64% of the price reduction, in the form of direct payments that will be worth approximately €121 million to Irish beet growers over the next seven years. A once-off payment of almost €44 million will also become available for the benefit of beet growers in the event that sugar beet production ceases in Ireland. In that event also, an aid package of up to €145 million would become available for the economic, social and environmental costs of the restructuring of the Irish sugar industry involving factory closure and renunciation of quota. This would involve the submission of a detailed restructuring plan for the industry.

The reform agreement provides that 10% of the restructuring fund will be reserved for sugar beet growers and machinery contractors to compensate notably for losses arising from investment in specialised machinery. This proportion may be increased by member states after consultation with interested parties, provided that an economically sound balance between the elements of the restructuring plan is ensured. The entire compensation package for Irish stake-

holders has an estimated value of in excess of €300 million.

The final legal text of the reform has yet to be adopted. I understand the Minister will meet the Council of Ministers within two weeks to discuss this matter. I congratulate the Minister for Agriculture and Food, Deputy Coughlan, and her Ministers of State for the enormous amount of work they are doing on behalf of Irish agriculture. All of us who have the betterment of the Irish agriculture industry at heart should strive to ensure there is a viable future for farming.

Mr. Ferris: I wish to share time with Deputies Sargent, Connolly, Cowley and McHugh.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Is that agreed? Agreed.

Mr. Ferris: I support the motion and its criticism of the manner in which Irish agriculture is being administered. No doubt the Minister has the best of intentions. Many of the issues referred to in the motion precede her term in office or are beyond her control but the Government still bears overall responsibility.

Among the issues referred to in the motion is the infamous nitrates directive. This issue has been left unresolved since 1991. No Government or Minister for Agriculture and Food, be they from the current coalition or parties from previous Governments that included Fine Gael and Labour, have done anything to resolve it. Putting this matter on the long finger for 15 years has led to a situation where farmers are now expected to adapt to measures introduced all at once and in a manner that appears to take little account of specifically Irish conditions or the relevant scientific research, such as it is. Some of that research has not been taken into consideration. Had this been the case and had it been done within an earlier timeframe, a more coherent argument could have been presented to the EU in support of a different approach being taken.

I concur with criticism of the Government's handling of the sugar beet issue. In effect, what we are witnessing is a process under which the Irish sugar beet sector is faced with destruction. The history of the sugar beet growers' contribution to rural Ireland cannot be emphasised enough. The EU has decided to sacrifice the sugar industry as part of its effort to secure a deal with the WTO. The Government ought to have resisted this and put up a stronger fight to save the industry. The thousands of growers and the many others in the sugar factories who have lost jobs or are threatened with the loss of their jobs deserve better.

Even if it is too late to save the sugar industry as it stands, I strongly urge the Minister to devote real efforts to directing the growing and processing of beet towards the production of bio-fuels. The State will have to meet EU targets for biofuels in the coming years and sugar beet and

the existing processing facilities clearly present an opportunity, not only of meeting these but of placing Ireland prominently in what will be an expanding area in the future.

Many other issues are of concern, some of which, like food labelling and country of origin, are referred to in the motion. The ongoing contraction of income and falling farm numbers are also of serious concern. The rural development 2025 report forecasts that there will be around 10,000 full-time farmers in 20 years' time. That is a catastrophic prediction. The report appears to envisage an eventual elimination of small family farms and the consolidation of large commercially viable enterprises. If this happens, it will herald the destruction of rural Ireland. There is an onus on all of us, both in Government and in Opposition, to work collectively to ensure this will not be the case.

I wish to briefly refer to genetically modified, GM, food. Judging from the Minister's reply to my question about the growing of a trial GM potato crop in Meath, she appears to believe that this is none of her concern. Given that GM crops will inevitably contaminate conventional species, the implications for Irish farming and the marketing of Irish food produce are potentially catastrophic. I appeal to the Minister to make it her business to ensure that the Government reverses its pro-GM stance in the interests of Irish farmers and consumers. The argument has been put forward that GM crops can be grown alongside conventional crops without being contaminated but the evidence, both scientific and otherwise, is to the contrary.

Mr. Sargent: Gabhaim buíochas leis na Teachtaí eile as a gcuid ama a roinnt liom. This motion calls into question a general lack of effectiveness on the part of the Minister for Agriculture and Food. It is fundamental that we take stock of farming in this country and this motion is an important opportunity to do this.

After a parent, the work of a farmer is probably the most important job a person can do. Food is something which nobody can live for very long without and its production is of the utmost importance. There are similarities between being a parent and being a farmer. Both need money, both must plan beyond the life of any Government and both are sometimes under pressure to the extent that it is hard for them to know how they will manage in the weeks to come. For both farmers and parents one thing that is certain is that nitrates are a cancer-causing poison. It is not possible to live with nitrates in any significant quantities.

Thankfully, the Environmental Protection Agency's reports on water pollution show that we have better water quality than in most European countries. In spite of that, however, there is still a worrying trend. Between a quarter and a third of drinking water from lakes and rivers is polluted

and a high level of nitrates has been found in drinking water in 13 counties. In 2004, the European Court of Justice found Ireland guilty on every count of breaching the nitrates directive.

I do not blame farmers for most of this problem. We should remember that local authorities have responsibilities in this regard. Many companies contribute to the problem through discharge to receiving waters. There has been a 15-year delay in implementing the directive, which is forcing us to adopt what are, essentially, panic measures. Teagasc has been caught up in that panic response because it has been told to come up with the data, but in such haste that they do not stand up to the scrutiny they are now coming under. It strikes me that if the nitrates directive had been called the arsenic directive, we would have probably got action without 15 years of foot dragging.

Somehow people think nitrates are like nitrogen or oxygen — part of the air we breathe. The Government motion to absolve the Minister is no defence for what amounts to criminal neglect when we take into account the poisonous character of nitrates. It begs the question of why measures were not put in place in advance of the guillotine coming down. The measures that were put in place are very little and very late. Every county should have anaerobic digesters. The figures for organic production should be much higher at this stage, given that it is at 4% in Wales and 11% in Austria. We are still languishing around 1% and if we get to 1%, the Minister will think she is doing great.

A previous speaker referred to farmers leaving the land. In 1997 farmers comprised 9.6% of workers and in 2002 they were 7% of the total workforce. The general infrastructure of farming is being made ever more intensive. According to 2001 figures, 700 abattoirs closed in the previous decade.

The Minister must face the charges being brought against her in terms of the sugar beet industry. It was my colleague, Councillor Mary White, who went to find an ethanol producing plant to try to provide some hope for farmers left destitute by the closure of the sugar beet factory in Carlow. It is my party's Councillor Mary White, not Senator Mary White of the Minister's party, to whom I refer in this regard.

Mary Coughlan: She was not at the negotiations which achieved the once-off payment of €44 million.

Mr. Sargent: The GM issue, mentioned by the last speaker, is symptomatic of the problem here. The Minister states this matter is the problem of somebody else — the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government, Teagasc and the European Commission. The same applies with the GM issue. It is the Minister's problem. It is affecting food and it is affect-

[Mr. Sargent.]

ing farming. It will have a major impact on her responsibility and she cannot absolve herself of that responsibility. She must stand as charged.

Mr. Connolly: Ireland's water quality is the envy of the western world, attested to by no less an organisation than the Earth Institute of Columbia University and the Environment School at Yale University in the US.

At the World Economic Forum in Davos in Switzerland the 2006 Environmental Performance Index placed Ireland tenth out of 133 countries for environmental health and 23rd for water quality. That is amazing. Ireland is top of the European champions league for water quality, with Norway and Switzerland, and the consensus at Davos was that our water could not be cleaner. What is all the fuss about? The nitrates directive is putting the livelihoods and viability of thousands of farmers at risk with its overkill insistence that we should have even purer water than the purest in Europe. Many of the 22 countries rated above us in the water quality league are among the poorest, with little or no economic activity that would be instrumental in polluting their rivers, in other words, we beggar the farming community to achieve virtually unachievable cleaner water standards. The EPA water quality report also showed that 98% of 301 Irish sites tested met or exceeded the EU standard. The reality has been totally overlooked by the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government in its anxiety to penalise progressive farmers.

The nitrates directive is also being stuffed down the throats of Irish farmers for whom it is least suited. Ireland is caught in a measure that was designed as a cure-all directive for the community in Europe. Its implications are massive for farming families who cannot afford a 20% drop in income. For farmers who have kids to send to school, it is grossly unfair.

Every effort must be made to ensure that Brussels does not ruin Ireland's unique agrifood contribution to the EU, of high grass production and an unusually long growing season. For most of the year Ireland's conditions are excellent for grass growth and stocking.

While I must wrap up here, I understand that the overwhelming majority of the EU's 25 member states have failed to incorporate the directive into national legislation as it was intended by Brussels. We see this in all aspects of European life, where we take every European directive to the letter of the law whereas other neighbouring countries do not. I would call for a deferral of the nitrates regulations to enable a compromise solution to emerge and to enable a proper and comprehensive evaluation to take place.

Dr. Cowley: We, in Ireland, are good Europeans but sometimes we go a bit too far. The

Government has, on more than one occasion, thrown out the baby with the bath water such is its wish to keep in with its European partners and to be seen as good Europeans. Following the habitats directive, when the Government totally over-did it by designating far beyond what should have been designated, we are still paying the price for that over-enthusiasm by the Government.

In the nitrates directive interpretation the Government is going down the same old road. Farmers have left Mayo in their thousands but this was predicted in the Mansholt plan. After the loss of thousands of farmers from the land of Mayo, what did the brave Minister do? All these people who were decentralised to Castlebar had to go all the way back up the hill to the Minister of State, Deputy Parlon's, country.

Mary Coughlan: They did not move far, they went up the stairs. Only for me, nothing would be sorted. He should not give me that rubbish.

Dr. Cowley: Just to finish farmers off altogether, an entire economy dependent on farmers will suffer — shopkeepers, suppliers etc. Today the IFA pulled out of the partnership talks, but they did not do it lightly. So seriously has the IFA seen this issue that even though it represents 20% of the economy, it has still pulled out of the talks because it is fed up.

This will impact on all farmers across Ireland. There are 50,000 REPS farmers. The impact of cutting fertiliser use by 30% on tillage farmers means a severe reduction in nitrogen fertiliser use in crops and the import is right across the entire block. The nitrates regulation will criminalise the good and decent farmers of Ireland who have been led up the garden path by their advisers to behave in a certain way in the interests of good animal and crop husbandry. As all that has now been taken from them, all the Minister has to offer them is more criminalisation. My message to the Minister is to get sense and bring in common sense regulations that are workable and that will protect our water quality and allow Irish farmers to remain competitive and on the land. She should do that at least.

Mr. Healy: I support this motion. There is no doubt in my mind that the nitrates directive has been mishandled, not only by the Government but by successive Governments dating back to 1991. Some 15 years later there is confusion, fear and anger in the farming community and, indeed, in the scientific community and there are serious difficulties between farmers and Teagasc as a result. I would have thought that over a much shorter period of time there would have been widespread consultation with all the stakeholders on this matter, and that the Government would not allow a situation arise where, following a European Court of Justice case against Ireland in

2004, the panic reaction is to introduce this directive.

I welcome the suspension of the phosphate portion of this directive. It is eminently reasonable in the circumstances, and particularly having regard to the scientific evidence, that this entire directive should be suspended and I hope that the Minister would agree to do that.

The motion also refers to food labelling. Food labelling is an important area for the Irish economy, for farm products and for products that derive from the farm gate. In some cases food labels list a country of origin, a different country which is where reprocessing occurred and a third country which is a packaging or repackaging country. In many cases it is not clear what is the country of origin. It is important that housewives are in a position to determine what they buy as an Irish product. In addition, some of these products are being resold on the international market on the basis of being Irish products when that is not the case.

Mr. McHugh: I do not accept that the Minister, Deputy Coughlan, is an abject failure or that she is guilty of gross negligence.

Mr. Durkan: He is a lick.

(Interruptions).

An Ceann Comhairle: Allow Deputy McHugh without interruption.

Mr. Durkan: Would he like to crawl over?

Mr. McHugh: Although I want to speak critically on the nitrates directive, she is not the only Minister involved in this. The Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government, Deputy Roche, has a much greater role in the nitrates directive.

Mr. Durkan: Poor ol' Dick.

Mr. McHugh: There is much hot air and bluster surrounding the introduction of the nitrates directive. The entire process is now so discredited that the only option is to withdraw it immediately and start again, this time with a practical and open approach making available to the public the scientific data and information on which decisions are made. The process is discredited and the public fashion of the criticism by the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government, Deputy Roche, of Teagasc was the final nail.

Why reinvent the wheel? In my view, it is simple. Whatever directive is to be introduced should be based on existing criteria which apply to the REP scheme. Teagasc has a standard manual in vogue since 2004 covering the spread of fertiliser, slurry etc. and there is no evidence whatsoever that any pollution of surface water, or indeed

ground water, has occurred when the requirements of the Teagasc green book have been applied. The terms of the nitrates directive are more stringent than those applicable to REPS, although there is no evidence to show that the existing requirements are insufficient. This directive will impact strongly on farmers unless it is changed and may drive some farmers out of business. The action plan will place an additional bureaucratic burden on every landowner and farmer as farmers will be required to record every detail of their enterprises, irrespective of their ability to do so.

The draconian measures proposed to police this action plan are reprehensible. For example, the power to enter a private dwelling house at 24 hours' notice and the power of the Garda Síochána to arrest without warrant a person whom it suspects of having committed an offence are measures more akin to those of a dictatorship than a democracy.

The big polluters are not the farmers but sub-standard treatment plants and the absence of treatment plants in towns and villages throughout the country. The Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government should direct his energies to those problems and stop persecuting farmers.

Mr. Kehoe: I wish to share time with Deputies Connaughton, Enright, Breen and Twomey.

I was waiting for the Minister for Agriculture and Food to give Deputy McHugh a big hug and say, "Welcome back", but unfortunately that did not happen.

The constant stream of bad news coming from the Department of Agriculture and Food is a major source of concern to everybody in the farming community. The two issues exciting farmers in my constituency are the sugar beet industry and the infamous nitrates directive. The sugar beet industry has been a vital element of the agriculture sector in County Wexford and its loss will have severe consequences for the farmers, contractors, hauliers, and other people working within the industry. There are rural families who have been committed to the industry for many years and through several generations. The loss of the industry is a major blow to many farmers' livelihoods.

The Minister has failed to outline where the division of the €145 million compensation will take place. The lion's share must not go to Greencore; it must go to help the farmers. I hope the Minister is listening. Many families operating progressively and successfully within the beet sector face an income crisis.

The Minister has also failed to ensure that their incomes can be protected through access to adequate compensation, reaching consensus on the reference years for claiming the beef price compensation by way of the EU single farm payment scheme, ensuring clarity regarding prices for

[Mr. Kehoe.]

next year, and the initiatives to advance alternatives to the sugar beet crop and land use. The failures on this issue alone will cause untold hardship and distress to farmers throughout the country, especially those in County Wexford.

The introduction of the nitrates directive has been a shambles. The Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government, Deputy Roche, informed us that between 13 and 15 years of planning have gone into this issue. I would like to see what planning he put into it because he directed this overnight. The farmers, however, have not received any information briefings on the matter. Furthermore, the restrictive nature of parts of the plan means the interpretations of the directive contradict the REPS plan submitted to the Department of Agriculture and Food this year.

Other farmers, especially in the pig and poultry sectors, face a major predicament to reconcile the viability of their farms with the restrictive practices imposed under the directive. The Government has defended the basis of this plan on the grounds that it now appears to question scientific information.

Water quality has also gone quickly off the agenda. We saw the unseemly behaviour of the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government playing the blame game with Teagasc on national television last night. It became obvious that the one person who should have made a clear, concise statement on the matter, namely, the Minister for Agriculture and Food, had fallen silent. She disappeared before Christmas and for the month of January and is in the House now only because the Irish Farmers Association has put her under severe pressure over recent days.

Mary Coughlan: That is untrue.

Mr. Kehoe: Has the Minister underestimated the impact of this directive on the farming sector or has she just decided to turn a blind eye to it, like her Ministers of State have done?

Mary Coughlan: No. That is why I secured a package of €46 million this year to deal with it.

Mr. Kehoe: The prospect of the major farming representative body pulling away from the partnership talks should be a major concern for the Minister and the Minister of State at the Department of Agriculture and Food, Deputy Brendan Smith.

Mr. B. Smith: The Deputy was running down partnership a few weeks ago.

Mr. Kehoe: The Taoiseach said the position the Government has obtained is satisfactory. Fianna Fáil backbenchers have spoken from both sides of their mouths in recent days. One blames the

Minister for Agriculture and Food, the other blames the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government. I blame both Ministers and the Taoiseach. These failures are unacceptable.

We must insist that the Minister for Agriculture and Food take responsibility for poor performance on this issue, as well as on the sugar beet crisis. The food labelling debacle and many other issues that farmers have overcome have already created a difficult climate. I call on the Minister to take leadership on the nitrates issue sooner rather than later.

Mr. Connaughton: The nitrates directive is a shambles as the Minister knows better than most.

Mary Coughlan: I am delighted to get so much advice from the boys in Opposition.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Minister should allow the Deputy to speak without interruption.

Mr. Connaughton: The Minister had a great chance to do something about this but she did nothing about it.

An Ceann Comhairle: Due to the time limit I appeal to Deputies to address their remarks through the Chair.

Mr. Connaughton: Indeed. I assume the same applies to the Minister.

An Ceann Comhairle: I have already told the Minister to allow the Deputy to continue without interruption.

Mr. Connaughton: This has turned out to be a different proposition from that which should have been implemented three months ago. Since the Minister took office she has closed three vital farming sectors. She stood aside when the beet growers were wiped off the face of the earth a few months ago. To compound that, she and that great advocate—

Mary Coughlan: I do not know what the Deputy is talking about.

An Ceann Comhairle: I ask the Minister to allow the Deputy to speak.

Mr. Connaughton: The Minister does not like listening to this but she is going to hear because she should hear it.

Mary Coughlan: That is factually incorrect.

Mr. B. Smith: That is not true.

Mr. Connaughton: Where did the sugar industry go? It was wiped off the face of the earth.

Mary Coughlan: The farmers will not grow for nothing. Even the Wexford fellows will not do that.

Mr. B. Smith: What the Deputy said is nonsense.

Mr. Connaughton: That great advocate and friend of the farming community, the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government, Deputy Roche, has connived with the Minister for Agriculture and Food to destroy the livelihood of every pig and poultry farmer in the country. The Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government appeared on television last night doing his level best to ensure Teagasc was blamed for all these problems.

When the Minister for Agriculture and Food replies, will she inform the house whether she believes Teagasc is at fault?

Mary Coughlan: I cannot answer that.

Mr. Connaughton: The Minister does not want to answer.

Mary Coughlan: I cannot answer it because I have already spoken.

Mr. Connaughton: That is a three-card trick answer. The Minister should tell the House what she thinks of Teagasc.

Mary Coughlan: I gave a very good speech. I explained it all in the House but the Deputy was not present at the time.

Mr. Connaughton: No Minister in the history of the State has done more damage in a year than this Minister. It is nothing short of outrageous that the sugar beet, pig and poultry producers are consigned to the bogholes of Ireland. They are gone. The Minister has wiped them out.

Mary Coughlan: There is no sugar beet growing in the bog.

Mr. Connaughton: The Minister does not even acknowledge their contribution. That is bad, but what the Minister is doing to the 50,000 farmers in REPS is nothing short of despicable. She and the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government frightened the daylights out of the decent hard-working farmers who, being environmentally conscious, committed their farms—

Mary Coughlan: Boys like the Deputy frightened them.

Mr. B. Smith: Scaremongering.

Mr. Connaughton: The Minister may not like it but she should listen to it because it is true.

Mary Coughlan: We have never paid out so much.

Mr. Connaughton: The farmers proved it was true when they walked out of the partnership talks this evening. The Minister is far from the CAP now.

Mary Coughlan: Only for Fianna Fáil there would be no CAP because the boys in Opposition would have succumbed.

Mr. Connaughton: I know the Minister does not like to hear this but she should listen.

An Ceann Comhairle: I understand the Deputy is sharing time with colleagues.

Mr. Connaughton: Am I finished?

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy has half a minute remaining.

Mr. Connaughton: I thought I was entitled to more because of the interruptions. I have many good things to say but obviously I will not get the chance to say them.

Mary Coughlan: The Deputy is like me.

Mr. Connaughton: The Minister has succeeded only in frightening the people in the front line.

Mr. B. Smith: That is untrue.

Mr. Connaughton: They thought they were the leaders and the Minister has pulled them all down to a common denominator until nobody knows where they are going. Unless this Government—

Mr. Kehoe: The Minister is lucky Deputy Crawford is not here because he would put the Minister in her box.

Mary Coughlan: I blame him.

Mr. B. Smith: He is the man who backed every cutback that the then Minister for Agriculture, Ivan Yates, introduced.

Mr. Connaughton: The Minister told the farmers that on 1 January this year, she was introducing the on-farm special scheme for pollution.

Mary Coughlan: I did not. I said it would be ready at the beginning of the new year.

Mr. Connaughton: The Minister negotiated that it should last for 12 months. Half the year has now passed, and there is still no scheme.

(Interruptions).

An Ceann Comhairle: Allow Deputy Connaughton without interruption.

Mr. Connaughton: Going by the kinds of planning permission, the Minister knows better than I what will happen. It is another three-card trick, and farmers have the worst of all worlds. Let the Minister or Minister of State stand up and talk to the REPS farmers. They have taken the ground from under them. Some of those on the Government benches would not know what a REPS farmer is. However, I guarantee that they will know it before the year is out.

Ms Enright: This motion was not tabled lightly but in response to sustained negative targeting of farmers by the Government over the past year, leaving them in genuine fear for their existence.

The sugar sector has been in turmoil since the devastating deal the Minister tried to pass off as a victory last year. She adopted a sell-out approach throughout the debate on the future of the sugar industry, and for the first time in the history of farming negotiations, the EU and the Government practically colluded in wiping out a viable industry. Driving through part of Laois last weekend and seeing the familiar sight of the sugar beet on the side of the road, I was struck, as, I am sure, many colleagues would be, by the fact that something that was commonplace across Laois and Offaly may very well cease to be a part of rural life in our area.

The Minister has still offered no clarification on the compensation package and has yet to make a commitment regarding how much compensation farmers will receive. She failed to side with the farmer at the EU talks in adopting her sell-out approach. She must now make a commitment that she will not let them down again on the compensation package. She must stand by the beet-growers this time.

Not content with closing down the beet sector, she decided to move on to the pig and poultry sectors and all other farming areas too, in partnership with her colleague, the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government, Deputy Roche. There may be attempts to lay all the blame at his door, but it is she who is in charge of the Department of Agriculture and Food and whom farmers expect to represent their view. In any event, there is still the thorny issue of collective Cabinet responsibility enshrined in our Constitution, so no one in the Government can wash his or her hands of this.

These regulations will virtually destroy the pig and poultry sectors, and will have a detrimental impact on our dairy and beef industries. We have always been told that the environmental standards required under REPS were best practice. The inexplicable aspect of the nitrates regulations is that they run contrary to REPS. Everyone involved in farming contends that there was very little, if any, consultation between Departments

before signing the regulation. The EPA has stated that water quality in Ireland is among the best in Europe, so treating Irish farms in the same manner as farms in other EU countries is not comparing like with like. In any case, something that cannot be implemented will not contribute to protecting water. Sending farmers to jail, the ultimate penalty under the directive, will make little difference.

I am sick of hearing Government backbenchers and middle-benchers criticise the bureaucracy in farming while standing by and watching the Minister implement a directive that will add so much more by requiring farmers to prepare and maintain detailed records of all their fertiliser requirements, purchases and stocks for five years. To say that they will be bogged down is an understatement. Both large and small farmers will have their operations severely restricted if they have to implement these regulations. If they are farming in such a way as to need early grass, they will be severely restricted by the limitations on spreading nitrates and phosphates.

I am not sure that the Minister fully appreciates the seriousness of the situation. She said in a statement designed to reassure pig-farmers on 28 November that it was a situation where farmers could help other farmers, by accepting pig slurry.

Mary Coughlan: I stand by that statement.

Ms Enright: That is far from accurate.

Mary Coughlan: They are obviously not the usual ones that they are talking about.

Ms Enright: They can do that now, but under the regulations and directive, farmers would be terrified to accept slurry for fear of the repercussions. People can try all they like to claim credit for a limited deferral, but it only puts it off. The IFA and Macra na Feirme were left with no option today but to walk out of partnership talks, so deep was their frustration. The response of the Government, of which all the Deputies opposite are part, was to say that the farmers' actions had been noted. I warn the Minister that the actions of her Government and its appalling handling of the issue have also been noted.

Mary Coughlan: The Deputy should not bother warning me.

Mr. P. Breen: The first observation to be made regarding the nitrates directive is the Government's shocking and criminal failure to deal with the problem. I watched the "Six-one" news this evening and saw the IFA's new president, Pádraig Walshe, say that the measure could not be implemented. That is his reaction when the farmers pulled out of partnership negotiations today. Last Friday in Ennis, the Minister's colleague, Deputy Roche, was greeted by angry farmers when he arrived at his hotel. The Minister would

be greeted by angry farmers if she decided to tour the country.

Mary Coughlan: I meet the farmers every day of the week.

Mr. P. Breen: She will be greeted with anger in the constituencies.

An Ceann Comhairle: Please allow Deputy Breen.

Mr. P. Breen: The nitrates directive was agreed by the EU in 1991, some 15 years ago, when the former Fianna Fáil leader Charles Haughey was Taoiseach. In the interim, the Government has acted as if it had never heard of the directive until recently. Meanwhile, in the drive to clean up brown water by limiting the use of livestock manure on farms to 170 kg per hectare, it seems that we have missed out on water quality. We share the best water quality in Europe with Switzerland and Norway, and we are ranked 23rd in the world according to a study by Columbia University.

What also seems to have been missed is the continued importance of agriculture to our economy. In my constituency in County Clare, there are 6,000 farms employing more than 11,500 people, all of whom will be affected by the directive. The delegation here last week said that farmers in Clare will be wiped off the map if the directive goes through. The difference between the REPS plan permits on the spreading of nitrogen fertiliser and the new nitrates directive restrictions is more than one bag per acre. The new restrictions on spreading slurry will dramatically increase the need for storage capacity on farms. Sadly, the lack of preparedness for this directive on the Government's part is typical of how it treats agriculture.

The nitrates directive is an example of regulation gone wrong — not too much, but the wrong kind applied in inappropriate circumstances. Originally, it was negotiated badly by the Government which stuck its head in the sand until the European Court of Justice found against it for failing to implement the directive. Since then, implementation has been badly thought out, and farmers do not even know what will happen. There is no direction from the Government, and all farmers know is that they are now liable for jail terms of up to six months for non-compliance. The recently announced deferral of implementation of the key element relating to phosphorous levels is the Minister's first sensible move in this debate, and I appeal to her to do the same regarding nitrates.

The other issue about which I would like to talk is labelling, to which some speakers tonight referred. The Government has failed to prevent deception of the consumer by allowing pork

products to be falsely passed off as Irish packets of rashers when they are nothing of the sort. The two issues are related. Both ultimately affect Irish farmers' livelihood, contributing to a growing sense of powerlessness that they experience because of runaway bureaucracy, an uninterested Government and flooding of the market with cheap and insufficiently regulated produce. The most basic regulations——

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy's time is concluded.

Mr. P. Breen: There are problems, particularly regarding packets of rashers. Unless they have the Bord Bia "origin Ireland" logo displaying the shamrock, consumers are missing out.

Dr. Twomey: I hope tonight the Minister will lead all those backbenchers who have declared such undying affection for her in singing a bar of "Four Green [but empty] Fields", since that is the way agriculture will go if she continues with the rules that she has implemented since entering office.

Mary Coughlan: The Deputy is very poetic tonight.

Dr. Twomey: Her mailbag would certainly be full of Oireachtas envelopes next Tuesday, given the rate at which expressions of affection are being thrown in her direction by backbenchers. Unfortunately, Irish farmers do not exactly feel that way about it. She should answer questions regarding what is happening on beet. It is a very important issue, and the deadline for growing beet is drawing near, yet still a large number of questions remain unanswered. Greencore has stated that it might pull out of the beet industry this year. All that it need do is close its plant in Mallow.

Have there been any negotiations between the Government and Greencore regarding the compensation fund? If so, what was their outcome? Greencore feels that it is legally entitled to most of the compensation fund. If that is the case, farmers will get less than half — if it is to be paid out. People feel that to save the Government's neck at the next general election, Greencore must keep the plant in Mallow open this year, charge the farmers €25 million, close it down next year and collect a nice fat bonus from the Government — after the next election. The Government needs to come clean on how much compensation the farmers will receive. The Government should not make excuses about what is happening in Brussels——

Mary Coughlan: I cannot say until I see the text.

Dr. Twomey: The Minister knows.

Mary Coughlan: I cannot say.

An Ceann Comhairle: Allow the Deputy without interruption.

Dr. Twomey: I guarantee that if the Government knew it would be giving out over €100 million, the announcement would have been made four times by now, with or without EU laws. The fact the Minister is saying nothing and is singing dumb means those of us on this side of the House do not believe her. If we are wrong, she should say we are wrong and tell us how much the farmers and Greencore will get. If the plant in Mallow is closed we will know very quickly and the Minister's shallowness will be exposed if Greencore does not get what it wants from her.

With regard to the nitrates directive, the way the Sheikh of Dubai, the Minister, Deputy Roche, was talking last night, one would think he was only interested in the environment and that this was a subject very close to his heart but this means nothing. What action will he take about the raw sewage pouring into our rivers across the country other than blaming farmers whom he regards as the chief culprits for every form of pollution? Huge amounts of raw sewage not of animal origin is being poured into rivers and seas across the country yet this Government has done nothing to invest in alleviating this problem.

Food labelling is an important issue. We have gone a long way towards preventing variant CJD. The feeding of bonemeal to animals was stopped because of the risks to health. However, food of unknown origin is coming into the country. The Minister is sitting back and blaming the EU for all the problems.

(Interruptions).

Minister of State at the Department of Agriculture and Food (Mr. B. Smith): This Government has unfailingly shown a total commitment to agriculture and the agri-food sector. It has always recognised the economic and social significance of our most important indigenous industry. I suggest the Opposition listen.

Mr. McCormack: Who wrote the script?

Mary Coughlan: He wrote it himself.

Mr. B. Smith: I, Brendan Smith, wrote it.

Mr. McCormack: That makes it worse.

Mr. B. Smith: The record of achievement of my colleague, the Minister, Deputy Coughlan, and her proactive approach since her appointment as Minister for Agriculture and Food, has been outstanding. There is no need for me to reiterate her achievements as they are on the record of the House. Opposition attempts to create the

impression of a crisis crumbled in the face of the record spelled out last night in the House.

I listened patiently to Opposition attempts to suggest the Government has neglected food labelling but I regard this as nonsense.

Mr. Hayes: The Minister of State should ask Deputy Ned O'Keeffe about food labelling.

Mr. B. Smith: Time constraints prevented the Minister from detailing the exceptional progress made in implementing the recommendations of the food labelling group——

Mr. Kehoe: Deputy Ned O'Keeffe brought a packet of rashers into the House.

Mr. B. Smith: On the issue of complaints of mislabelling of foods, the Government has centralised the enforcement of all food labelling regulations in the Food Safety Authority of Ireland. This not only streamlines the enforcement measures but also provides a one-stop shop for consumer complaints about labelling.

We recognised consumer demand for information on the origin of beef used in restaurants and the catering sector. National primary legislation was required due to the lack of EU legislation and is now well advanced by way of amendment to section 54 of the Health Act 1947 by means of the Irish Medicines Board (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2005. Subject to enactment of this legislation and EU approval of the appropriate regulations, it will be a mandatory requirement to provide country of origin information to consumers in respect of beef served in restaurants and hotels and in use in the catering sector.

I sympathise with the concerns expressed about products which are imported into the Community and which once processed, are described as being the product of a particular member state. This practice arises from a concept known as "substantial transformation", in the context of European customs regulation. The Minister has raised the matter at the Council of Ministers and has been in direct contact with the EU Commissioner for Health and Consumer Affairs, reiterating her concerns on this issue, particularly in the context of the labelling of poultry meat.

Following the outbreak of foot and mouth disease, the Minister acted immediately on foot of an EU decision to ban imports from several regions in Brazil. This ban remains in place and the competence for extending or removing the ban lies with the EU Commission. The current ban severely restricts exports of beef from the main exporting areas in Brazil and is consistent with the EU approach of operating in accordance with a principle of regionalisation which was also applied during the outbreak of foot and mouth disease in Ireland.

Reference was made to the need for excise relief on biofuels. The Opposition seems to be unaware of the announcement in the budget of the extension of an excise relief scheme to cover annually 163 million litres of biofuel. This is intended to stimulate interest in biofuel development. The research proposals selected for assistance under the research stimulus fund are another element in the measures to promote bio-energy.

The Government is acutely aware of farmers' concerns about the implications of the nitrates regulations.

Mr. Kehoe: Why does it not take action?

Mr. B. Smith: The Deputy should listen and cut out the misrepresentation.

The Minister realised at an early stage that slurry storage and the needs of the intensive dairy, pig and poultry sectors were issues. Following completion of a survey by Teagasc of storage levels on farms, the Minister has made proposals for major improvements to the farm waste management scheme in terms of grant rates and wider sectoral and measure coverage.

Mr. Kehoe: The Government is blaming Teagasc.

Mr. B. Smith: Fine Gael did away with that scheme in the mid-1990s.

Funding of €43 million has been provided for the scheme in the Department's 2006 Estimates. Grant aid is also to be provided to support the demonstration of new technologies in the treatment of livestock manure. This will be of particular benefit to pig and poultry producers.

The early negotiation of a derogation for farmers operating above a level of 170 kg of organic nitrogen per hectare is important for dairy farmers. The Departments of Agriculture and Food and the Environment, Heritage and Local Government, are actively engaged with the European Commission in progressing Ireland's derogation request.

A number of Deputies raised the need for an information campaign. A major campaign to inform farmers about the nitrates regulations is being undertaken by my Department working closely with Teagasc and the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government. This will involve advertising in the farming media, the preparation of a handbook for farmers explaining the regulations in plain language and information meetings for farmers.

Agriculture and the agri-food sector is in a period of major transition. With the broad policy framework in place, the Department has turned its attention to finalising an action plan for the sector. The Government is of the view that agriculture must encompass strong commercial farm-

ing as well as part-time farming to create an innovative, market-oriented and multi-dimensional agri-food sector to serve consumers and markets worldwide.

Mr. G. Murphy: I wish to share time with Deputies Hayes and Naughten.

I listened with interest to my constituency colleague, Deputy Michael Moynihan, and I wondered for a while during his contribution whether we were both living in the same constituency. He barely mentioned the nitrates directive but that may have been in deference to our other constituency colleague, Deputy Batt O'Keeffe, who is Minister of State in the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government, which is the Department that caused the problem in the first place.

Mr. M. Moynihan: The Deputy might have missed the opening line of the speech because that was what I wished to put on the record of the House.

Mr. Connaughton: It is a different story at home now.

Mr. G. Murphy: The facts are that Cork North-West is a rural constituency that depends almost entirely on the agricultural industry. Fianna Fáil in Government for 18 out of the past 20 years has presided over the destruction of the farming industry in our constituency. The whole infrastructure in the area is based on market towns like Newmarket, Kanturk, Charleville and Millstreet, which depend totally on a good agricultural industry for their survival. There are three independent co-operatives, Newmarket co-op, North Cork co-op and Boherbee co-op. They are the mainstay of the local economy but they will go into decline as farming is declining in the area.

The proposed rationalisation of Teagasc offices in the area will further lead to a downturn in the economies in these towns. The farmers are confused. They have no idea what the future holds for them. There is no planning, no leadership and no hope for the future of the industry in our area. The simple fact is that Fianna Fáil wrote off the agricultural industry before the last general election; up to then they had simply ignored it.

Fianna Fáil strategists and their American pollsters took a conscious decision that the election could be won. Farming and agriculture no longer had the numbers electorally and so yet again farming could be sacrificed in the EU and world trade negotiations in order to deliver for the Celtic tiger. Farming has always been the building block on which our economy was based and still accounts for a large proportion of our exports. The Government can get away with this strategy as long as the Celtic tiger is still running but there

[Mr. G. Murphy.]

are clouds on the horizon. Firms are moving to economies based on cheaper labour, interest rates are increasing and there is uncertainty over energy supplies whose costs are rising.

That brings me to what used to be the sugar beet industry. It will most certainly have disappeared by the end of next year. A valuable crop for farmers in north Cork was swept away almost overnight with no prospect of a replacement. The valuable factory jobs during the beet campaign helped many smaller farmers in the western region to remain in farming. For years, this activity provided a valuable income for small farmers. Despite the fact that the demise of the sugar industry was inevitable, the Government failed to come up with any positive proposals for an industry based on renewable energy — for example, to make beet growing viable as a biofuel crop or to come up with a replacement crop. There were no plans to convert the sugar factory itself into a modern facility to produce biofuels. The Government has no vision or idea of what the future holds for farmers. It has no plans to address our energy crisis or for biofuel crops. It has a haphazard approach to promoting wind energy which, if done properly, would have gone some way towards making a contribution to farm viability.

This is despite the fact that the security of energy supply is fundamental to keeping the rest of the economy secure. Until recently, it was thought that only strong, committed farmers with intensive, well-run operations would survive but this has proved to be another myth. The nitrates and phosphate directives will put paid to the ambitions of such farmers. The directives hit at the heart of commercial farming and unless the Government makes changes to both directives commercial farming as we know it will be over. Family pig farms cannot cope with the phosphate directive and the poultry sector will also be in serious trouble.

Why will there be a need for the Government and the EU to continue supporting REPS when the proposals on phosphate and nitrates by the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government, Deputy Roche, go much further than the REP scheme ever did?

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy's time has concluded.

Mr. G. Murphy: Successive Fianna Fáil Ministers for Agriculture and Food have failed the farming community and rural Ireland generally. Fianna Fáil Ministers for Agriculture for 18 of the past 20 years have failed to protect farming interests. The final straw that will break the agricultural industry is the nitrates directive. As a so-called arm of Government, Teagasc passed the ball to the Minister, Deputy Roche.

Mary Coughlan: That is factually incorrect. The Deputy should withdraw that remark.

Mr. G. Murphy: The Minister and the Department of Agriculture and Food were not even on the pitch at the same time.

Mr. Hayes: Having listened to both sides of the argument, I want to put one proposition to the Minister. She is a very nice person but she has not—

Mary Coughlan: Do not start that condescending rubbish that I have to put up with from Blueshirts.

Mr. Hayes: I want to give the Minister an invitation.

Mary Coughlan: I may be nice but not when it comes to my job.

An Ceann Comhairle: Please allow Deputy Hayes to continue, Minister.

Mr. Hayes: I want to issue an open invitation to the Minister for Agriculture and Food to come to the heart of my constituency—

Mary Coughlan: I have been in it several times.

Mr. Hayes: —without any councillors, backbenchers or anybody else protecting her. If she comes to my constituency I will give her just one example of what is happening on the land. I am genuine about this because I come from a background where we love what we do but young farmers are fleeing the land. Agricultural colleges have been closed down by this Administration.

Mary Coughlan: Not by us.

Mr. Hayes: In my county alone, two agricultural colleges have closed down. People are scared to death by the nitrates directive. In my parish alone, there were 13 pig farmers three years ago but now there are only two. This is due to the administration of the Government. I would like to bring the Minister to meet these people. Only 30 minutes ago I got a call from one of them who is giving up farming. That is what the Minister is doing to the pig industry.

South Tipperary was a great beet growing area. In addition to beet growers, there were many others involved in the industry, including contractors and animal feed producers. The Minister is out of touch with the agricultural sector. She should come to visit those people to see their problems but she is far away from the reality and does not understand what is happening.

Mary Coughlan: My constituency is as agriculturally based as Tipperary.

Mr. Hayes: The Minister does not know what is happening and is afraid to face up to the reality.

Mary Coughlan: That is nonsense. The Deputy obviously never went through the Gap. They are the best farmers ever so do not give me that rubbish.

Mr. Hayes: The Minister is driving them off the land.

Mr. Browne: Nonsense.

Mary Coughlan: The Deputy is wrong and I can tell him so. That is sanctimoniousness.

Mr. Naughten: I welcome the opportunity to wind up the debate.

Mary Coughlan: What do the west of Ireland boys have to say about that now?

Mr. B. Smith: It is snobbery.

Mary Coughlan: What about the cattle in Roscommon?

Mr. Naughten: I listened intently to the speeches by Government backbenchers who spoke about REPS, the single farm payment, forestry, the special beef premium overshoot, beef and sheep exports, the budget, the Finance Bill and CAP reform. None of them, however, addressed the issues in the motion.

Mary Coughlan: Of course they did.

Mr. Naughten: They are afraid that if they try to defend the Minister on the issues highlighted in the motion they will be lynched, literally, when they return to their constituencies at the weekend. There is a lack of direction in the Department of Agriculture and Food and in the Government with regard to agricultural issues. Agriculture is unlike the Government's other pet sectors, including biotechnology or information and communications technology. The Government is failing to provide strong direction on the future development of agriculture and the food industry. Sadly, that is the reality.

The Minister had it within her control to do something about labelling but nothing has been done about it.

Mr. B. Smith: That is not correct.

Mary Coughlan: That is not correct.

Mr. Naughten: One third of the total consumption of beef is now being imported from Brazil. That is a massive amount of beef from Brazil where foot and mouth disease is rampant and

they do not have a tagging and traceability system.

Mary Coughlan: Does the Deputy want to scare consumers now?

Mr. Naughten: The Minister of State, Deputy Brendan Smith, said we have to have the issue of regionalisation in Brazil because we used it here when we had foot and mouth. The difference between Ireland and Brazil on foot and mouth is that if one animal left County Louth and went into County Monaghan the CMMS system would pick it up straight away. There is no CMMS system in Brazil, nor is there a tagging or traceability system there. Consumers in this country are shopping blindfolded as regards trying to get Irish food products. The Minister may clap herself on the back for introducing country-of-origin legislation, which I welcome, but it will only address beef. There is nothing in it about lamb, poultry or pigmeat, all of which is being abused and relabelled in this country, yet we see no action on it from the Minister.

As regards the sugar industry, one of the questions in the motion concerned clarity on the implementation of the restructuring levy and the distribution of the compensation package. The difficulty is that within the next few weeks farmers will have to decide whether they will grow beet this year. The Minister cannot provide answers.

Mary Coughlan: Because it is on 20 February.

Mr. Naughten: She cannot provide answers to either of the two questions raised in the motion in this regard. The Minister sat down at the negotiations and signed up to the deal but we have had no clarity on the restructuring levy or compensation. We do not know whether a cap will be put on the compensation available to farmers or contractors. The Minister does not know what she signed off on.

Mary Coughlan: I do know.

Mr. Naughten: She is not prepared to develop alternative uses for the beet industry.

Mary Coughlan: The Deputy should not mislead the House.

Mr. Naughten: The Minister of State talked about 160,000 litres of biofuel but how long would the Government mercs run on that? They would not get as far as the gate. It is impractical and it cannot be implemented.

As regards the nitrates directive, the Minister spoke yesterday about the farm waste management scheme and said there was €43 million available for that.

Mary Coughlan: It is €46 million.

Mr. Naughten: Not one cent of it can be drawn down at the moment because the specifications and guidelines are not there. We still do not have approval from the European Commission. Yesterday, the Minister said: "I expect that the remaining issues will be resolved shortly and that a revised scheme will be introduced at an early date." It sounded very familiar.

Mary Coughlan: Tomorrow is the answer to that, not ten years.

Mr. Naughten: Funnily enough, that is exactly what the Minister said last year.

Mr. B. Smith: That is the Government that abolished payments in the mid-1990s under the former Minister, Mr. Yates.

Mr. Naughten: The Minister lied. She has been duping Irish farmers in this regard. There is no doubt that the core principle of an approach to the implementation of the nitrates directive based on scientific evidence was shelved in favour of political expediency. The Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government used that avenue and the Minister for Agriculture and Food sat back and let him do so. We have 50,000 REPS plans in this country which are currently illegal.

Mary Coughlan: That is not the situation.

Mr. Naughten: Under the law they are illegal. Furthermore, from now on, if farmers in this country want to spread fertiliser, they must bring a thermometer with them because unless the ground temperature is above 6° Celsius, they are breaking the law no matter what day or month of the year.

Mary Coughlan: The Deputy cannot mislead the House. He is in no position to do so.

Mr. Naughten: We still have no indication with regard to a derogation. The Minister claims she will get a derogation within six months and I hope she does. Sadly, every other country which succeeded in getting a derogation took years to get

it. If it takes years, the dairy farmers of this country will be gone along with many other intensive producers. I received an e-mail today from farmers in Newcastlewest involved in the poultry industry. They will be wiped out. They do not have resources available to them.

Mr. B. Smith: That is a misrepresentation.

Mr. Naughten: Grant aid of 40% is worthless if they do not have the resources to put the 60% with it. The Minister has been given an opportunity today. Teagasc said it is prepared to review the phosphate and nitrate tables if it is requested to do so.

Mary Coughlan: I made that request.

Mr. Naughten: Will the Minister allow scientific evidence to support this? Today, at the Joint Committee on the Environment, Heritage and Local Government, Dr. Seamus Cross of Teagasc said it was necessary to review the nitrates tables. Let him be given the opportunity to do that and ensure we go back to the Green Book which is seen as the good standard and farming practice in this country and which has been recognised in the European Union as the way forward for the proper protection of our environment and good farming practice. The Minister is out of touch, as is the Government. It is nine years in office and is jaded.

Mary Coughlan: Far from it.

Mr. Naughten: It does not understand the real issues facing rural Ireland and Irish farmers. On this side of the House we have no confidence in the Minister. We raised critical questions by means of our motion and she has not been able to answer them.

Mary Coughlan: The Deputy will get his answer.

Mr. Naughten: The IFA and Macra na Feirme have no confidence either in the Minister as they have withdrawn from the partnership negotiations. I commend the motion to the House.

Amendment put.

The Dáil divided: Tá, 72; Níl, 54.

Tá

Ahern, Michael.
Ahern, Noel.
Andrews, Barry.
Ardagh, Seán.
Blaney, Niall.
Brady, Johnny.
Brady, Martin.
Brennan, Seamus.
Browne, John.

Callanan, Joe.
Carey, Pat.
Carty, John.
Cassidy, Donie.
Collins, Michael.
Coughlan, Mary.
Cowen, Brian.
Cregan, John.
Cullen, Martin.

Tá—continued

Curran, John.
 Davern, Noel.
 de Valera, Síle.
 Dempsey, Noel.
 Dempsey, Tony.
 Dennehy, John.
 Devins, Jimmy.
 Ellis, John.
 Finneran, Michael.
 Fitzpatrick, Dermot.
 Fleming, Seán.
 Gallagher, Pat The Cope.
 Glennon, Jim.
 Hanafin, Mary.
 Haughey, Seán.
 Hoctor, Máire.
 Jacob, Joe.
 Keaveney, Cecilia.
 Kelleher, Billy.
 Kelly, Peter.
 Kitt, Tom.
 Lenihan, Brian.
 Lenihan, Conor.
 McDaid, James.
 McEllistram, Thomas.
 McGuinness, John.
 Moloney, John.

Moynihan, Donal.
 Moynihan, Michael.
 Mulcahy, Michael.
 Nolan, M.J.
 Ó Cuív, Éamon.
 Ó Feargháil, Seán.
 O'Connor, Charlie.
 O'Dea, Willie.
 O'Donnell, Liz.
 O'Donovan, Denis.
 O'Flynn, Noel.
 O'Keefe, Batt.
 O'Keefe, Ned.
 O'Malley, Fiona.
 O'Malley, Tim.
 Parlon, Tom.
 Power, Peter.
 Power, Seán.
 Sexton, Mae.
 Smith, Brendan.
 Smith, Michael.
 Treacy, Noel.
 Wallace, Dan.
 Wallace, Mary.
 Walsh, Joe.
 Wilkinson, Ollie.
 Woods, Michael.

Níl

Allen, Bernard.
 Boyle, Dan.
 Breen, James.
 Breen, Pat.
 Broughan, Thomas P.
 Bruton, Richard.
 Burton, Joan.
 Connaughton, Paul.
 Connolly, Paudge.
 Costello, Joe.
 Cowley, Jerry.
 Crowe, Seán.
 Deasy, John.
 Deenihan, Jimmy.
 Durkan, Bernard J.
 English, Damien.
 Enright, Olwyn.
 Ferris, Martin.
 Gilmore, Eamon.
 Gormley, John.
 Hayes, Tom.
 Healy, Seamus.
 Higgins, Joe.
 Higgins, Michael D.
 Hogan, Phil.
 Howlin, Brendan.
 Kehoe, Paul.

Lynch, Kathleen.
 McCormack, Pádraic.
 McGinley, Dinny.
 McGrath, Paul.
 McManus, Liz.
 Mitchell, Gay.
 Mitchell, Olivia.
 Murphy, Catherine.
 Murphy, Gerard.
 Naughten, Denis.
 Noonan, Michael.
 Ó Caoláin, Caoimhghín.
 O'Shea, Brian.
 O'Sullivan, Jan.
 Pattison, Seamus.
 Penrose, Willie.
 Perry, John.
 Rabbitte, Pat.
 Ring, Michael.
 Ryan, Eamon.
 Sargent, Trevor.
 Sherlock, Joe.
 Stagg, Emmet.
 Stanton, David.
 Timmins, Billy.
 Twomey, Liam.
 Upton, Mary.

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Kitt and Kelleher; Níl, Deputies Kehoe and Stagg.

Amendment declared carried.

Question put: "That the motion, as amended, be agreed to."

The Dáil divided by electronic means.

Mr. Kehoe: I notice the former IFA leader, Deputy Parlon, did not support farmers so, under

Standing Order 69, I propose that the vote be taken by other than electronic means.

An Ceann Comhairle: As Deputy Kehoe is a Whip, under Standing Order 69 he is entitled to call a vote through the lobby.

Question again put.

The Dáil divided: Tá, 72; Níl, 51.

Tá

Ahern, Michael.
 Ahern, Noel.
 Andrews, Barry.
 Ardagh, Seán.
 Blaney, Niall.
 Brady, Johnny.
 Brady, Martin.
 Brennan, Seamus.
 Browne, John.
 Callanan, Joe.
 Carey, Pat.
 Carty, John.
 Cassidy, Donie.
 Collins, Michael.
 Coughlan, Mary.
 Cowen, Brian.
 Cregan, John.
 Cullen, Martin.
 Curran, John.
 Davern, Noel.
 de Valera, Síle.
 Dempsey, Noel.
 Dempsey, Tony.
 Dennehy, John.
 Devins, Jimmy.
 Ellis, John.
 Finneran, Michael.
 Fitzpatrick, Dermot.
 Fleming, Seán.
 Gallagher, Pat The Cope.
 Glennon, Jim.
 Hanafin, Mary.
 Haughey, Seán.
 Hoctor, Máire.
 Jacob, Joe.
 Keaveney, Cecilia.

Kelleher, Billy.
 Kelly, Peter.
 Kitt, Tom.
 Lenihan, Brian.
 Lenihan, Conor.
 McDaid, James.
 McEllistrim, Thomas.
 McGuinness, John.
 Moloney, John.
 Moynihan, Donal.
 Moynihan, Michael.
 Mulcahy, Michael.
 Nolan, M. J.
 Ó Cuív, Éamon.
 Ó Fearghaíl, Seán.
 O'Connor, Charlie.
 O'Dea, Willie.
 O'Donnell, Liz.
 O'Donovan, Denis.
 O'Flynn, Noel.
 O'Keeffe, Batt.
 O'Keeffe, Ned.
 O'Malley, Fiona.
 O'Malley, Tim.
 Parlon, Tom.
 Power, Peter.
 Power, Seán.
 Sexton, Mae.
 Smith, Brendan.
 Smith, Michael.
 Treacy, Noel.
 Wallace, Dan.
 Wallace, Mary.
 Walsh, Joe.
 Wilkinson, Ollie.
 Woods, Michael.

Níl

Allen, Bernard.
 Boyle, Dan.
 Breen, James.
 Breen, Pat.
 Broughan, Thomas P.
 Bruton, Richard.
 Burton, Joan.
 Connaughton, Paul.
 Costello, Joe.
 Cowley, Jerry.
 Crowe, Seán.
 Deasy, John.
 Deenihan, Jimmy.
 Durkan, Bernard J.
 Enright, Olwyn.
 Ferris, Martin.
 Gilmore, Eamon.
 Gogarty, Paul.
 Hayes, Tom.
 Healy, Seamus.
 Higgins, Joe.
 Higgins, Michael D.
 Hogan, Phil.
 Howlin, Brendan.
 Kehoe, Paul.
 Lynch, Kathleen.

McCormack, Pádraic.
 McGinley, Dinny.
 McGrath, Paul.
 McManus, Liz.
 Mitchell, Gay.
 Mitchell, Olivia.
 Murphy, Catherine.
 Murphy, Gerard.
 Naughten, Denis.
 Noonan, Michael.
 Ó Caoláin, Caoimhghín.
 O'Shea, Brian.
 O'Sullivan, Jan.
 Pattison, Seamus.
 Penrose, Willie.
 Perry, John.
 Rabbitte, Pat.
 Ring, Michael.
 Ryan, Eamon.
 Sargent, Trevor.
 Stagg, Emmet.
 Stanton, David.
 Timmins, Billy.
 Twomey, Liam.
 Upton, Mary.

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Kelleher and Kitt; Níl, Deputies Kehoe and Stagg.

Question declared carried.

Adjournment Debate.

Health Service Staff.

Mr. Cregan: I thank the Acting Chairman for allowing me the opportunity to raise this important matter for my constituents in Limerick. The HSE must immediately appoint a third geriatrician to the mid-west HSE region, with particular emphasis on that post being filled in Limerick Regional Hospital, which will complement the current service to that hospital and its associated hospitals, St. Ita's Hospital, Newcastlewest and St. Camillus's Hospital, Limerick.

For many years I served as a member of the Mid-Western Health Board. I consider that board to have been extremely responsible. It always lived within its budget and did its business correctly within the limited resources available. One abiding memory I have from my time on the health board is that successive CEOs consistently reported to the board that the mid-west region received less funding per head of population than any other health board.

Evidently the HSE mid-west region is still behind other regions regarding consultant posts across all disciplines, as it always has been. I recall being told while on the board that it was short five, ten or 15 consultants. Two consultant geriatricians are attached to Limerick Regional Hospital and its two associated hospitals, St. Ita's and St. Camillus's. They work above and beyond the call of duty. Both are greatly concerned about the care of an increasingly elderly population. I have personal experience of the work of one of these eminent gentlemen, David Clinch. I cannot commend him highly enough for his caring nature, the way in which he carries out his duties and the concern he expresses on a daily basis for the improvement of services in our region.

A recent report by the national task force recommends a total of seven geriatricians by 2009. That is based on a ratio of 1:50,000. We have three geriatricians, at a ratio of 1:85,000 which is 35,000 more elderly patients than is recommended. These figures indicate the elderly population of County Limerick is not given the level of service required and deserved.

I repeat the geriatricians in the region work above and beyond the call of duty in Limerick Regional Hospital, St. Ita's Hospital in Newcastlewest and St. Camillus's Hospital in Limerick. However, because of the lack of response to the repeated requests that a third geriatrician be appointed, these gentlemen must use some of their time lobbying public representatives, the local HSE and the Department of Health and Children. It is about time we answered that call. This proposal has been under active consideration for a period of time. The

time is right to make a decision and to fill that post.

I fully understand the demands on the Department and the Minister from all sections. All I ask for is a level playing pitch and a fair slice of the cake for my constituents in Limerick West. I appeal to all concerned to hear my plea and ensure this matter can be dealt with speedily. The Tánaiste and the Ministers for State, Deputies Seán Power and O'Malley, have my full support in a difficult job. I commend them for the manner in which they carry out their duties. Having stated that, I appeal again for this matter to be dealt with urgently.

Minister of State at the Department of Health and Children (Mr. S. Power): I thank Deputy Cregan for raising this matter and I am delighted to have the opportunity to reply on behalf of my colleague, the Tánaiste and Minister for Health and Children.

Mr. P. McGrath: It must not be good news or else she would have been in.

Mr. S. Power: We give the Deputy good news occasionally on the Adjournment. The issue raised by the Deputy is a matter for the HSE which has responsibility for delivering its service plan priorities in line with the funding made available to it. I understand from the HSE that the situation at present is that there are four consultant geriatricians employed in the former Mid-Western Health Board, two in the Limerick area, one in Clare and one in Tipperary North. I also understand from the HSE that the employment of a third geriatrician in Limerick is under active consideration. We will keep the Deputy informed of any change in the situation. I realise he has taken an interest in this matter for a long time.

As the House will be aware, an investment package of €150 million in services for older people and palliative care over the years 2006-07 was announced in the recent budget. This is the largest ever increase in funding for services for older people and underlines the Government's commitment to older people and to putting them at the centre of health policy in the future.

This is a full year cost and is broken down into €110 million for this year and €40 million more for next year. This package is a developmental one and has a particular focus on care in the community, with over €100 million being provided to support home and day care, including respite care for older people.

Initiatives in this area include the development of the home care packages to enable older people to remain living in the community for as long as possible in line with their expressed wishes, an increase in the number of home help hours provided, an increase in day respite care provision, a significant increase in the resources available to the meals on wheels service, funding to support the development of sheltered housing, the further

[Mr. S. Power.]

implementation of the report on elder abuse by providing for dedicated staff and a research function in this area and €4 million has been put aside for the development of proposals in the primary and community care areas which are new ways of delivering service and reflect best practice elsewhere.

The level and range of the investment package clearly shows the Government's commitment to ensuring that the care we provide for older people is of the highest possible standard and in line with their expressed wishes.

Schools Building Projects.

Mr. Penrose: I wish to share time with Deputy Paul McGrath.

I thank the Ceann Comhairle for permitting me to raise on the Adjournment the important issue of Dysart national school. A brief history of the situation is as follows. The school was approved for a grant of €350,000, the maximum granted under the 2004 small schools initiative, to construct a new school to service a large geographical area. The old school in Dysart was condemned as far back as 1999 — both I and Deputy Paul McGrath raised the issue many years ago — thus the need for this school to progress without further procrastination or delay.

The awarding of the grant under the scheme was vigorously and enthusiastically embraced by the board of management and, initially, two estimates were sought and they amounted to €350,000 to €390,000. By the time the tender was submitted in early January 2005, the best tender was €460,000 and together with professional fees the total cost for the erection of new modern school which would meet the needs of the young pupils attending the school and the staff, together with the ancillary facilities required, was in the order of €500,000.

Obviously, when the grant of €350,000 is taken into account, this leaves a shortfall of €150,000 which, in essence, is too onerous a burden for a small community to bear. While the small schools initiative may not have intended to leave schools with significant fundraising needs, that is the situation in which this small community of Dysart finds itself.

The planning guidelines for primary schools issued by the Minister's Department clearly indicated that the board of management was not free to tailor the scope of capital works despite what some of the officials state. Indeed, on the contrary, the board of management in Dysart felt constrained to work within those guidelines. As a result, the school designed is based on a two classroom school plan produced by the Department's architects.

Despite assertions by the Department to the contrary, there was no statement specifying three classrooms — its representative was told that

approval was to build a two teacher unit. On 22 March 2005, an official from the Department was presented with a copy of the plans with a written request to meet the board of management. Further requests for meetings were submitted on 25 April 2005 and 15 September 2005 and both I and Deputy Paul McGrath raised the matter in the House subsequently.

It should be noted that in July 2005, €245,000, or approximately 70% of the original grant, was released to the school which would surely indicate approval and sanction for the two classroom school as planned. The matter has been through the appeals process. Both I and Deputy Paul McGrath tried very hard to get a positive result. We were extremely disappointed with the nature and tenor of the reply which referred the matter back to the school planning section. It was stated that the building project was unlikely to meet the long-term accommodation needs. Ultimately, the appeals board decided the school did not warrant additional funding to everybody's great surprise.

The Minister is aware that of the €150,000 shortfall, a significant amount of it arises as a result of the need for the school board to comply with the planning conditions set down by the planning authority. I understand a copy of the consultant engineer's assessment of the additional costs associated with that have been furnished to the Department.

The Minister should give the additional money required to deal with the extra costs which are clearly outside the control of the school authorities and were not set down by them. The accepted tender price to erect the school represents exceedingly good value. It is of paramount importance that the additional grant aid of €150,000 is provided to this small community.

On 24 November, the school met the Department but it received a point blank refusal. The delays have forced the children and teachers of Dysart to endure another year in an unfit building which was condemned as long ago as 1999. In January this year, the boys' toilet had to be closed due to a leaking roof so boys and girls must now share one toilet. The roof is also leaking rain water into the corridor on top of the ESB fuse box area.

Time is of the essence. If there is a lot of money to give out and if we are facilitating all sorts of developments and initiatives, surely a school is the first place to start and €150,000 is small bread to ensure comforts for teachers and pupils in this area.

Mr. P. McGrath: I thank my colleague, Deputy Penrose, for sharing time. This is a small rural community which is at a crossroads. There is some housing development in the area. This school has been condemned for some time. Initially, the old school was to be renovated but that proved impractical and not worthwhile. Plans were approved by the Department for a new

school and expenditure appeared to be approved by it because no response was received from it. A contractor was brought on site and the school is half built. Since the local community will not be able to meet the additional requirement of €150,000, work had to stop. Will we leave it as it is? Will it be another white elephant like the hospital in Mullingar and several others? Let us make progress on the school and let common sense prevail.

Mr. S. Power: It is nice to see co-operation between the two Deputies opposite. Perhaps it is a sign of things to come.

Mr. Penrose: We always co-operate in the interests of our constituency.

Mr. S. Power: We all have that in common. I thank the Deputies for affording me the opportunity to outline the position of the Department of Education and Science with regard to the allocation of funding for school building projects and, in particular, the project at Dysart national school, Mullingar. Dysart national school is accommodated in classrooms in a building which was built in 1941. It has an enrolment of approximately 38 pupils and a staffing of a principal teacher and one assistant teacher.

The Department of Education and Science is moving towards a model of devolving funding, responsibility and authority, as appropriate, for building projects directly to school management authorities. Devolving of funding to school management authorities allows them to have control of their projects, assists in moving projects more quickly to tender and construction and can deliver better value for money.

This devolved initiative was originally introduced on a pilot basis for 20 schools in the 2003 school building programme and due to the positive feedback from schools was extended in the school building programmes of 2004 and again last year. While appropriate for many schools, the Department is aware that the devolved initiative is not necessarily suitable for all national schools seeking to refurbish their school building or to build new accommodation. It is not the intention of the scheme to leave schools with massive fundraising requirements. Rather, the level of funding should determine the scope of works undertaken. However, in some cases, the school site or building can be problematic while in others, the extent of the required work is too extensive for the funding available under the initiative.

In such situations, schools have a number of choices. They can reduce the scope of intended works, fundraise to cover the shortfall or withdraw from the scheme and be considered for inclusion in the mainstream school building programme in line with the project's priority band rating. This school was offered a grant of €350,000 under the devolved initiative in 2004 to provide new accommodation. The board of management

accepted the grant offered and proceeded with the architectural planning of the project.

The school has received planning permission for a new school building subject to a number of conditions. Construction work on the new school started during the summer of 2005. It is clear from the information supplied by the school to officials in the Department of Education and Science that the grant of €350,000 will not be sufficient to construct the building as designed. Officials from the Department met the school authorities on 24 November 2005 to discuss this difficulty. An appeal for additional funding was considered by the appeals board and it is satisfied that under the terms of the scheme, the school does not warrant additional funding. The board of management has been informed of the decision.

Mr. P. McGrath: That is disappointing.

Mr. S. Power: I again thank the Deputy for outlining the current position to the House. I listened attentively to the issues raised by both Deputies and I will communicate that message to the Minister for Education and Science who, unfortunately, cannot be present this evening.

Water and Sewerage Schemes.

Ms C. Murphy: To stress the importance of investing in the sewage treatment systems in both the upper and lower Liffey catchments, I will begin by discussing water supplies in the greater Dublin area. At Ballymore Eustace, Dublin City Council abstracts 250 million litres per day from the River Liffey. There are proposals to take a further 66 million litres from the river at that source in the short term, which is too much.

The river then flows through County Kildare towards Dublin until it reaches Sallins where there is a major regional sewage treatment plant. This plant has serious problems and sewage leaks into the river, particularly in wet weather when one must also contend with storm water. The river, thus contaminated by waste, then continues through north Kildare towards Dublin where the next plant it meets is Fingal County Council's water treatment plant at Leixlip where 148 million litres are abstracted and treated.

Like other plants, the level of water treatment at the plant depends on the abstracted water's cleanliness. Obviously, when an overloaded sewerage plant upstream from it leaks into the river, the level of chemical intervention is much higher to clean up the water. An engineer informed me that this process is known as enrichment, although it is not the kind of enrichment for which I would wish. The plant serves Fingal, some of Dublin city, South Dublin County Council, north Kildare and Meath, all of which consequently have an interest in this issue.

Once the river passes by the Leixlip water treatment plant, it flows past the Leixlip sewage

[Ms C. Murphy.]

treatment plant which is also earmarked for expansion. I understand that this proposal may be funded. Local residents in Sallins noticed that sewage was flowing into the river and obviously were concerned about the quality of their living environment. Given the level of development that has taken place in that area, I can understand their concern.

Kildare County Council has written to me and to others in a categorical manner. It stated:

Given the unprecedented growth in the . . . catchment in recent years, and the combined nature of the network, both wastewater and surface water, the Sallins pumping station, along with other elements of the network have reached breaking point. The result is that in particularly in times of heavy rainfall, the network becomes overloaded and overflows occur at the pumping station into nearby watercourses.

In other words, into what will end up being our drinking water. The letter goes on to state:

Kildare County Council are fully aware of the situation and as far back as 1999 Kildare County Council commissioned a report to identify infrastructural requirements to meet current and future needs. This report was completed in 2002 and forwarded to the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government . . . [The] overall cost of the proposed scheme is €65 million, which is obviously outside the scope of Kildare County Council's own finances and hence the need for departmental approval and associated funding. Kildare County Council has constantly pressed the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government for approval of the overall report to allow it to proceed to the next stage . . . [The council] met with the Department in December 2005 . . . [and at that] meeting it was agreed to progress some of the recommendations . . . [to deal] with the short-term issues.

What is the problem? This work is necessary and those people who bought houses and have come to live in Kildare will not move out. They will not stop running their taps or flushing their toilets. Why postpone this work and damage the river for other uses? Why pump more chemicals into the population instead of cleaning up the water at source? The River Liffey's primary use has been designated as the supply of drinking water. We should stop using it as a toilet and should fund the necessary projects.

Minister of State at the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government (Mr. B. O'Keefe): I thank the Deputy for raising this important issue. A huge range of important water services infrastructure is being progressed in Kildare at present with the support of unpre-

cedented Exchequer funding from the national development plan. The investment in such infrastructure has made a key contribution to the economic growth that has benefited every part of Ireland, with Kildare very much to the fore in this regard.

The schedule of new water and sewerage schemes planned and in progress for Kildare under the Department's water services investment programme 2005 to 2007, which was published late last year, provides firm evidence of the Government's determination to safeguard the environment while at the same time providing for new housing, new jobs and all the other requirements of a successful and still growing economy.

The water services investment programme has allocated funding for water and sewerage schemes worth more than €220 million for Kildare, all of which will be put in place as soon as possible. Many towns and villages can look forward to new or upgraded sewerage facilities. Sewerage schemes valued at more than €90 million are under construction or are scheduled to start over the next two years.

The quality of waste water discharged into the River Liffey from the present Leixlip and Osbertstown treatment plants is well within the prescribed treatment standards. In this context, it is worth noting that two thirds of all drinking water abstracted from the Liffey is taken at Ballymore Eustace, which is upstream of the two waste water plants. Drinking water abstracted from the Liffey at Leixlip is protected by the high standards of waste water treatment at the Osbertstown plant.

The objective of the upper and lower Liffey valley sewerage schemes is to ensure that Kildare County Council can continue to maintain the highest possible standards for waste water discharges to guarantee drinking water standards, while at the same time supporting continuing economic and social development in the county for the foreseeable future.

More than €38 million of the planned €220 million investment in water services in Kildare has been committed to the upper and lower Liffey valley sewerage schemes. These major infrastructural undertakings involve a combination of upgraded and extended waste water treatment facilities and sewage collection networks that will serve more than a dozen towns and villages in the Liffey catchment, including Kilcock, Clane, Celbridge, Maynooth, Leixlip, Naas and Newbridge.

I am as anxious as the Deputy to see these schemes reach construction and completion as quickly as possible and my Department is doing everything it can to ensure that this happens. However, the Deputy will appreciate that multi-million euro projects that are funded by the taxpayer must go through detailed planning and development processes to ensure that they meet their intended objectives, that they are designed and constructed in an economical manner and

that they produce treated waste water, or drinking water as the case may be, to a standard that meets national and EU requirements.

In May 2005, my Department approved Kildare County Council's proposals to proceed with work on an advance section of the lower Liffey valley scheme at Straffan, which I understand is nearing completion. The council's contract documents for the major elements of this scheme are also under examination in my Department. I expect these to be approved within the next few weeks. Kildare County Council will then be in a position to seek tenders for the scheme which will bring it to the construction stage.

The council's revised preliminary report for the upper Liffey valley sewerage scheme is being assessed by my Department. Here again the council can also expect a decision in the near future. Following this approval the council will be able to proceed with the preparation of contract documents for this scheme.

To sum up, my Department is fully committed to getting these important infrastructural schemes started quickly. To this end, I assure the Deputy we will complete the assessment of both schemes with a minimum of delay with a view to authorising Kildare County Council to advance them to construction as soon as possible.

Local Authority Staff.

Mr. P. McGrath: I wish to share time with Deputy Ring.

The review body on higher remuneration in the public sector in its report No. 38 of September 2000 considered that performance related awards for managers and assistant managers of local authorities were appropriate. The situation evolved so that managers of local authorities made submissions to a committee for performance awards in the local government sector under the chairmanship of the Secretary General of the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government. The procedure is that the county manager makes a submission setting out his or her goals for the upcoming year and it is approved by the committee. At the end of the year, the manager reports back saying how well he or she did. It costs local authorities a total of €2.1 million annually, which must be paid out of their budgets. The average payment to the recipients is €10,000 per annum.

While I welcome this good initiative, nobody outside the committee can access the submissions to establish what they contain or the performance, tasks and so on undertaken by the county managers. How can we have a realistic idea of whether they earn the awards? One cannot acquire the documents under the Freedom of Information Act 1997. I raised this with the Taoiseach at a meeting of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Finance and the Public Service. He was astonished and said I should get the documentation. He said he would see to it but nothing

happened. One cannot even get a glimpse of these submissions.

The original terms of reference of the scheme stated local authority chairman should be given a copy of the submissions or at least a synopsis of them but this has been rowed back on. Additional moneys are awarded to senior local authority staff by the committee, which does not visit local authorities to speak to the chairman, members or staff. It is done entirely on a paper assessment. It is incorrect that this documentation should not be available. While I do not want to know who earns how much, I want to know the goals that are set, how they are assessed and what scrutiny is in place to ensure the assessment takes place.

Mr. Ring: I support my colleague on this issue which has bothered me for a long time. I have also tried to get this information. It is wrong that civil servants protect other civil servants. Why should the Freedom of Information Act cover Oireachtas Members, including Ministers, while senior public servants, including county managers, assistant county managers and directors of services are protected under the Act? Why should the taxpayer not know what these people are being paid for and why they receive these bonuses? Why should these people tell us how great they are? For example, the local authority in my county got rid of the refuse service and the mobile libraries this year. Are senior staff being given bonuses to take away services from the people?

The taxpayers of County Mayo and everywhere else are entitled to this information. They should know why these staff receive the bonuses, the amount of the bonuses and where the money comes from. The awards are funded by the taxpayer and local authority members should discuss these awards every year. A report should be brought before them and it should be listed on the agenda for discussion to see if the officials are entitled to a bonus. It is wrong that they are being protected by the Government and the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government and it is wrong that legislation was passed which provides for the protection of these people.

We cannot have two laws in this country. This is not Russia. We knew members of the establishment in Russia looked after one another but this is supposed to be a democracy. If information about Oireachtas Members can be published by every daily newspaper, the local newspapers should know how much county managers and directors of services receive in bonuses, especially when the people pay for them. They should at least know how much is being paid.

How can I obtain this information? When I table parliamentary questions, I do not want to be told to go to the Oireachtas Library. If the Minister of State's Department continues to issue

[Mr. Ring.]

such replies, I will make the staff busy because I will table many parliamentary questions and make many freedom of information requests. I am warning the Minister of State and his Department that if they want to play that game, I can play it too.

Mr. B. O’Keeffe: I thank both Deputies for raising this important issue. A scheme for performance related awards for the local authority sector for managers, assistant managers and directors of services was introduced in 2003 following the recommendation of the review body on higher remuneration in the public sector in its report of 25 September 2000. The review body recommended that a committee for performance awards be established to monitor and adjudicate on the performance awards process in the local government sector. The committee comprises the Secretary General of the Department, two senior local authority managers and two members from the private sector.

Mr. P. McGrath: Keep it within the house.

Mr. B. O’Keeffe: The committee’s mandate is to make an independent determination of awards in accordance with the scheme formulated by the Department with the approval of the Department of Finance and which is consistent with principles recommended by report No. 38 of the review body. Under the scheme, participants prepare a statement of objectives at the beginning of the year and a self-assessment of performance at the end of the year. These objectives and assessments are subject to approval by the committee for performance awards which also makes the final determination of the amounts of awards.

The committee’s reports for 2003 and 2004 are available in the Oireachtas Library. The reports contain details of the background of the scheme, including the setting of objectives, assessment of performance and the approved range of awards available under the scheme. The reports also include details of the distribution of awards as a percentage of pay, the range of monetary value of awards and the number of recipients. The report for 2005 will not be available until the second quarter of the year and I understand that the committee is considering including in that report details of total awards by local authorities.

Mr. P. McGrath: The committee did not outline the objectives.

Mr. B. O’Keeffe: In the two years covered by the reports, awards to county and city managers ranged between 8% and 12% with an average award of 10.12%.

Mr. Ring: Not bad.

Mr. B. O’Keeffe: In the case of grades other than manager, awards ranged between 4% and 15% with an average award of 9.9%. The maximum award of 20% was not made in any case. The average annual cost of the awards so far has been approximately €2.1 million across the local government sector.

The annual reports clearly set out relevant details of the scheme with the main exception of details concerning individuals. In a request for details concerning individuals in the comparable civil service scheme, the Information Commissioner decided on appeal that information on individuals constituted “personal records” in accordance with the relevant provisions of the Freedom of Information Act 1997.

Mr. Ring: He was a former civil servant.

Mr. B. O’Keeffe: The commissioner in the decision stated that public servants, as with all employees, are entitled to a degree of privacy—

Mr. Ring: But not Deputies or Ministers.

Mr. B. O’Keeffe: —in the evaluation of their work performance, competence or ability and found that this type of information is held by public bodies on the understanding that it would be treated by them as confidential. The commissioner found that, on balance, the public interest in protecting the right to privacy outweighed the public interest that the information be granted.

The operation of schemes of performance awards for senior public servants have in the past been reviewed by the review body on higher remuneration. That body has been activated again to review the remuneration of a wide range of senior public servants and has recently invited submissions by any person or organisation in connection with its review. It is, therefore, open to the Deputies to consider making a submission to the review body on any aspect of the current local government performance scheme.

Mr. P. McGrath: That is a kick for touch.

Mr. Ring: Does the Minister of State think the body will listen to us?

Mr. B. O’Keeffe: I have no doubt both Deputies will take the opportunity to make such a submission.

Mr. Ring: Like all the civil servants, the Minister of State will protect the civil servants.

The Dáil adjourned at 10 p.m. until 10.30 a.m. on Thursday, 9 February 2006.

Written Answers.

The following are questions tabled by Members for written response and the ministerial replies received from the Departments [unrevised].

Questions Nos. 1 to 14, inclusive, answered orally.

Questions Nos. 15 to 103, inclusive, resubmitted.

Questions Nos. 104 to 111, inclusive, answered orally.

Official Languages Act.

112. **Ms Shortall** asked the Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs if he is satisfied with the implementation to date in 2006 of the Official Languages Act 2003; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4437/06]

Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs (Éamon Ó Cuív): I draw the Deputy's attention to my inaugural report on the implementation of the Official Languages Act 2003 for the period July 2003-31 December 2004, which has been laid before each House of the Oireachtas. As set out in that report and as I have outlined on a number of occasions in this House, considerable progress has been made to date in the implementation, on a phased basis, of the provisions of the Act.

To date, a total of 22 language schemes prepared by public bodies have been confirmed by me and published. My Department is in discussion with in excess of 70 additional public bodies in relation to completion or commencement of the process of drafting a scheme.

Most of the provisions of the Act have been commenced and, as provided for in section 1 of the Act, the remaining provisions will commence automatically in July next, if not brought into operation by order sooner.

Polasaí Dátheangachais.

113. D'fhiafraigh **Mr. Sargent** den Aire Gnóthaí Pobail, Tuaithe agus Gaeltachta an eiseoidh sé treoiríní d'fhoilsitheoirí agus don phobal i gcoitinne chun go mbeidh an Béarla agus an Ghaeilge taobh le taobh ar leathanach ar bith más cur i láthair dátheangach atá á chur ar fáil. [4424/06]

Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs (Éamon Ó Cuív): Ba mhaith liom a mhíniú don Teachta go leagtar síos sna Treoiríní faoi alt 12 d'Acht na dTeangacha Oifigiúla 2003, a foilsíodh i mí Mheán Fómhair 2004, gur chóir do chomhlachtaí polasaí soiléir a chruthú dá n-eagraíochtaí féin maidir le soláthar

sheirbhísí dhátheangacha i gcomhthéacs scéim teanga faoi alt 11 a ullmhú.

I measc na nithe sonracha atá luaite sna Treoiríní, a bheadh le cur san áireamh i bpolasaí den tsórt sin, tá:

. . . cleachtas dhátheangach a chur i bhfeidhm i ndoiciméid chlóite (foirmeacha iarratais, ciorcláin, fógraí eolais, etc). Sa chuid is mó de na cásanna, is é an dea-chleachtas ná go gcuirfeadh i láthair leaganacha ar leithligh sna teangacha laistigh d'aon chlúdach amháin.

Cé go bhfuil buntáistí láidre don chustaiméir go mbeadh an Béarla agus an Ghaeilge taobh le taobh ar leathanaigh, is ceist í do gach comhlacht ar leith polasaí a chruthú dá eagraíocht féin a oireann dá chustaiméirí ó thaobh sheirbhísí dhátheangacha a sholáthar, ag tógáil san áireamh nithe a bhaineann le costais agus modhanna chun doiciméid agus foirmeacha a sheachadadh.

Dormant Accounts Fund.

114. **Mr. Boyle** asked the Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs his views on recent remarks made by a person (details supplied) regarding the changes in the dormant fund allocation system which he claims has made the system less accessible and accountable. [4339/06]

Minister of State at the Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs (Mr. N. Ahern): The Deputy will be aware that I have outlined in the House on a number of occasions the reasons the Government decided to make changes to the dormant accounts scheme. In summary, these were to fully address governance and accountability issues and to provide for greater transparency in decision-making on disbursements.

On 4 January 2006, I announced details concerning the allocation of €24 million from the dormant accounts fund in 2006 for the purpose of supporting programmes and types of projects tackling social and economic disadvantage. Details of the announcement are available on the website of my Department at www.pobail.ie and are set out below in Appendix 1 for the Deputy's information. Following this announcement, there was a certain amount of media coverage including an interview on national radio with a representative from Integrated Rural Development, Kiltimagh concerning the changes introduced by Government on dormant accounts.

There may have been an impression given in the interview that Pobal, formerly Area Development Management Limited, was previously the decision-making authority with regard to disbursements from the dormant accounts fund. This is clearly not the case. The Dormant Accounts Fund Disbursements Board engaged Pobal as a service provider to administer the initial round of funding on its behalf. In this regard, Pobal

[Mr. N. Ahern.]

received and evaluated applications and submitted its advice to the board which then made decisions on whether applications should be approved.

Under the new arrangements, recently put in place by Government, applications will be received and assessed against published criteria by or on behalf of public bodies and the results of such assessments will be submitted to the Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs. The Minister will then submit the results of the assessments to the Government for approval. It is anticipated that Pobal will, in the main, be engaged as a service provider to again carry out the function of receiving and assessing applications similar to its role for the former board.

Appendix 1

Press Release 04 January 2006

€24 MILLION DORMANT ACCOUNTS FUNDING

TO BE TARGETED AT SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC DISADVANTAGE

Noel Ahern, T.D., Minister of State at the Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs and Éamon Ó Cuív T.D. Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs today announced that the Government has approved the categories under which €24 million from dormant accounts will be spent in 2006 on programmes and projects tackling social and economic disadvantage.

The Dormant Accounts legislation targets three broad categories of persons for support from the Dormant Accounts Fund:

- those affected by economic and social disadvantage;
- those affected by educational disadvantage; and
- persons with a disability.

Today's announcement relates solely to the Social and Economic Category. The programmes and types of projects in this category will aim to ensure that particular priority is given to the areas designated by Government as most disadvantaged i.e. RAPID, CLÁR and Drugs Task Force areas (see Editor's note).

The funding announced today will focus on:

- RAPID Programme — up to 50% of the overall funding will be ring-fenced to

provide additional supports for priority projects in RAPID areas;

- Support for Priority Themes — funding for specific measures supporting youth, older people and other priority themes — including suicide prevention; alcohol misuse; supports for immigrant families; supports for offenders/ex-offenders;
- Support for Jointly Funded Flagship Projects — funding for innovative measures addressing matters of major public concern, which also involve substantial funding from private, philanthropic or community sources.

“I am very pleased that a significant level of spending will go directly towards projects in areas designated by Government as suffering particular disadvantage. I also believe that the money aimed at jointly funded flagship projects will lever significant additional funding from private and other sources.”

Noel Ahern T.D., Minister of State, Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs

Éamon Ó Cuív, T.D., Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs, strongly welcomed the Government decision. He indicated his intention to bring proposals to Government soon in relation to additional Dormant Accounts funding under the Educational Disadvantage Category and the Disability Category.

Editor's Note:

RAPID

RAPID (Revitalising Areas by Planning Investment and Development) is a focused initiative designed to prioritise and target Government expenditure, over a number of Departments, on the most concentrated centres of disadvantage in the country. Strand 1 targets 25 urban centres while Strand II targets 20 provincial towns.

CLÁR

CLÁR (Ceantair Laga Ard-Riachtanais) is a similar type initiative targeting rural areas and the islands. It funds and provides co-funding for measures designed to support physical, community and social infrastructure.

Drug Task Forces

Drug Task Forces (DTFs) operate in the areas experiencing the worse levels of drug misuse, particularly heroin. The role of the DTFs is to prepare local action plans, which include a range of measures to tackle drug misuse in the areas of treatment, rehabilitation, education, prevention and curbing local supply.

Programmes and Types of Projects Recommended by
Social & Economic Disadvantage Committee

Programme Heading	Programme Description	Target Group / Area	Application Process	Additionality Demonstrated
1. <i>Additionality under RAPID Programme.</i> €11.5 million	Funding ring-fenced for the purpose of supporting priority projects within RAPID areas.	Strand 1 and Strand 2 RAPID areas.	RAPID AITs invited to apply	Yes. The ring-fencing of funding for RAPID areas will ensure that funding for priority projects is front-loaded in 2006
2. <i>Specific Priority Measures:</i> €7.5 million <i>Youth Disadvantage Initiatives</i>	Once-off small scale equipment grants for youth groups with a particular focus on disadvantaged and marginal groups.	Young people.	Public invitation to youth groups	Yes. Existing Local Youth Club Grant scheme does not include any element of capital funding for equipment
— Supports for youth groups.	Grants to fund participation in recreational pursuits and personal development activities which are not normally available to disadvantaged children and disadvantaged young people.	Invitation to Partnership companies	Disadvantaged children and disadvantaged young people.	Yes. No specific funding stream to provide such services
— Supports to provide enhanced access to recreational & personal development opportunities for disadvantaged young people.	Grants to fund purchase of essential equipment / hire of halls etc. not funded under Sports Capital Programme.	Young people in disadvantaged areas.	Invitation to specified sports	Yes. Funding under Sports Capital Programme not provided for personal equipment
— Supports for sports which have traditional appeal to youth in disadvantaged areas (e.g. boxing; wrestling; martial arts; weightlifting etc.).	Projects supporting disadvantaged young people to adapt to information technology with a particular focus on early school leavers.	Disadvantaged young people.	Targeted public invitation to groups active in this area	Yes. No specific funding stream for this measure.
— IT initiatives for disadvantaged young people.	Supports for community based care services for older people such as improved access to services including transport and mobility.	Local Community and voluntary groups supporting older people.	Public invitation to groups active in this area	Yes. No specific funding stream for local community and voluntary groups supporting older people
<i>Older People Initiatives</i> Enhanced interventions and supports to assist older people living in their own homes and in the community.				

[Mr. N. Ahern.]

Programme Heading	Programme Description	Target Group / Area	Application Process	Additionality Demonstrated
<p><i>Social Disadvantage Measures:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> — Supports for offenders / ex-offenders. — Supports for vulnerable immigrants. — Suicide prevention. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · supports to strengthen community based suicide prevention; · young men under 35. — Projects tackling alcohol misuse. 	<p>Projects providing addiction counselling for prisoners / ex-prisoners.</p> <p>Projects providing employment supports for prisoners / ex-prisoners.</p> <p>Supports for immigrant families who have been granted refugee status or granted leave to remain in the State.</p> <p>Measures tackling suicide prevention with a particular focus on</p> <p>Supports for community based responses addressing problems associated with alcohol misuse.</p>	<p>Prisoners / ex-prisoners.</p> <p>Prisoners / ex-prisoners.</p> <p>Immigrant families.</p> <p>At risk individuals.</p> <p>At risk individuals.</p>	<p>Targeted public invitation to groups active in this area</p> <p>Targeted public invitation to groups active in this area</p> <p>Public invitation to Partnership companies.</p> <p>Public invitation to community and voluntary groups active in this area.</p> <p>Public invitation to community and voluntary groups active in this area.</p>	<p>Yes. No specific funding stream for such services.</p> <p>Yes. No specific funding stream for such services.</p> <p>Yes. No specific funding stream for such services.</p> <p>Yes. No specific funding stream to provide funding for community groups.</p> <p>Yes. No specific funding stream to provide funding for such services.</p>
<p><i>3. Flagship Projects Jointly Funded:</i></p> <p>€5 million</p> <p>Innovative initiatives addressing issues of social and economic disadvantage.</p>	<p>Innovative initiatives addressing matters of major public concern and/or headline policy interventions for which funding from private/philanthropic or community sources can be levered.</p>	<p>Socially and economically disadvantaged.</p>	<p>Public invitation to groups who have substantial guaranteed funding from private, philanthropic or community sources for innovative projects</p>	<p>Yes. Objective is to encourage innovative projects which can lever significant funding from private, philanthropic or community sources.</p>

Aistritheoirí Béarla-Gaeilge.

115. D'fhiafraigh **Mr. Costello** den Aire Gnóthaí Pobail, Tuaithe agus Gaeltachta cathain a chuirfear scéim oifigiúil cáilíochtaí ar bun d'aistritheoirí Gaeilge; agus an ndéanfaidh sé ráiteas ina leith. [4408/06]

Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs (Éamon Ó Cuív): Mar is eol don Teachta, tá iarrtha agam ar Fhoras na Gaeilge córas creidiúnaithe d'aistritheoirí Gaeilge a fhorbairt. Is é seo an chéad chóras dá leithéid a bheidh ar fáil d'aistritheoirí Gaeilge na tíre seo.

D'eagraigh Foras na Gaeilge seimineár le gairid chun an dul chun cinn a bhí déanta go dáta i ndáil le forbairt an chórais a chur i láthair an phobail. Tuigim gur fhreastal slua ollmhór ar an tseimineár agus gur léirigh said an-spéis sa chóras nua. Is éard a bheidh i gceist ná go mbronnfar séala creidiúnaithe ar aistritheoirí a bhaineann caighdeán sár-chumais amach. Mar chéad chéim chun an caighdeán sin a thástáil, déanfar scrúdú a eagrú i mí Aibreáin 2006. Cruthófar painéal d'aistritheoirí creidiúnaithe agus, mar a thuigim, beidh an chéad painéal ar fáil do na hearnálacha poiblí agus príobháideacha faoi mhí na Bhealtaine 2006.

Is próiseas leanúnach — le scrúdaithe ar bhonn tráth-rialta amach anseo — a bheidh i gceist sa chóras creidiúnaithe seo, a fhéachfaidh le seirbhísí aistriúcháin ghairmiúla d'ardchaighdeán a chinntiú.

National Drugs Strategy.

116. **Mr. Rabbitte** asked the Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs if his attention has been drawn to the recent college lifestyle and attitudinal national survey that showed that drug use among the student population was much higher than in the 2003 national drug prevalence survey; if his attention has further been drawn to the fact that 37% of those surveyed used cannabis and 8% had used ecstasy; the efforts he is making to address growing drug use by young people; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4434/06]

Minister of State at the Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs (Mr. N. Ahern): I am aware of the college lifestyle and attitudinal national, CLAN, survey which was jointly carried out by the health promotion unit of the Department of Health and Children and NUI Galway in the 2002-03 academic year. A total sample of 3,259 students from universities and other third level institutions across Ireland was involved in the wide-ranging survey, where drugs was only one of many areas under focus. The focus and methodology of the survey differed from the 2002-03 drug prevalence survey carried out for the National Advisory Committee on

Drugs and the Drug and Alcohol Information and Research Unit, Northern Ireland. Also, the survey was restricted to third level students and established research suggests that this cohort is more likely to experiment with drug use than are other sections of society. Therefore the results of the two surveys are not directly comparable and would not be expected to throw up the same figures. However, the findings are nonetheless valuable in improving our understanding of drug use among young people in Ireland.

The figures quoted by the Deputy, 37% having used cannabis and 8% having used ecstasy, reflect usage in the past 12 months. It would be expected that these figures would include many who experimented once, or at least very few times, rather than reflecting more problematic long-term or regular use.

For comparison, I gather that the usage in the past 12 months by young adults — 15-34 years — in the drug prevalence survey were 8.6% for cannabis and 2.3% for ecstasy. That survey covered 8,442 people, aged between 15 and 64 on the island of Ireland. As it was the first such survey, it provides the initial baseline data which will facilitate the identification of trends going forward. It is intended that the fieldwork for the next drug prevalence study will be carried out from around September 2006 to April 2007. Preliminary analysis will be done in the months following, with a first report of national prevalence figures and trends expected later in 2007. At that stage we will be much better placed to effectively measure any changes in the use of cannabis in Ireland.

Meanwhile the national drugs strategy contains 108 actions which cover all aspects of drug use, included various age strata and drug types. The national drugs awareness campaign, the second and third phase of which were targeted at young people, has been running over the past three years and all schools now have substance misuse prevention programmes on their curricula.

117. **Mr. Quinn** asked the Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs his views on whether a change to the law regarding the possession of cannabis, or a reclassification of the drug, would be of benefit in regard to tackling drug use here; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4433/06]

Minister of State at the Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs (Mr. N. Ahern): It is my view that a change in the law regarding the possession of cannabis, or a reclassification of the drug would be of no benefit whatsoever in tackling drug use here — in fact I think that it would aggravate the problem.

While cannabis may not be as dangerous as some other drugs, the evidence is that it is damaging to the physical and mental health of the user, particularly the young and those who are heavy

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users. Long-term cannabis use can trigger mental illness such as schizophrenia and depression in some cases. While it is sometimes said that cannabis does not lead to the use of other illegal drugs, this is untrue. It is clear that by using cannabis people can become involved and immersed in the drug culture. Evidence shows that the majority of young people who have used a variety of illegal substances have begun with cannabis.

Taking all this into account, I am satisfied that there is no case for reviewing the current legal position in relation to cannabis.

Turasóireacht sa Ghaeltacht.

118. D'fhiafraigh **Mr. Sargent** den Aire Gnóthaí Pobail, Tuaithe agus Gaeltachta an bhfuil ról ar bith aige i gcur chun cinn na Gaeilge do chuairteoirí a thagann go hÉirinn ag lorg cultúir faoi leith. [4445/06]

Minister of State at the Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs (Mr. N. Ahern): Táim cinnte go n-aontóidh an Teachta liom go bhfuil saibhreas cultúrtha ar leith fréamhaithe i dteanga na Gaeilge, an teanga is ársa san Eoraip ar an dtaobh thuaidh de Shléibhte na nAlp, ó thaobh labhartha agus scríofa de. Tá tábhacht ar leith leis an ilghnéitheacht teangacha don oidhreacht chultúrtha agus do shaibhreas coiteann an chine daonna sa saol atá inniu ann.

Tá fógartha ag mo Roinn le déanaí go bhfuil fo-chiste bunaithe chun tacú le cúrsaí Gaeilge in institiúidí 3ú leibhéal thar lear. Tá líon áirithe de choláistí 3ú leibhéal thar lear gníomhach cheana féin le cláracha don Ghaeilge agus do na Staidéir Cheilteacha laistigh dá bhforais féin agus tá spéis léirithe acu i bhforbairt na gcláracha sin. Cothaíonn cláracha dá leithéid dea-thoil d'Éirinn sna tíortha sin thar lear. Go deimhin, tagann cuid mhór de na scoláirí a bhíonn páirteach sna cláracha seo ar chuairt go hÉirinn agus is minic go leanann ceangail caradais agus tuiscint ar thabhartas uathúil cultúrtha ár dtíre as an bpáirtíocht seo. Ag eascairt as an tionscnamh nua atá fógraithe, bheifí ag súil le tuilleadh scoláirí fós ag teacht go hÉirinn amach anseo.

Is fiú a lua chomh maith go dtugtar cúnaimh ó mo Roinnse faoin Scéim Chúrsaí Gaeilge sa Ghaeltacht do Dhaoine Fásta do choistí cáilithe atá ag feidhmiú i gceantair Ghaeltachta agus ag eagrú cúrsaí Gaeilge aitheanta do dhaoine fásta. Is féidir glacadh le daoine a bhfuil cónaí orthu laistigh agus lasmuigh den Ghaeltacht orthu, chomh maith leo siúd nach Éireannaigh iad, mar dhaltáí faoin scéim seo.

Community Development.

119. **Mr. Gogarty** asked the Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs when consultations will commence between his Depart-

ment, local agencies and county development boards in relation to the application for volunteering funding submitted under the Cohesion Fund. [4347/06]

Minister of State at the Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs (Mr. N. Ahern): Funding of €1.46 million to promote volunteering has been allocated to 24 county-city development boards and to Údarás na Gaeltachta. The following table provides the details. In the case of areas where no allocation has yet been made my Department is in discussions with the relevant authorities with a view to allocating funds subject to their meeting the criteria involved.

Volunteering	
Organisation Name	Allocation €
	€
Carlow County Council	0
Cavan County Council	50,000
Clare County Council	80,000
Cork City Council	92,000
Cork County Council	100,000
Donegal County Council	96,000
Dublin City Council	0
Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council	36,900
Fingal County Council	41,000
Galway City Council	50,000
Galway County Council	100,000
Kerry County Council	0
Kildare County Council	50,000
Kilkenny County Council	51,000
Laois County Council	0
Leitrim County Council	0
Limerick City Council	75,000
Limerick County Development Board	50,000
Longford County Council	0
Louth County Council	36,500
Mayo County Council	60,000
Meath County Council	0
Monaghan County Council	22,000
North Tipperary County Council	0
Offaly County Council	29,000
Roscommon County Council	0
Sligo County Council	50,000
South Dublin County Council	50,000
South Tipperary County Council	0
Waterford City Council	75,000
Waterford County Council	50,000
Wexford County Council	50,000
Wicklow County Council	50,000
Westmeath County Council	50,000
Údarás na Gaeltachta	69,000
Total	1,463,400

National Drugs Strategy.

120. **Mr. G. Murphy** asked the Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs if the working group examining rehabilitation initiatives as a fifth pillar of the national drugs strategy has completed its work; if it has reported to the interdepartmental group on drugs and the Cabinet Committee on Social Inclusion; the recommendations arising from this process; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4380/06]

137. **Ms McManus** asked the Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs if the working group to develop a policy for the provision of integrated rehabilitation services under the aegis of the national drugs strategy has completed its report; the date the report will be published; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4429/06]

Minister of State at the Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs (Mr. N. Ahern): I propose to take Questions Nos. 120 and 137 together.

The working group on rehabilitation was established in September 2005 and includes representatives from a range of Departments and agencies involved in delivering rehabilitation services, as well as representatives from the national drugs strategy team, NDST, the National Advisory Committee on Drugs, NACD, and the community and voluntary sectors. The terms of reference of the group include examining the current provision of rehabilitation services in Ireland and recommending actions to develop an integrated rehabilitation service for the future.

The working group has held a number of meetings, as well as consultations with interested parties. It is envisaged that its recommendations will be finalised by mid-year and that they will report to the interdepartmental group on drugs and to the Cabinet Committee on Social Inclusion at that stage.

121. **Mr. Naughten** asked the Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs if he is satisfied regarding the failure of the regional drugs task forces to enact measures to date in 2006 to tackle drug abuse in their respective regions; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4372/06]

Minister of State at the Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs (Mr. N. Ahern): Ten regional drugs task forces, RDTFs, have been established covering all parts of the country that are not already serviced by one of the 14 local drugs task forces. The RDTFs work in a partnership manner, similar to the local drugs task forces, and are made up of nominees from State agencies working in the region, the community and voluntary sectors and elected public representatives.

Following the assessment of regional plans submitted by the RDTFs, approvals were granted in September 2005 and allocations totalling just under €5 million were made to the ten regional drugs task force areas. Work on the implementation of the projects identified in these plans then commenced and a total of €633,200 was spent in 2005. Such a level of drawdown was to be expected as the regional task forces got up and running. A similar situation pertained when the local drugs task forces were established.

I am satisfied with the rate of progress made by the RDTFs to date and it is expected that the full €5 million allocated will be expended this year.

Community Development.

122. **Mr. G. Murphy** asked the Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs the progress in relation to a review of the RAPID programme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4379/06]

Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs (Éamon Ó Cuív): As the Deputy may be aware, Pobal manages the RAPID programme on behalf of my Department and has contracted Fitzpatrick's Associates to complete an evaluation of the programme. This work commenced in January and is expected to be complete by the end of April.

National Drugs Strategy.

123. **Mr. S. Ryan** asked the Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs if he has received a copy of the recent report on cocaine use here by the National Advisory Committee on Drugs; his views on the finding that cocaine use here is almost twice as high as in Northern Ireland; his further views on the report in general; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4435/06]

Minister of State at the Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs (Mr. N. Ahern): My Department requested the National Advisory Committee on Drugs to commission the fourth bulletin of the Drug Use in Ireland and Northern Ireland 2002-2003 Drug Prevalence Survey dealing with cocaine use. I launched the report on 12 January of this year. This is the first time we have had such detailed baseline information available at a population level on issues such as regular use of cocaine, how and where the drug was obtained and reasons for quitting, together with attitudinal information towards cocaine use.

A total number of 8,434 people aged 15 to 64 were surveyed by MORI MRC on behalf of the National Advisory Committee on Drugs and the Drugs and Alcohol Information and Research Unit, Northern Ireland. Of these, 4,918 were in

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the Republic of Ireland and 3,516 in Northern Ireland. While the report showed that younger people, aged 15 to 34, reported greater levels of cocaine use than older people it should be borne in mind that the proportion of such younger people is higher in the Republic of Ireland.

In regard to the survey findings generally, they provide valuable insights into the social context in which the drug is used. Over three quarters of recent users — used in the last year — obtained their drugs from someone known to them. The findings contributed to the rationale for the targeted two-phased multi-media cocaine awareness campaign. This campaign, managed by the health promotion unit as part of the national drugs strategy, targeted young people aged 18 to 35 years and focused on the dangers and consequences of cocaine use. Furthermore, substance misuse prevention programmes are now on the curricula of all schools.

A new drug prevalence study will be carried out in late 2006-early 2007. Preliminary analysis will be done in the subsequent months leading to a first report of national prevalence figures and trends later in 2007.

Departmental Research.

124. **Ms B. Moynihan-Cronin** asked the Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs the details of the special fund created for the purpose of placenames research; the amount being given to the fund; the type of groups that will be able to access the fund; the aims of the fund; and if he will make a statement on the matter.

[4430/06]

Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs (Éamon Ó Cuív): Details regarding the special fund of €300,000 that I am making available for placenames research and its overall purpose were set out in the press release issued by my office on 6 January 2006, a copy of which I am forwarding to the Deputy. The fund is intended to provide bursaries for postgraduate students who select placenames as the basis for their study. As I indicated in the press release, a notice containing further information for potential applicants will be published shortly and I have arranged with my Department that a copy of the notice will also be provided to the Deputy.

Community Development.

125. **Dr. Cowley** asked the Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs his views on whether all areas of County Mayo should be covered under schemes administered by his Department; the steps he will take to include the county as a whole in all schemes; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4398/06]

Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs (Éamon Ó Cuív): The Deputy will be aware that my Department already offers a wide range of schemes and projects to all areas of County Mayo. Details are given in the following appendix, as are my plans to extend eligibility, where appropriate.

Appendix

Programme of Grants for Locally Based Community and Voluntary Organisations

All parts of County Mayo are included under the Programme of Grants for Locally Based Community and Voluntary Organisations. The beneficiaries under this scheme are listed on the Department's website — www.pobail.ie.

Scheme of Community Supports for Older People

All parts of County Mayo are included under the Scheme of Community Supports for Older People. The beneficiaries under this scheme are listed on the Department's website — www.pobail.ie.

Dormant Accounts

Dormant Accounts legislation provides for a scheme to disburse unclaimed moneys for projects and programmes designed to alleviate poverty, disability and social deprivation in all areas of the country, including Mayo.

Cohesion Measures

The Cohesion Process aims to achieve the integration of LEADER and Partnership groups by the end of 2006 so that local and rural development programmes are delivered by the one body in each area. In addition, from 1 January 2007, the local development social inclusion programme (LDSIP) is being extended to all areas of the country. These changes will make it much easier for communities who are tackling disadvantage throughout the country to access a wide range of local and community development supports.

CLÁR

Of the 152 District Electoral Divisions (DEDs) in County Mayo, 104 are included in the CLÁR programme. The methodology used in deciding the areas to be included in the programme was identification of the DEDs which lost the most population from 1926 to 1996 for the original CLÁR areas and 1926-2002 for the revised CLÁR areas. Areas included suffered an average population loss of 50% with an aggregate population now of over 4,000. I am satisfied that no other significant areas fulfil the population criteria for inclusion in CLÁR. Funding for projects in the Mayo DEDs under the various measures in the programme totals over €8 million from 2002 to date in 2006. Commitments entered into for the comparable period, yet to be drawn down, amount to over €3 m. Through the co-

funded measures operating with other Departments, State agencies and local authorities, these areas also benefit from further funding from both public and private sources. I am satisfied that the needs of the people in the CLÁR areas of County Mayo, which currently covers over 46% of the population for the county, are being met through the efficient and effective delivery of the programme and that CLÁR is making a sustained and strong positive contribution to rural communities there.

Gaeltacht areas

A comprehensive linguistic study of the use of Irish in the Gaeltacht is being carried out at present. It is intended that this will be used as a basis for a review of the official Gaeltacht areas. I cannot say at this stage what impact this may or may not have on the Gaeltacht areas in County Mayo.

Islands

All of the Mayo offshore islands are eligible for assistance under Subhead H (Islands) of the Department's vote and Gaeltacht areas of the county are covered under Subhead I (Údarás na Gaeltachta).

Drugs Strategy

Mayo is covered by a Regional Drugs Task Force (whole country covered by either Regional or Local Drugs Task Force).

Rural Social Scheme

This scheme aims to provide an income supplement to small farmers and part-time fishermen who are currently in receipt of long-term social welfare payments while at the same time harnessing their skills for the benefit of rural communities. All of the work undertaken under the Rural Social Scheme (RSS) is beneficial to the local communities. The scheme was introduced on a phased basis initially, and is now being implemented throughout the country on behalf of the Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs by the LEADER Groups and in the Gaeltacht by the LEADER Groups in conjunction with Údarás na Gaeltachta. Provision has been made under the scheme for 2,500 participants.

Rural Social Scheme in Co. Mayo.

The RSS is being implemented throughout the entire county of Mayo by the following implementing bodies:

- IRD Kiltimagh.
- South West Mayo Development Company Ltd.
- Údarás na Gaeltachta.
- Meitheal Forbartha na Gaeltachta Teoranta.
- Comhdháil Oileáin na hÉireann.

- Moy Valley Resources.
- Comhar Iorrais LEADER Teo.

To date these implementing bodies have 442 participants on the RSS who are carrying out work projects in rural communities in all regions of Co. Mayo. There are also 24 supervisors to manage and supervise these work projects in their respective areas.

Dormant Accounts Fund.

126. **Mr. Durkan** asked the Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs the works which will qualify for grant aid through his Department from the dormant accounts fund; the amount of moneys to date in 2006 expended from this source and the projects; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4364/06]

132. **Ms O. Mitchell** asked the Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs when funding announcements for the two remaining categories to be funded under the dormant accounts funds will be announced and allocated; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4374/06]

151. **Ms Burton** asked the Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs the details of the €24 million package of funding for economic and social disadvantage projects that was raised from money from the dormant accounts fund; the projects that are being funded and their location; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4427/06]

Minister of State at the Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs (Mr. N. Ahern): I propose to take Questions Nos. 126, 132 and 151 together.

Disbursements from the dormant accounts fund are designed to assist three broad categories of persons: those who are socially or economically disadvantaged; those who are educationally disadvantaged; and persons with a disability.

The Dormant Accounts (Amendment) Act 2005 provided for significant changes in relation to the disbursement of funds from dormant accounts. Under this new legislation, the Minister is required to consult with appropriate Ministers for the purpose of developing a proposal for submission to Government for approval. This proposal will include the programmes and types of projects in relation to which applications for disbursements will be invited, as well as the criteria to be applied in assessing applications made in response to the invitation.

After consulting with the appropriate Ministers and having obtained the approval of Government, I announced details on 4 January 2006 concerning the allocation of €24 million in 2006 for the purpose of supporting programmes and types of projects tackling social and economic disadvantage. Details of the announcement are avail-

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able on the website of my Department at *www.pobail.ie*. and are set out below in Appendix 1 for the Deputies' information.

The rollout of the measures announced on 4 January has now commenced. In this regard, an invitation to the 45 RAPID area implementation teams, AITs, issued at the end of January requesting them to submit their priority projects for consideration. This measure provides for the ring-fencing of €11.5 million for priority projects identified by the RAPID AITs. In relation to the other measures proposed, it is anticipated that they will be rolled out on a phased basis over the coming months as the specific operational arrangements are finalised.

With regard to the other two categories — educational disadvantage and persons with a disability — the Government has approved the allocation of an amount of €18 million for each category from the dormant accounts fund. The consultation process required under the legislation will be completed shortly. It is anticipated that further announcements will be made shortly in relation to proposals under these headings when work ongoing in both the Departments of Education and Science and Health and Children is completed and subject to specific measures being submitted and approved by Government.

Appendix 1

Press Release

04 January 2006

€24 MILLION DORMANT ACCOUNTS FUNDING TO BE TARGETED AT SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC DISADVANTAGE

Noel Ahern, T.D., Minister of State at the Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs and Éamon Ó Cuív T.D. Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs today announced that the Government has approved the categories under which €24 million from dormant accounts will be spent in 2006 on programmes and projects tackling social and economic disadvantage.

The Dormant Accounts legislation targets three broad categories of persons for support from the Dormant Accounts Fund:

- those affected by economic and social disadvantage;
- those affected by educational disadvantage; and
- persons with a disability.

Today's announcement relates solely to the Social and Economic Category. The programmes and types of projects in this category will aim to ensure that particular priority is given to the areas designated by Government as most

disadvantaged i.e. RAPID, CLÁR and Drugs Task Force areas (see Editor's note).

The funding announced today will focus on:

- RAPID Programme — up to 50% of the overall funding will be ring-fenced to provide additional supports for priority projects in RAPID areas;
- Support for Priority Themes — funding for specific measures supporting youth, older people and other priority themes — including suicide prevention; alcohol misuse; supports for immigrant families; supports for offenders/ex-offenders;
- Support for Jointly Funded Flagship Projects — funding for innovative measures addressing matters of major public concern, which also involve substantial funding from private, philanthropic or community sources.

“I am very pleased that a significant level of spending will go directly towards projects in areas designated by Government as suffering particular disadvantage. I also believe that the money aimed at jointly funded flagship projects will lever significant additional funding from private and other sources.”

Noel Ahern T.D., Minister of State, Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs

Éamon Ó Cuív, T.D., Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs, strongly welcomed the Government decision. He indicated his intention to bring proposals to Government soon in relation to additional Dormant Accounts funding under the Educational Disadvantage Category and the Disability Category.

Editor's Note;

RAPID

RAPID (Revitalising Areas by Planning Investment and Development) is a focused initiative designed to prioritise and target Government expenditure, over a number of Departments, on the most concentrated centres of disadvantage in the country. Strand 1 targets 25 urban centres while Strand II targets 20 provincial towns.

CLÁR

CLÁR (Ceantair Laga Ard-Riachtanais) is a similar type initiative targeting rural areas and the islands. It funds and provides co-funding for measures designed to support physical, community and social infrastructure.

Drug Task Forces

Drug Task Forces (DTFs) operate in the areas experiencing the worse levels of drug misuse, particularly heroin. The role of the DTFs is to prepare local action plans, which include a range of measures to tackle drug misuse in the areas of treatment, rehabilitation, education, prevention and curbing local supply.

Programmes and Types of Projects Recommended by
Social & Economic Disadvantage Committee

Programme Heading	Programme Description	Target Group / Area	Application Process	Additionality Demonstrated
1. <i>Additionality under RAPID Programme.</i> €11.5 million	Funding ring-fenced for the purpose of supporting priority projects within RAPID areas.	Strand 1 and Strand 2 RAPID areas.	RAPID AITs invited to apply	Yes. The ring-fencing of funding for RAPID areas will ensure that funding for priority projects is front-loaded in 2006
2. <i>Specific Priority Measures:</i> €7.5 million <i>Youth Disadvantage Initiatives</i>	Once-off small scale equipment grants for youth groups with a particular focus on disadvantaged and marginal groups.	Young people.	Public invitation to youth groups	Yes. Existing Local Youth Club Grant scheme does not include any element of capital funding for equipment
— Supports for youth groups.	Grants to fund participation in recreational pursuits and personal development activities which are not normally available to disadvantaged children and disadvantaged young people.	Invitation to Partnership companies	Disadvantaged children and disadvantaged young people.	Yes. No specific funding stream to provide such services
— Supports to provide enhanced access to recreational & personal development opportunities for disadvantaged young people.	Grants to fund purchase of essential equipment / hire of halls etc. not funded under Sports Capital Programme.	Young people in disadvantaged areas.	Invitation to specified sports	Yes. Funding under Sports Capital Programme not provided for personal equipment
— Supports for sports which have traditional appeal to youth in disadvantaged areas (e.g. boxing; wrestling; martial arts; weightlifting etc.).	Projects supporting disadvantaged young people to adapt to information technology with a particular focus on early school leavers.	Disadvantaged young people.	Targeted public invitation to groups active in this area	Yes. No specific funding stream for this measure.
— IT initiatives for disadvantaged young people.	Supports for community based care services for older people such as improved access to services including transport and mobility.	Local Community and voluntary groups supporting older people.	Public invitation to groups active in this area	Yes. No specific funding stream for local community and voluntary groups supporting older people
<i>Older People Initiatives</i> Enhanced interventions and supports to assist older people living in their own homes and in the community.				

[Mr. N. Ahern.]

Programme Heading	Programme Description	Target Group / Area	Application Process	Additionality Demonstrated
<p><i>Social Disadvantage Measures:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> — Supports for offenders / ex-offenders. — Supports for vulnerable immigrants. — Suicide prevention. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · supports to strengthen community based suicide prevention; · young men under 35. — Projects tackling alcohol misuse. 	<p>Projects providing addiction counselling for prisoners / ex-prisoners.</p> <p>Projects providing employment supports for prisoners / ex-prisoners.</p> <p>Supports for immigrant families who have been granted refugee status or granted leave to remain in the State.</p> <p>Measures tackling suicide prevention with a particular focus on</p> <p>Supports for community based responses addressing problems associated with alcohol misuse.</p>	<p>Prisoners / ex-prisoners.</p> <p>Prisoners / ex-prisoners.</p> <p>Immigrant families.</p> <p>At risk individuals.</p> <p>At risk individuals.</p>	<p>Targeted public invitation to groups active in this area</p> <p>Targeted public invitation to groups active in this area</p> <p>Public invitation to Partnership companies.</p> <p>Public invitation to community and voluntary groups active in this area.</p> <p>Public invitation to community and voluntary groups active in this area.</p>	<p>Yes. No specific funding stream for such services.</p> <p>Yes. No specific funding stream for such services.</p> <p>Yes. No specific funding stream for such services.</p> <p>Yes. No specific funding stream to provide funding for community groups.</p> <p>Yes. No specific funding stream to provide funding for such services.</p>
<p><i>3. Flagship Projects Jointly Funded:</i></p> <p>€5 million</p> <p>Innovative initiatives addressing issues of social and economic disadvantage.</p>	<p>Innovative initiatives addressing matters of major public concern and/or headline policy interventions for which funding from private/philanthropic or community sources can be levered.</p>	<p>Socially and economically disadvantaged.</p>	<p>Public invitation to groups who have substantial guaranteed funding from private, philanthropic or community sources for innovative projects</p>	<p>Yes. Objective is to encourage innovative projects which can lever significant funding from private, philanthropic or community sources.</p>

Charities Legislation.

127. **Mr. Broughan** asked the Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs if his attention has been drawn to the Law Reform Commission consultation paper on legal structures for charities; his views on the paper; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4441/06]

153. **Mr. Boyle** asked the Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs his views on the Law Reform Commission's proposal to introduce a new legal structure for charities to be called the Charitable Incorporated Organisation. [4340/06]

Minister of State at the Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs (Mr. N. Ahern): I propose to take Questions Nos. 127 and 153 together.

The Law Reform Commission is an independent statutory body. Its Second Programme for Law Reform identified certain branches of the law for examination, including the law of charities. In that context, the Law Reform Commission took the initiative to prepare a Consultation Paper on Legal Structures for Charities, which was published on 16 January 2006, with a deadline for submissions of 31 March 2006.

The Law Reform Commission usually publishes in two stages: first a consultation paper, and then a report. The consultation paper is intended to form the basis for discussion and, accordingly, the recommendations, conclusions and suggestions contained in it are provisional. The commission makes its final recommendations, following further consideration of the issues and consultation, in the report.

National Drugs Strategy.

128. **Mr. Naughten** asked the Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs if a progress report will be provided on the measures to counter the increasing use of cocaine and crack cocaine here; his proposals to meet the needs of users; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4371/06]

131. **Mr. Crowe** asked the Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs if, in view of the nature and scale of cocaine abuse and its epidemic growth across communities here, his views on the fact that more action needs to be taken than the current multi-media awareness campaign; if his attention has been drawn to the pilot schemes to tackle cocaine abuse in Dublin city; his views on diverting more resources to these schemes and expanding them across the State; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4367/06]

Minister of State at the Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs (Mr. N. Ahern): I propose to take Questions Nos. 128 and 131 together.

While anecdotal evidence suggests that there has been an increase in the use of cocaine, I do not believe it has reached epidemic proportions. The 2002-03 national drug prevalence survey provides comprehensive baseline information on cocaine use in this country. It is intended that the fieldwork for the next drug prevalence study will be carried out from around September 2006 to April 2007. Preliminary analysis will be done in the months following, with a first report of national prevalence figures and trends expected later in 2007. At that stage we will be much better placed to measure effectively the level of growth of cocaine use in Ireland.

There is no substitution treatment drug for cocaine and crack cocaine and existing services such as counselling and behavioural therapy are the best treatments available. In this context, the Health Service Executive has recruited additional counsellors and outreach workers in the last number of years.

As I have outlined to this House on a number of occasions, I am confident that through the implementation of the actions in the national drugs strategy, and the projects and initiatives operated through the local and regional drugs task forces, the problem of cocaine and crack cocaine use can be addressed. Each of the drugs task forces has in place an action plan to tackle drug use in their area, based on their own priorities and aided by their ongoing contact with local communities.

I also point out that all schools now have substance misuse prevention programmes. In addition, the national drugs awareness campaign focused specifically on cocaine use in 2004-05. This well received campaign sought to dispel the image that cocaine was a clean and safe drug with few detrimental consequences.

Furthermore, in 2005 I launched the four pilot cocaine treatment projects to examine different methods of treatment for cocaine use, as well as a training initiative focusing on frontline workers. Funding of almost €400,000 was provided by me to support these initiatives. The four projects deal with the following cohorts of cocaine users: intravenous cocaine users; poly-drug users using cocaine; problematic intranasal cocaine users; and problematic female cocaine users. The evaluation of these pilot projects has commenced and it is expected that a preliminary report will be available in the coming months. The main thrust of the evaluation will be to analyse, in a systematic manner, what is being achieved by the projects and to report on the lessons to be learned as a result. It is hoped that the results of this evaluation will aid the formulation of further effective actions aimed at tackling cocaine misuse.

[Mr. N. Ahern.]

While the problems of cocaine and crack cocaine must not be underestimated, I believe progress is being made and I will continue to respond in a flexible and focused way as the situation evolves.

Question No. 129 answered with Question No. 111.

Agency Governance Structures.

130. **Mr. Gormley** asked the Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs his views on the recent report carried out on the governance of agencies by the Institute of Public Administration, which criticises the existence of duplicate function agencies and found that his Department is likely to have agencies of this type. [4345/06]

Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs (Éamon Ó Cuív): The report in question was completed by the Committee for Public Management Research, CPMR, and published by the Institute of Public Administration. The report deals with the general issue of “agencies” or organisations which have been set up, usually through legislation, to carry out public governance functions on behalf of, for example, Departments. Of the 601 agencies identified in the report, 307 are described as “duplicate function agencies”, that is, the same function is carried out by a number of similar agencies in different locations, for example, county councils, county development boards, regional tourism authorities. Other examples include Leader and partnership companies.

I am not sure that it is accurate to say, as the Deputy seems to suggest, that the report criticises the existence of duplicate functions. It is not recommended, for example, that we should have a fewer number of county councils. The report does, however, makes recommendations on how agencies in general should be set up, resourced and monitored, how performance is to be managed and on how the links between agencies and their parent Departments should operate. We support fully the principles underlying these recommendations and our governance and management practices are, at least, equivalent in effect to what the committee is recommending.

In this regard, the Deputy might note that my Department was established in 2002 with the key aim of ensuring a more co-ordinated engagement by the State with communities around the country as they pursue their own development. The Deputy will be aware that a review process to secure the most positive impacts for communities from expenditure through programmes in this area is ongoing and the guiding principles-terms of reference for this review are: improving on the ground services, supports and impacts on local communities from within existing levels of resources; streamlining and rationalising struc-

tures in order to avoid overlaps, duplication and undue administrative overheads; bringing transparency, co-ordination and improved control to the funding and operation of local-community development measures; and strengthening the democratic accountability of agencies and service providers in this area.

Arising from the review, the Government agreed a range of measures designed, *inter alia*, to improve arrangements under which community and local development initiatives are delivered and enable communities to more readily access and make maximum use of the funding available. In line with that decision, local and community development agencies were requested to advance improvements in linkages, cohesion and sharing resources. City and county development boards were given the role of co-ordinating the cohesion process. Cohesion funding of €3,248,600 was allocated during 2004 to support specific measures arising from that process. These were mainly focused on improving current arrangements with regard to resources, staffing and geographic coverage.

Last year, I announced a €7 million cohesion funding package over 2005-2006 aimed at achieving the alignment of Leader and partnership groups, including community partnerships, in order that local and rural development programmes are delivered by one body in each area. Allocations in 2005 amounted to approximately €3.4 million and I expect to announce further allocations shortly.

In addition, following an independent review of Area Development Management Limited, carried out within the framework of the review, the company has been restructured in order to secure improved accountability and strengthen the relationship between the organisation and Government. The company name has also been changed to Pobal, which more appropriately reflects its role in the delivery of programmes on behalf of Government, for the benefit of communities.

Question No. 131 answered with Question No. 128.

Question No. 132 answered with Question No. 126.

Foclóir Béarla-Gaeilge.

133. D’fhiafraigh **Mr. M. Higgins** den Aire Gnóthaí Pobail, Tuaithe agus Gaeltachta cén dul chun cinn atá déanta leis an bhfoclóir Béarla-Gaeilge ag Foras na Gaeilge; agus an ndéanfaidh sé ráiteas ina thaobh. [4413/06]

Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs (Éamon Ó Cuív): Mar a thug me le fios sa fhreagra a thug mé ar Cheist Uimh 56 ar 30 Samhain 2005, tá Céim a hAon den tionscadal seo curtha i gcrích. Tuigim ó Fhoras na Gaeilge go

bhfuil sé i gceist conraitheoir a cheapadh i mbliana do Chéim a Dó den tionscadal, sé sin, tiomsú agus scríobh an Fhoclóra idir an leagan leictreonach agus an leagan clóite de. Meastar gur obair thrí nó ceithre bliana a bheidh i gceist chun Céim a Dó a chríochnú. Ina dhiaidh sin, beidh an dá leagan den Fhoclóir críochnaithe le táirgeadh agus meastar go dtógfaidh an próiseas sin suas le bliain.

Foghlaim na Gaeilge sna Scoileanna.

134. D'fhiafraigh **Mr. Gilmore** den Aire Gnóthaí Pobail, Tuaithe agus Gaeltachta an bhfuil sé ar intinn aige moladh a chur faoi bhráid na Roinne Oideachais go ndeanfaí dhá ábhar den Ghaeilge san Ardeistiméireacht; agus an ndéanfaidh sé ráiteas ina thaobh. [4412/06]

Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs (Éamon Ó Cuív): Mar a dúirt mé ag díospóireacht phoiblí in Ollscoil na hÉireann, Gaillimh, le déanaí, bheinnse lán-sásta go ndéanfaí dhá ábhar den Ghaeilge san Ardeistiméireacht agus go n-ardófaí an moladh seo san idirphlé leanúnach a bhíonn ar siúl idir mo Roinne agus an Roinn Oideachais agus Eolaíochta.

Is éard atá i gceist agam ná go mb'fhéidir gurbh fhiú go mbeadh an córas in ann freastal ar dhaltáí ar leibhéil dhifriúla ó thaobh na Gaeilge de trí dhá chúrsa difriúil a bheith ann, ceann amháin dírithe ar fhoghlaim na teanga mar theanga labhartha agus ceann eile dírithe ar an litríocht. Bheinn den tuairim sa chomhthéacs sin go mba chóir go mbeadh cead ag daltaí an dá ábhar a dhéanamh, más mian leo.

Tuigfidh an Teachta, ar ndóigh, gur ceist í seo go príomha don Aire Oideachais agus Eolaíochta.

Mergers and Amalgamations.

135. **Mr. Penrose** asked the Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs the reason for the amalgamation of groups (details supplied); the benefits from the merger of the two groups; the remit of the new organisation that has been created; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4432/06]

Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs (Éamon Ó Cuív): An outline of the thinking that led to the decision to amalgamate these two bodies and the remit of the amalgamated body is set out in the press release issued by my office at the time, a copy of which I am forwarding to the Deputy.

It does not appear to be open to me, in the context of dealing with a "details supplied" parliamentary question, to add anything further in this reply.

Forbairt na nOileán.

136. D'fhiafraigh **Mr. McGinley** den Aire

Gnóthaí Pobail, Tuaithe agus Gaeltachta cén dul chun cinn atá déanta maidir le haerstráice a thógáil ar oileán Thoraí: agus an ndéanfaidh sé ráiteas ina thaobh. [4402/06]

Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs (Éamon Ó Cuív): Tá Údarás na Gaeltachta i mbun oibre réamh-phleanála i gcomhair aerstráice a thógáil ar Oileán Thoraí le cúpla bliain anuas. Ag eascairt ón obair seo, fuarthas cead pleanála don fhorbairt ó Chomhairle Chontae Dhún na nGall i 2004.

Tá an cuardach chun úinéirí an talaimh a aimsiú críochnaithe anois ag an Údarás. Beidh oifigigh mo Roinne-se i dteagmháil le Comhairle Chontae Dhún na nGall go luath maidir leis na hOrduithe Ceannacháin Éigeantaigh a theastaíonn a chur i bhfeidhm chun an talamh don fhorbairt a cheannach.

Question No. 137 answered with Question No. 120.

Rural Development Strategy.

138. **Mr. Cuffe** asked the Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs the position regarding the approval and implementation dates for an overarching national strategy for rural development. [4342/06]

149. **Mr. Howlin** asked the Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs if an allocation of €500 million was especially earmarked for Ireland at the December 2005 European Council; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4442/06]

162. **Ms Lynch** asked the Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs if officials from his Department and the Department of Agriculture and Food have finished preparing the national strategy for rural development; if the strategy is ready to be agreed and formally adopted; the process in regard to the development of a national programme for rural development once the strategy is adopted; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4428/06]

Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs (Éamon Ó Cuív): I propose to take Questions Nos. 138, 149 and 162 together.

The Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs together with the Department of Agriculture and Food are preparing a joint national strategy for rural development as required by the new EU Council regulation on rural development. This task is being carried out in association with the EU Commission.

In October 2005, advertisements were placed in the national newspapers inviting representative organisations with an interest in rural development in Ireland to indicate if they wished to be consulted on preparation of the national strategy.

[Éamon Ó Cuív.]

In December 2005, a consultation document — draft — Ireland Rural Development National Strategy Plan, NSP, 2007-2013 — issued to the interested representative organisations.

Organisations were asked to make submissions by 27 January 2006. Some 70 submissions have been received to date and are being considered by both Departments. A consultation seminar is planned for early March and the representative organisations will be invited to participate. It is envisaged that the strategy will be formally agreed and adopted early in 2006.

A detailed national programme or programmes will be prepared following completion of the national strategy. This will be agreed with the EU Commission by the middle of 2006, in time to allow commencement in January 2007. An indicative amount of EU funding for rural development programming was agreed at the December 2005 European Council. These allocations will have to be formally agreed at an upcoming meeting of the EU Council of Agriculture Ministers.

Polasaí Gaeilge an Gharda Síochána.

139. D'fhiafraigh **Dr. Upton** den Aire Gnóthaí Pobail, Tuaithe agus Gaeltachta cén moladh a rinne sé le Coimisinéir an Gharda Síochána maidir le hinimirceoirí a bheadh ag iarraidh poist sna Gardaí do dhéanamh dianchúrsa trí mhí chun Gaeilge a fhoghlaim; agus an ndéanfaidh sé ráiteas ina thaobh. [4411/06]

Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs (Éamon Ó Cuív): Mar a fógraíodh roimhe seo, bunaíodh grúpa oibre idir-rannach chun féachaint ar chur chuige oiriúnach a mholadh ó thaobh riachtanais Gaeilge sa chóras oiliúna de chuid an Gharda Síochána de. Bunaíodh an grúpa i gcomhthéacs an athbhreithnithe a rinneadh chun a chinntiú go mbeidh deiseanna earcaíochta ag daoine ó phobail atá nua-bunaithe le blianta beaga anuas in Éirinn.

Tá, dar ndóigh, malartú tuairimí agus moltaí mar chuid lárnach den idirphlé idir-rannach sin agus níl sé i gceist agam aon tagairt phoiblí a dhéanamh ina leith roimh chinneadh a bheith déanta. Déanfaidh Coimisinéir an Gharda Síochána, i gcomhairle leis an Roinn Dlí agus Cirt, Comhionannais agus Athchóirithe Dlí agus le mo Roinnse, mionsonraí na riachtanas oideachais Gaeilge do Ghardaí faoi oiliúint a thabhairt chun críche go luath.

Countryside Access.

140. **Mr. Wall** asked the Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs the position regarding the work of Comhairle na Tuaithe; if policy decisions have been taken arising from the work of An Chomhairle; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4439/06]

Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs (Éamon Ó Cuív): I established Comhairle na Tuaithe in February 2004 to address the three priority issues of: access to the countryside; developing a countryside code; and developing a countryside recreation strategy. Comhairle na Tuaithe comprises representatives of the farming organisations, recreational users of the countryside and State bodies with an interest in the countryside.

To date Comhairle na Tuaithe has identified and reviewed a set of access parameters in the countryside, which it believes will serve as a basis for conflict prevention and integrate a variety of needs and responsibilities. It has also agreed the key features necessary for countryside code development, with a focus on the potential application of the internationally recognised leave no trace initiative. Details of the code are available in a booklet, which I launched in September of last year and are on my Department's website at www.pobail.ie.

Comhairle na Tuaithe is currently working on the development of a National Countryside Recreation Strategy. The first phase in the development of the strategy involved consultation with interested parties. In this regard, it invited submissions from interested individuals and groups. This invitation appeared in the national and provincial newspapers at the end of October and in addition Comhairle na Tuaithe wrote to groups representing recreational interests, State agencies and relevant Departments seeking their views. The closing date for receipt of submissions was 7 December 2005 and 190 submissions were received. The work of drafting the countryside recreation strategy is proceeding and Comhairle na Tuaithe is, at present, examining the submissions received. The strategy when formulated will help inform policy decisions in the wider rural development domain.

Voluntary Sector.

141. **Ms Burton** asked the Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs the support measures for volunteering he intends to introduce in 2006, including measures directed at promoting volunteering in second and third level institutions; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4440/06]

Minister of State at the Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs (Mr. N. Ahern): The Deputy will be aware of the volunteering package, which I announced in March 2005, and my replies to Questions Nos. 18, 34, 36, 53, 305 and 308 in March, April and June of last year relating to that initiative.

This volunteering package is now in place and funding is continuing for the range of initiatives for the three year period from 2005 to 2007, including funding to the various volunteer

bureaux and funding for second and third level volunteering initiatives.

I have only recently approved increased funding to Volunteering Ireland and Tallaght Volunteer Bureau bringing their total annual funding to €135,902 and €119,746, respectively. I have also approved increased funding for the Young Social Innovators bringing their total annual funding to €250,000.

With regard to an allocation from the Local and Community Development Cohesion Fund which I previously announced, I am pleased to say that in excess of €1.4 million was provided by my Department in December 2005 to county development boards for a range of volunteering initiatives across the country. Such initiatives in support of volunteering will continue through 2006 and beyond.

Charities Legislation.

142. **Ms Enright** asked the Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs the reason charities regulation legislation is not part of the current legislative programme; when this legislation will be published; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4377/06]

143. **Mr. Broughan** asked the Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs the progress in regard to preparation of legislation to regulate charities; the date for the publication of the Bill; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4426/06]

Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs (Éamon Ó Cuív): I propose to take Questions Nos. 142 and 143 together.

Preparation of the legislation to regulate the charities sector is progressing. The target date for publication of the Charities Regulation Bill 2006 remains spring-summer of this year, as previously indicated to the House.

Regional Development.

144. **Ms Enright** asked the Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs when the review of the structures of Údarás will be completed and its recommendations implemented; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4378/06]

Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs (Éamon Ó Cuív): As I indicated in my reply to Question No 58 of 30 November 2005, I initiated a public consultation process last year in regard to my Department's review of the powers and functions of Údarás na Gaeltachta. Some 67 submissions were received from various organisations and individuals as a result of this process. My officials are currently working on a comprehensive paper for my consideration and, following on from this paper, I expect to be in a position

to bring proposals regarding legislation to Government later in 2006.

Rail Network.

145. **Mr. Coveney** asked the Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs the action he has taken to ensure that the western rail corridor will be completed within the timeframe of Transport 21, in view of the route's importance to rural development; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4376/06]

Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs (Éamon Ó Cuív): The Deputy will appreciate that the completion of the western rail corridor is primarily a matter for my colleague, the Minister for Transport, Deputy Cullen, as part of the Government's ten-year programme for transport, Transport 21.

Transport 21 commits to developing the western rail corridor in phases. Following the launch of Transport 21, the Minister, Deputy Cullen, asked Iarnród Éireann to give immediate attention to the design and planning stages of the first phase of development from Ennis to Athenry. I understand that the company has already begun this work and will shortly undertake detailed scoping on the requirements for the technical aspects associated with re-opening the line. While Transport 21 anticipates the completion of this section of the line in 2008 and the re-opening of all sections to Claremorris by 2014, Iarnród Éireann has been encouraged to accelerate delivery of the programme wherever possible.

The remaining section of the line from Claremorris to Collooney will require further studies before a decision is made in relation to its re-opening. However, to ensure that no action is taken, in the meantime, along this stretch of line that would compromise its future development as a railway, the alignment will be preserved in its entirety. Iarnród Éireann has invited tenders to undertake the necessary work for fencing and closing-off of the line and I expect it to make proposals in relation to this matter in the near future.

Domestic Violence.

146. **Ms O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs the details of the code of practice on domestic violence that was recently launched by his Department; the aims of this code of practice; the projects this code of practice will benefit; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4431/06]

Minister of State at the Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs (Mr. N. Ahern): The code of practice on domestic violence was developed and adopted by projects funded by my Department under the community development programme. It emerged from the experience of projects in dealing with the issue of

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domestic violence. The code of practice has also been adopted for use by Family Resource Centres funded by the Family Support Agency. The code of practice provides a framework, through practical actions and responses, for projects to help address the issue of domestic violence in their communities.

National Drugs Strategy.

147. **Mr. O'Shea** asked the Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs the extent to which the national drugs strategy team is addressing middle class regular use of cocaine; his views on whether there is a growing national problem in this regard; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4425/06]

Minister of State at the Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs (Mr. N. Ahern): It is very difficult to quantify drug use by socio-economic group. However, the Drug Use in Ireland and Northern Ireland 2002-2003 Drug Prevalence Survey contained some questions pertaining to such groups. The fourth bulletin of the drug prevalence survey, focusing on cocaine, was recently launched. This survey indicates that there is no association between socio-economic group and cocaine use on a lifetime, last year or last month basis. However, respondents from the socio-economic group E, those who are long-term dependent on the State, reported a slightly higher lifetime prevalence, but the divergence was not statistically significant.

At my request, the national drugs strategy team set up a cocaine subgroup to come up with proposals to tackle cocaine misuse across all social classes. This subgroup was made up of people working on the ground, who might be expected to have the greatest degree of current knowledge of the cocaine problem. Arising from their recommendations, I launched four pilot cocaine treatment projects to examine different methods of treatment for cocaine use, as well as a training initiative focusing on frontline workers. Funding of almost €400,000 was provided by me to support these initiatives.

The four projects deal with the following cohorts of cocaine users: intravenous cocaine users; poly-drug users using cocaine; problematic intranasal cocaine users; and problematic female cocaine users. The evaluation of these pilot projects has commenced and it is expected that a preliminary report will be available in the coming months. The main thrust of the evaluation will be to analyse, in a systematic manner, what is being achieved by the projects and to report on the lessons to be learned as a result. It is hoped that the results of this evaluation will aid the formulation of further effective actions aimed at tackling cocaine misuse.

Polasaí Gaeilge an Rialtais.

148. D'fhiafraigh **Mr. Gilmore** den Aire Gnóthaí Pobail, Tuaithe agus Gaeltachta cathain a fhoilseoidh an Rialtas an ráiteas atá geallta aige ar an nGaeilge; agus an ndéanfaidh sé ráiteas ina leith. [4409/06]

Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs (Éamon Ó Cuív): Mar is eol don Teachta, iarradh tuairimí ó chomhaltaí Fhóram na Gaeilge sa bhliain 2005, i gcomhthéacs an ról chomhairleoireachta a tugadh don ghrúpa, maidir le plean straitéiseach 20 bliain a fhorbairt don Ghaeilge agus tosaíochtaí gaolmhara gearr-théarmacha agus tá obair ar na ceisteanna sin idir lámha.

Mar atá mínithe agam don Teach cheana féin mar fhreagra ar Cheisteanna faoin ábhar seo, bhí plé go dtí seo ag an bhFóram, i measc rudaí eile, maidir le cé chomh hionmholta is a bheadh plean straitéiseach 20 bliain don Ghaeilge.

Tá an cheist maidir le ráiteas soiléir ón Rialtas i ndáil le ról agus tábhacht na Gaeilge tar éis teacht chun cinn mar ábhar tosaíochta sa chomhthéacs sin agus tá dul chun cinn suntasach bainte amach le déanaí chun an cheist sin a thabhairt chun cinn. Tá súil agam a bheith in ann tuilleadh a rá faoin ábhar seo go luath.

Question No. 149 answered with Question No. 138.

Rural Social Scheme.

150. **Dr. Cowley** asked the Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs the reason a person (details supplied) in County Mayo could not participate in the rural social scheme as that person is a lone parent; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4397/06]

Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs (Éamon Ó Cuív): I refer to my previous responses to this matter under Questions No. 325 on 4 May 2005 and Question No. 833 on 28 September 2005. I hope to be able to make an announcement on the review of the rural social scheme in the near future.

Question No. 151 answered with Question No. 126.

Irish Language.

152. **Mr. Kenny** asked the Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs if he supports the development of a national strategy for the Irish language; the steps he has taken to progress this issue; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4382/06]

Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs (Éamon Ó Cuív): As the Deputy is aware, the views of the members of Fóram na Gaeilge

on the development of an Irish language plan and related short-term priority issues were sought in 2005 in the context of the advisory capacity assigned to the group, and work on these matters is continuing.

As I have already explained in response to similar questions in the House, the matter of the advisability of a 20-year strategic plan for the Irish language has been amongst the issues which have been considered in general terms by Fóram na Gaeilge in its deliberations thus far.

The need for the development and provision of a clear statement on the part of the Government in regard to the Irish language and its importance as a whole has emerged as a key issue in this context and considerable work has been done of late to progress this matter. I hope to be in a position to elaborate further on this matter in the near future.

Question No. 153 answered with Question No. 127.

National Drugs Strategy.

154. **Mr. Eamon Ryan** asked the Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs if he intends to strengthen the campaign against the use of cocaine following the recent findings of the all Ireland drug prevalence survey, which showed that 3% of people here have used cocaine at some stage of their lives. [4344/06]

Minister of State at the Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs (Mr. N. Ahern): The figure of 3% for the number of people who had ever used cocaine is about average in terms of European figures. The national drugs awareness campaign, run by the health promotion unit of the Department of Health and Children, focused specifically on cocaine in 2004-05. Its well-received campaign sought to dispel the image that cocaine was a clean and safe drug with few detrimental consequences. Also, all schools now have substance misuse prevention programmes on their curricula.

There is no substitution treatment drug for cocaine and existing services such as counselling and behavioural therapy are the best treatments available. Additional counsellors and outreach workers have been recruited by the health services in recent years and they will play an important role in helping those who present for treatment arising from cocaine use. It is also open to local and regional drugs task forces to include projects aimed at tackling cocaine in their plans.

In 2005 I launched four pilot cocaine treatment projects to examine different methods of treatment for cocaine use, as well as a training initiative focusing on frontline workers. Funding of almost €400,000 was provided by me to support these initiatives. The four projects deal with the following cohorts of cocaine users: intravenous cocaine users; poly-drug users using cocaine;

problematic intranasal cocaine users; and problematic female cocaine users. Following the evaluation of the outcomes of these initiatives, I will decide on whether it would be beneficial to expand these projects to other areas. I am confident that a range of measures is in place to tackle the problems that will be posed by cocaine in the coming period.

Rural Social Scheme.

155. **Mr. Eamon Ryan** asked the Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs if the 506 rural social scheme participant places, which remained available here at the end of 2005, have been filled. [4343/06]

Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs (Éamon Ó Cuív): The rural social scheme accepted its first participants in July 2004 and the numbers have been increasing steadily since then. At the end of 2005, there were 1,994 participants on the scheme and this number has since increased to a current total of 2,060. I expect that participant numbers will continue to increase and that all 2,500 places will be availed of in the near future.

Drug Seizures.

156. **Mr. Stagg** asked the Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs if his attention has been drawn to data from the Revenue Commissioners' customs service suggesting that the approximate value of illegal drug seizures here in 2005 was €37 million; if his attention has further been drawn to the fact that there were 1,223 such seizures; his views on these figures; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4438/06]

Minister of State at the Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs (Mr. N. Ahern): I am aware of the provisional figure of €37 million from the Revenue Commissioners' customs service as the value of illegal drug seizures in 2005.

This is a significant increase on the figure of €12.4 million for 2004 and it illustrates the continued success of the customs service in disrupting the flow of illegal drugs into this State. The fact that there were 1,223 such seizures further emphasises the constant nature of this struggle against illicit drugs.

Supply reduction is one of the cornerstones of the national drugs strategy and the Revenue's customs service play a huge role in this respect. The customs service is achieving its targets for seizures as set out under the strategy and its ongoing achievement is also illustrated by the €160 million worth of illegal drugs it prevented from entering the country between 1999 and 2004.

[Mr. N. Ahern.]

The customs service is committed to maintaining this success and will shortly introduce its first mobile X-ray scanner aimed at detecting illegal drugs. I commend the Revenue Commissioners' customs service on its increasing rate of success in disrupting the flow of illicit drugs into the country.

National Drugs Strategy.

157. **Mr. English** asked the Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs his views on the dissatisfaction expressed by representatives of the community and voluntary sector over their involvement with the national drugs strategy; the action he will take to re-engage this sector in the strategy; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4370/06]

Minister of State at the Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs (Mr. N. Ahern): Representatives of the community and voluntary sectors are currently engaged in all areas of the national drugs strategy. As the Deputy is no doubt aware, the community sector representative on the national drugs strategy team, NDST, has recently confirmed his intention to resign from the team. It will be open to the community sector to put forward a replacement representative. Meanwhile, the current community and voluntary sector representatives continue to play a full part in the work of the NDST. There is similar full engagement in the case of the national assessment committee of the young people's facilities and services fund and the inter-departmental group on drugs.

Some dissatisfaction has been expressed by representatives of the community and voluntary sectors over the emerging needs fund of the local drugs task forces. I have already allocated almost €850,000 to 15 projects under this fund and further substantial allocations are envisaged.

All those involved in tackling the problems of drugs misuse share the same aims. I am sure that we will address and overcome any issues that arise from time to time so that we can continue to jointly tackle the misuse of drugs.

Decentralisation Programme.

158. **Mr. Howlin** asked the Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs the position regarding the planned decentralisation of his Department to Knock; if all staff are ready to decentralise; if suitable accommodation has been found; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4444/06]

Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs (Éamon Ó Cuív): My Department is transferring its headquarters to Knock Airport and 13 posts to Na Forbacha. On Na Forbacha,

seven posts are already in place and it is expected that the remaining posts will be filled by the end of 2006.

My Department is scheduled to complete its move to Knock Airport by the end of 2007. It is also planned to relocate up to 70 posts in advance of the main move subject, *inter alia*, to the availability of suitable temporary accommodation in the general area. The Office of Public Works is currently seeking to source suitable accommodation and I hope this advance move can take place from mid-2006.

Currently some 26 members of staff have indicated a willingness to transfer to Knock Airport. Additional staff are transferring into my Department from other Dublin Departments for decentralisation. In addition, a large number of applicants who are currently decentralised wish to transfer to my Department. With all of those staff, and with the adoption of appropriate HR and risk management responses, I believe I will have sufficient applicants to fill all posts, both for the advance move and for the next phase of my Department's decentralisation programme, namely, the relocation to the new permanent headquarters building.

A site has been chosen for a headquarters building and the Office of Public Works has signed a contract for the purchase of that site. A competition was advertised recently for the design and building of the headquarters. It is anticipated that work on site will begin in the final quarter of this year. All necessary work on the building is scheduled to be completed in time for staff to move to Knock Airport by the end of 2007.

To support the decentralisation process, my Department has prepared a comprehensive decentralisation implementation plan, which sets out steps to be taken to ensure a successful relocation. The plan follows the guidelines set down by the Government's decentralisation implementation group. The plan is being implemented in full consultation with managers and staff and in line with industrial relations agreements and good practice.

National Drugs Strategy.

159. **Mr. Crowe** asked the Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs if, in view of his Department's responsibility for co-ordinating the implementation of the national drugs strategy which involves substantial input and participation from other Departments, his views on whether there is a cross-departmental consensus on the operation of this strategy; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4368/06]

Minister of State at the Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs (Mr. N. Ahern): The Mid-Term Review of the National

Drugs Strategy was published in June of 2005. This report was the culmination of a comprehensive review which included extensive consultation with Departments and agencies, the community and voluntary sectors and the public in general.

The review was overseen by a steering group, chaired by my Department, and made up of representatives of the relevant participants in the national drugs strategy. I am pleased that the steering group found that the current aims and objectives of the drugs strategy are fundamentally sound. It was confirmed that there are encouraging signs of progress since 2001, when the strategy was first launched, suggesting that our current approach to tackling the drug problem is proving to be effective. At the same time, however, the review highlights the need to re-focus some priorities and to accelerate the roll-out and implementation of various key actions in the remaining period of the strategy up to 2008.

The actions outlined in the national drugs strategy are being progressed with the significant input of other Departments and agencies — for example, the Health Services Executive, the Departments of Health and Children, Education and Science, and Justice, Equality and Law Reform, the Garda Síochána, the Irish Prison Service, the customs service of the Revenue Commissioners and FÁS. All these bodies are playing important roles in the implementation of the overall strategy and the structures in place facilitate the sorting out of any issues that arise in relation to the details of the implementation.

While inevitably some differences of approach may arise between public bodies from time to time I am happy that there is consensus on the overall implementation of the strategy and I have every confidence that this will continue.

Harbours and Piers.

160. **Mr. Gogarty** asked the Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs if he will report on progress being made on the proposed improvements to pier infrastructure which are to compensate for the cancellation of a cable car project on Inishbiggle, County Mayo. [4348/06]

Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs (Éamon Ó Cuív): Officials of my Department met officials from Mayo County Council recently to discuss the feasibility of extending the slipways at Gob na Dumhaí, Inis Bigil, and at Doran's Point, Ballycroy, and the feasibility of carrying out further improvement works on the mainland and island slipways at Béal an Bhulláin. As a result of these discussions, Mayo County Council has indicated it will be submitting proposals to my Department for funding works at these locations. These proposals will be evaluated in the context of the moneys available to me for

island development and the various demands on that funding.

National Drugs Strategy.

161. **Ms Lynch** asked the Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs when he will commission the new comprehensive drugs prevalence survey in 2006; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4443/06]

Minister of State at the Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs (Mr. N. Ahern): The National Advisory Committee on Drugs, NACD, and the Drug and Alcohol Information and Research Unit, DAIRU — Northern Ireland, commissioned the first drug prevalence survey in 2002-03, with the purpose of establishing the population prevalence of drug use in Ireland and Northern Ireland.

The NACD and DAIRU are currently seeking expressions of interest from potential tenderers for a new population drug prevalence survey. The new survey may again cover Northern Ireland as well as the Republic of Ireland.

It is intended that the fieldwork for the drug prevalence study will be carried out from around September 2006 to April 2007. Preliminary analysis will be done in the months following with a first report of national prevalence figures and trends expected later in 2007.

Question No. 162 answered with Question No. 138.

An Teanga Gaeilge.

163. D'fhiafraigh **Mr. M. Higgins** den Aire Gnóthaí Pobail, Tuaithe agus Gaeltachta cathain a bheidh na 330,000 téarmaí nua Gaeilge atá le cur ar fáil ag Coiste Téarmaíochta Fhoras na Gaeilge ullamh; agus an ndéanfaidh sé ráiteas ina thaobh. [4410/06]

An tAire Gnóthaí Pobail, Tuaithe agus Gaeltachta (Éamon Ó Cuív): Glacaim leis go bhfuil an Teachta ag tagairt don bhunachar náisiúnta téarmaíochta atá á réiteach ag FIONTAR, Ollscoil Chathair Bhaile Átha Cliath, le páirtmhaoiniú ó Fhoras na Gaeilge. Tuigim ón bhForas go gcuirtear an obair sa chás seo faoi bhráid an Choiste Téarmaíochta go míosúil. Tá obair ghlantacháin ar siúl faoi láthair ar an dtéarmaíocht atá ionchurtha go dtí seo agus leanfar ar aghaidh leis an bpróiseas sin go dtí an samhradh. Tá sé i gceist ag FIONTAR réamhleagan den bhunachar a chur amach beo ar an idirlíon i mí Mheán Fómhair na bliana seo. As sin go Márta 2007, tuigim go mbeifear ag plé le ceisteanna nó deacrachtaí a eascróidh as aiseolas ón bpobal.

National Drugs Strategy.

164. **Mr. Durkan** asked the Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs the expenditure by his Department to date in 2006 to assist communities attempting to combat drug abuse; the extent to which he intends to provide and improve such aid in the future; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4365/06]

Minister of State at the Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs (Mr. N. Ahern): A total of €1,599,414.95 was spent by my Department to tackle drug misuse in the current year up to 3 February 2006. An allocation of €34.027 million for 2006 has been made for the drugs initiative and young people's facilities and services fund in the abridged Estimates volume. This represents an increase of 8% on the allocation for 2005. The level of increase in spending in the drugs area over the past number of years illustrates the Government's commitment to tackling the continuing problem of drugs misuse.

165. **Mr. Coveney** asked the Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs if he has received the 2004 annual report from the national drugs strategy team; if not, the reason for same; if he is satisfied regarding this situation; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4375/06]

Minister of State at the Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs (Mr. N. Ahern): My Department has recently received their annual report for 2004 from the national drugs strategy team.

Irish Language.

166. **Mr. Allen** asked the Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs the progress on the review of the use of Irish in Gaeltacht areas; the outcome of this review; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4381/06]

Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs (Éamon Ó Cuív): I assume that the Deputy is referring to the sociolinguistic study of the Gaeltacht, which commenced in April 2004 and is scheduled for completion this coming September. This important study — which is being conducted on behalf of my Department by Acadamh na hOllscolaíochta Gaeilge, National University of Ireland, Galway, in conjunction with the National Institute for Regional and Spatial Analysis, National University of Ireland, Maynooth — is examining Irish language usage in the Gaeltacht as a basis for strengthening the linguistic development of the Gaeltacht as an Irish-speaking area, and a review of the official Gaeltacht boundaries.

As I have already outlined to the House, all of the findings and proposals emerging from the

study will receive careful and considered examination by my Department. Any proposals that may emerge on foot of that examination will be put before Government in due course.

Northern Ireland Issues.

167. **Mr. Rabbitte** asked the Taoiseach if, in view of his commitment in a letter of 2 November 2005 to this Deputy that he would be happy to meet with a person from Northern Ireland whose son was murdered by loyalist paramilitaries, arrangements have been made for the meeting; if not, if he will set a date for the meeting; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4470/06]

The Taoiseach: Following the commitment made in my letter of 3 November 2005, officials from the Department of Foreign Affairs met the person in question on 16 November 2005. Since then, arrangements have been made for officials from my Department to meet that person. That meeting is scheduled to take place shortly. As I stated in my letter of 3 November, I would be happy to meet with the person in question at a future date.

Information Society Commission.

168. **Mr. Quinn** asked the Taoiseach the names of the persons who are members of the Information Society Commission; the date on which the Information Society Commission first met; the date on which it most recently met; the number of reports it has published for his office or any other office; the titles of such reports; the areas in which such reports can be viewed; the date on which the term of the current Information Society Commission will expire; his plans to renew this project; the names of members of the Information Society Commission who have resigned since it was established; the names of persons added to the membership of the Information Society Commission since it was established; the cost of the Information Society Commission for each calendar year since its inception; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4484/06]

Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach (Mr. Kitt): Since 1997, the Government has established two successive Information Society Commissions to act as an independent advisory body to Government on matters relating to the information society. The first Information Society Commission was established by the Government in May 1997, in response to the report of Ireland's information society steering committee, entitled Information Society Ireland: Strategy for Action. It ended in December 2000. The second commission was set up in November 2001 and ended its term of office on 31 December 2004.

The amounts spent in respect of the Information Society Commission are as follows: year 2005 — €333,900; year 2004 — €484,722; year 2003 — €600,456; year 2002 — €514,954; year 2001 — €305,638; year 2000 — €635,726; year 1999 — €661,645; year 1998 — €647,832; and year 1997 — €195,122.

During its term of office, the commission has published a number of influential reports on a range of topics and conducted a number of policy seminars. All reports of the second commission are available at www.isc.ie. The membership of the first Information Society Commission was:

Name	Company
Ms Vivienne Jupp (Chairman),	Andersen Consulting
Ms Selina Bonnie	Communications Consultant
Ms Paula Carey	ICTU
Mr. Donal Connell	3COM
Mr. Sean Corkery	Esat Telecom
Dr. Eamonn G. Hall	Telecom Éireann
Mr. Paul Kavanagh	
Mr. Dermot McCarthy	Department of the Taoiseach
Mr. Eugene Murray	RTE
Mr. Séamus Ó Canainn	Blackrock Education Centre
Ms Barbara Patton	Irish Permanent plc (Note: Ms Patton resigned in 1998)

Reports published by the first Information Society Commission include:

Information Society Ireland Identity Guidelines;

Information Society Ireland — the World is Changing Fast — Show that you're ahead — 1st Report of the Information Society Commission, December 1997;

General Public Survey 1998 — Ireland as an Information Society . . . what the public is saying, November 1998;

Business Survey 1998 — Ireland as an Information Society . . . is the business community ready, December 1998;

Implementing the Information Society in Ireland: An Action Plan, January 1999;

Second Report of the Information Society Commission, April 1999;

Learning Report — Building a Capacity for change, July 1999;

General Public survey 1 — Ireland's Progress as an Information Society, October 1999;

Business Survey 1 — Irish Business in the Information Society, December 1999;

General Public Survey 2 — Early and Late Adopters of Net Technology, February 2000;

IT Access for All Report, March 2000;

General Public Survey 3 — New Technology: Attitudes and Expectations, March 2000;

Business Survey 2 — eWork: an activity, not a place, April 2000;

Business Survey 3 — New Technology in Irish Business: Skills and Training, May 2000;

Business Survey 4 — Internet Access and Usage within Irish Businesses, May 2000;

Benchmarking Ireland in the Information Society Report, May 2000;

How the Business Community is adapting to the Information Society in Ireland, September 2000;

How the General Public is adapting to the Information Society in Ireland, October 2000;

Third Report of the Information Society Commission, December 2000; and

Innovation in Learning in the Information Society: A comparative International Study (CRITE Report), December 2000.

The Membership of the Second Information Society Commission was:

Name	Company
Danny O'Hare (Chairman)	Former President of DCU (Dublin City University)
Claire Cunningham	Director, Aura Internet Services Ltd
Dr. Chris Coughlan	Hewlett Packard
Michael Byrne	CEO, Ennis Information Age Services

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Name	Company
Jerry Shanahan	ICTU/Amicus
Karen Hynes	Manager of E-Business Services, Chambers of Commerce of Ireland
Colm Reilly	PA Consulting
Inez Bailey	Director, National Adult Literacy Agency
Dr. Eamonn Conway	Head of the Department of Theology and Religious Studies, Mary Immaculate College, UL (University of Limerick)
Robert Johnston	JLS Software Solutions
Clodagh O'Donnell	Client Executive, Financial Services Sector, IBM
Dee Cari	Torque Management
Marion O'Neill	Manager, Kilkenny Information Age Town
Dr. Patricia O'Hara	Manager, Policy Division, Western Development Commission
Christopher Took	Web Developer (resigned September 2002)
Charles Stanley-Smith	Chief Technical Officer, Piercom
Brian Lennon	Guidance Counsellor, St. Oliver's College, Drogheda
Donal Toolan	Forum of People with Disabilities
Kathryn Raleigh	Director of the Irish Software Association, IBEC
Joe Horan	County Manager, South Dublin County Council
Peter Ryan	Assistant Secretary, Department of the Taoiseach

Reports published by the Second Information Society Commission include:

Learning in the 21st Century: Towards Personalisation, December 2004;

Ethics & Values in a Digital Age: Conference Proceedings, December 2004;

Learning to Innovate. Reperceiving the global Information Society, January 2005;

Survey Assessments of the Information Society in Ireland, By James Williams, Sylvia Blackwell, Brendan J. Whelan, ESRI, December 2004;

An eHealthy State?, December 2004;

21st Century Infrastructure, November 2004;

Current Perspectives on the Information Society, April 2004;

Ireland's Broadband Future, December 2003;

eGovernment — More than an automation of Government Services, October 2003;

eInclusion: expanding the Information Society in Ireland, October 2003;

Modernising Public Procurement, September 2003;

Delivering a World Class Payments Environment, June 2003;

Building the Knowledge Society, December 2002;

Building Trust through the Legal Framework, December 2002; and

Information Society Commission Business and General Public Survey, April 2003;

As recommended by the ISC in 2005, a review of our e-strategy is taking place. While the shape of that strategy has yet to be fully defined, it is clear that new approaches will be needed to support the transition taking place from the information society to the knowledge society. It is envisaged that the new strategy will require different structures for its implementation, as also envisaged by the ISC.

Vehicle Sales.

169. **Mr. Bruton** asked the Taoiseach the number of new cars and other vehicles sold nationally in Dublin, Meath, Wicklow and Kildare in each year since 1998; and the number of cars and other vehicles registered to owners nationally in Dublin, Meath, Kildare and Wicklow in 1998, 2002 and 2005. [4676/06]

Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach (Mr. Kitt): Data on the number of new cars and other vehicles sold are not available from the CSO. However the CSO does publish data on the number of vehicles licensed in its annual release entitled "Vehicles Licensed for the first time". The details of new private cars and new other vehicles classes, including the classes goods vehicles, motor cycles, tractors, public service vehicles and others, licensed in Dublin, Kildare, Meath, and Wicklow in each year from 1998 to date are set out in the table.

Number of new vehicles licensed for the first time, 1998 to 2005

Vehicle Type	National Total	Dublin	Kildare	Meath	Wicklow
New Vehicles — 1998					
Private Cars	138,538	50,633	5,487	4,368	3,755
Other Classes	33,986	11,046	1,392	1,234	884
Total	172,524	61,679	6,879	5,602	4,639
New Vehicles — 1999					
Private Cars	170,322	60,248	7,267	5,525	4,794
Other Classes	43,278	14,137	1,791	1,655	1,184
Total	213,600	74,385	9,058	7,180	5,978
New Vehicles — 2000					
Private Cars	225,269	77,813	9,876	7,406	6,415
Other Classes	49,721	15,939	2,259	1,839	1,464
Total	274,990	93,752	12,135	9,245	7,879
New Vehicles — 2001					
Private Cars	160,908	61,160	7,106	5,521	4,434
Other Classes	46,533	15,147	2,251	1,902	1,432
Total	207,441	76,307	9,357	7,423	5,866
New Vehicles — 2002					
Private Cars	150,485	55,274	6,519	5,159	3,780
Other Classes	43,258	12,505	2,135	1,792	1,295
Total	193,743	67,779	8,654	6,951	5,075
New Vehicles — 2003					
Private Cars	142,992	51,486	6,273	5,227	3,771
Other Classes	45,117	12,929	2,158	1,999	1,286
Total	188,109	64,415	8,431	7,226	5,057
New Vehicles — 2004					
Private Cars	149,635	51,441	6,839	5,694	3,894
Other Classes	45,872	12,846	2,203	2,058	1,267
Total	195,507	64,287	9,042	7,752	5,161
New Vehicles — 2005					
Private Cars	166,270	56,526	7,451	6,419	4,397
Other Classes	53,014	13,966	2,553	2,514	1,415
Total	219,284	70,492	10,004	8,933	5,812

The Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government provides a breakdown of all mechanically propelled vehicles under current licence in its annual publication, Irish Bulletin of Vehicle and Driver Statistics. The data of vehicles

under current licence for the years 1998 and 2002 for the requested counties are set out in Table 2. Data for 2005 are not yet available from the Department.

Table 2: Number of Vehicles under current licence for 1998 to 2002

Vehicle Type	National Total	Dublin	Kildare	Meath	Wicklow
<i>Vehicles under current licence 1998</i>					
Private Cars	1,196,901	343,775	47,924	40,221	35,670
Other Classes	313,952	62,577	10,584	10,357	8,345
Total	1,510,853	406,352	58,508	50,578	44,015

Vehicle Type	National Total	Dublin	Kildare	Meath	Wicklow
<i>Vehicles under current licence 2002</i>					
Private Cars	1,447,908	400,501	62,405	51,746	43,832
Other Classes	402,138	84,487	15,686	14,611	11,241
Total	1,850,046	484,988	78,091	66,357	55,073

Central Mental Hospital.

170. **Mr. Quinn** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Health and Children if the practice of slopping out is still in place at the Cental Mental Hospital; the timeframe in which she estimates that slopping out will be completely eliminated from that institution; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [4483/06]

Minister of State at the Department of Health and Children (Mr. T. O'Malley): The Deputy's question relates to the management and delivery of health and personal social services, which are the responsibility of the Health Service Executive under the Health Act 2004. Accordingly, my Department has requested the parliamentary affairs division of the executive to arrange to have this matter investigated and to have a reply issued directly to the Deputy.

Child Care Services.

171. **Mr. N. O'Keefe** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Health and Children if the new child care payment of €1,000 per annum will be awarded in respect of a child (details supplied) in County Cork who will reach the age of six in July 2006; and the manner in which this payment will issue. [4523/06]

174. **Mr. Haughey** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Health and Children the arrangements for the payment of the early child care supplement; if the parents of a child who will be six in February 2006 will qualify; if the parents of a child who will six in April 2006 will qualify; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [4693/06]

Minister of State at the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform (Mr. B. Lenihan): I propose to take Question Nos. 171 and 174 together.

As the legislation governing this new payment is currently being finalised as part of the Social Welfare and Pensions Bill 2005, and as the payment will be made by the Department of Social and Family Affairs using information on their database to which my Department currently has no access, I am not in a position to answer questions regarding the specific entitlements of individuals. I will, however, reply to the general questions raised and trust this will clarify the points of concern to the Deputies.

A new early child care supplement of €1,000 per annum is being introduced in respect of all children less than six years of age and will be effective from 1 April 2006. This will be a direct, non-taxable payment of €250 per quarter year, in respect of each eligible child, payable by the office of the Minister of State with responsibility for children. Payments will be processed by the Department of Social and Family Affairs, on an agency basis for the office of the Minister of State with responsibility for children. It will take some time to set the necessary arrangements in place, and it is likely that the first payment may not issue until September 2006.

As the payment is effective from 1 April 2006, a child who will be six in February 2006 will not qualify for the payment. A child whose sixth birthday falls in April 2006 will be eligible for the first quarterly payment only. Similarly, any payment in respect of an eligible child who will be six in July 2006, will only be made in respect of two quarters in 2006.

172. **Mr. Lowry** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Health and Children her plans to make capital and staffing grant aid available for toddler and preschool care under the EOCP programme or under any other programme; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [4583/06]

Minister of State at the Department of Health and Children (Mr. B. Lenihan): Responsibility for the national child care investment programme 2006-2010 has now been assigned to my Department under the general aegis of the office of the Minister of State with responsibility for children. The new national child care investment programme 2006-2010, which succeeds the Equal Opportunities Child care Programme, EOCP, 2000-2006, is a major new five year investment programme which aims to provide a proactive response to the development of quality child care supports and services which are grounded in an understanding of local needs. It will build on the previous EOCP programme and will incorporate a number of key objectives including: the creation of 50,000 additional child care places, of which approximately 20% will be for the three to four age group; and improving the quality of early childhood care and education services including part-time, full day care, school age child care and child minding services.

Arrangements are also being made for the introduction of an improved capital grant scheme to assist child minding services and a new capital

grant scheme to assist parent and toddler groups. Details of the new schemes will be available shortly from the office of the Minister of State with responsibility for children.

Health Service Investigation.

173. **Dr. Upton** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Health and Children her plans to investigate the possibility of a cluster regarding the three cases of vCJD diagnosed in one area; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [4609/06]

Minister of State at the Department of Health and Children (Mr. S. Power): My Department has sought a detailed report on this issue from the Health Service Executive. This report has not yet been received. When it is received, it will be referred to the CJD advisory group for consideration and advice on any policy implications. At this stage in its investigations the HSE is confident that it can see no basis for the suggestion that there may be a cluster of such cases.

Question No.174 answered with Question No. 171.

National Children's Strategy.

175. **Mr. Crowe** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Health and Children if, in view of both the RAPID report, which found systemic inequalities and deprivation affecting children and adults, and also the How are our Kids Report, which states that nine out of ten children experience fear of anti-social behaviour or crime and that more than one in four live in cold damp houses, his Department is co-ordinating the State's response to the considerable problems outlined in these reports. [4566/06]

Minister of State at the Department of Health and Children (Mr. B. Lenihan): It is assumed that the Deputy is referring to the How Are Our Kids research project undertaken by the childhood development initiative and Dartington social research unit which was published in October 2004. This report was one of eight preliminary research documents which culminated in the publication of A Place for Children, a ten year strategy by the childhood development initiative in west Tallaght. The ten year strategy was launched by the Taoiseach in October 2005. At that time, the Government welcomed the goals and aims of the initiative and it is clear that the strategy is the result of an enormous amount of work at community level.

The objective of the strategy is to improve children's health, safety, learning and achieving and to increase their sense of community belonging. The Government has put a number of initiatives in place with the ultimate aim of improving children's lives in areas such as west Tallaght. As a Government designated geographic area of disad-

vantage, namely, a RAPID area, it has been estimated that approximately €27 million was spent in the year 2004-05 by statutory bodies on children's services in the part of it covered by the strategy. I know the project recognises this and it is a substantial sum in the area concerned. Developments through this and other programmes in the areas of education, health and youth justice at national level are mirrored in the approach outlined in the childhood development initiative's ten-year strategy.

A number of meetings between representatives of this and other related projects have already taken place with officials of the relevant Department. In December 2005, the Government announced the bringing together of a number of functions relating to children and their well being in the office of the Minister of State with responsibility for children to bring greater coherence to policy making for children. In that context, the office of the Minister of State with responsibility for children will co-ordinate developments regarding this matter on behalf of the Government.

Mental Health Services.

176. **Ms McManus** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Health and Children if, in view of the great need for services for patients with dementia, the funding she will provide and when (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [4464/06]

Minister of State at the Department of Health and Children (Mr. S. Power): The Deputy's question relates to the management and delivery of health and personal social services, which are the responsibility of the Health Service Executive under the Health Act 2004. Accordingly, the Department has requested the parliamentary affairs division of the executive to arrange to have this matter investigated and to have a reply issued directly to the Deputy.

Housing Aid for the Elderly.

177. **Mr. P. Breen** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Health and Children the status of an application for a person (details supplied) in County Clare under the housing aid for the elderly scheme; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [4465/06]

Minister of State at the Department of Health and Children (Mr. S. Power): The Deputy's question relates to the management and delivery of health and personal social services, which are the responsibility of the Health Service Executive under the Health Act 2004. This includes responsibility for the provision of the housing aid scheme for the elderly, on behalf of the Department of Environment, Heritage and Local Government. Accordingly, the Department has

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requested the parliamentary affairs division of the executive to arrange to have this matter investigated and to have a reply issued directly to the Deputy.

178. **Mr. P. Breen** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Health and Children the status of an application under the housing aid for the elderly for a person (details supplied) in County Clare; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [4466/06]

Minister of State at the Department of Health and Children (Mr. S. Power): The Deputy's question relates to the management and delivery of health and personal social services, which are the responsibility of the Health Service Executive under the Health Act 2004. This includes responsibility for the provision of the housing aid scheme for the elderly, on behalf of the Department of Environment, Heritage and Local Government. Accordingly, the Department has requested the parliamentary affairs division of the executive to arrange to have this matter investigated and to have a reply issued directly to the Deputy.

Organ Donation.

179. **Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Health and Children her plans to introduce an organ donation scheme such as those found in several other European countries in which consent to donate is presumed unless an opt-out form has been signed. [4467/06]

Tánaiste and Minister for Health and Children (Ms Harney): The annual organ donor awareness campaign, which is organised by the Irish Donor Network and administered by the Irish Kidney Association, highlights the necessity for organ donation generally. The campaign, which is supported by my Department, highlights the need for organ donors by promoting the carrying of a organ donor card.

There are two systems that can be used to ascertain an individual's wishes on organ donation: the opt-in system and the opt-out system. The former system, which operates in this country, requires that the specific consent to donation of each person, or their relatives, be obtained before organs or tissues are removed. The opt-out system presumes that all citizens consent to donation unless they have specifically expressed a wish to the contrary.

The practice in this country is that, even when a person has indicated his or her willingness to donate organs by way of carrying an organ donor card, or a driving licence marked accordingly, the consent of the next-of-kin is always sought.

Even where opt-out systems are in operation, the relatives of the deceased are approached as part of the donor screening process to seek a

medical history of any high-risk behaviour. Thus, the relatives will always be aware that a donation is being considered and can register an objection to the donation.

The European Commission is currently considering the question of a directive in respect of organ transplantation, including the issue of consent, and proposes to conduct a thorough scientific evaluation of the situation. It will present a report on its analysis to the Council of the European Union and it is expected that this report will inform decisions regarding the development of a legislative framework in this area.

In the context of increasing the number of donor organs available for transplant, the Health Service Executive has been asked by the Department to undertake a review and analysis of the factors that impact on organ procurement and retrieval rates in hospitals around the country.

Health Services.

180. **Mr. F. McGrath** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Health and Children if the provision of a national unit for stroke victims under 65 will be provided as the current situation leaves a person (details supplied) in a very difficult state; and if this person will be given the maximum support on this matter. [4487/06]

Minister of State at the Department of Health and Children (Mr. T. O'Malley): The Deputy's question relates to the management and delivery of health and personal social services, which are the responsibility of the Health Service Executive under the Health Act 2004. Accordingly, my Department has requested the parliamentary affairs division of the executive to arrange to have this matter investigated and to have a reply issued directly to the Deputy.

Hepatitis C Compensation Tribunal.

181. **Mr. Ardagh** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Health and Children the position regarding compensation to be paid to partners and spouses of hepatitis C victims for loss of consortium. [4488/06]

Tánaiste and Minister for Health and Children (Ms Harney): The Hepatitis C and HIV Compensation Tribunal (Amendment) Act 2002 extended the categories of individuals who may apply to the tribunal for compensation. Persons who are either married to a person with hepatitis C or HIV or are cohabiting for a continuous period of not less than three years may make a claim to the tribunal for loss of consortium including impairment of sexual relations arising from the risk of transmission of HIV or hepatitis C. I am informed that the tribunal has been routinely hearing cases of this nature since the commencement of the Act on 9 October 2002 and has made awards totalling €32 million in respect of approxi-

mately 420 cases. As with other categories of claim, I understand that the tribunal is in position to allocate an early hearing date to claims for loss of consortium once the relevant documentation is in order.

Health Services.

182. **Mr. O'Dowd** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Health and Children the number of contract beds in nursing homes (details supplied) for each year since 2000. [4489/06]

Minister of State at the Department of Health and Children (Mr. S. Power): The Deputy's question relates to the management and delivery of health and personal social services, which are the responsibility of the Health Service Executive under the Health Act 2004. Accordingly, the Department has requested the parliamentary affairs division of the executive to arrange to have this matter investigated and to have a reply issued directly to the Deputy.

Nursing Home Review.

183. **Mr. O'Dowd** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Health and Children the progress to date in 2006 on the analysis of deaths at a nursing home (details supplied) by a person; when the report is expected to be completed; if the report will be debated in the Houses of the Oireachtas; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [4490/06]

Minister of State at the Department of Health and Children (Mr. S. Power): The Health Service Executive appointed a professor of geriatric medicine to independently review the deaths of residents of Leas Cross nursing home. The review commenced on 1 September 2005. The HSE has advised me that a report is being prepared and is at the final stages. A decision will then be taken on whether the report will be debated in the Houses of the Oireachtas.

Hospitals Building Programme.

184. **Mr. O'Connor** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Health and Children her views on concerns being expressed in the Tallaght region regarding the future of the National Children's Hospital at Tallaght Hospital; the position regarding same; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [4491/06]

Tánaiste and Minister for Health and Children (Ms Harney): On 3 February, the Health Service Executive published a report on the delivery of tertiary paediatric services in this country. The HSE commissioned this report at my request.

The report, which was prepared by McKinsey & Company, recommends that best outcomes for children can best be provided by one national tertiary paediatric centre which

would also provide all secondary paediatric services for the greater Dublin area.

Arising from the recommendations, a joint HSE-Department of Health and Children task group is being established to progress matters and to advise on the optimal location for the new facility.

Health Services.

185. **Mr. Ring** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Health and Children the reason a person (details supplied) in County Mayo who has been referred to occupational therapy services in April 2005 has not received an appointment in February 2006 in view of the age of person involved; and when they will receive an appointment. [4511/06]

Minister of State at the Department of Health and Children (Mr. T. O'Malley): The Deputy's question relates to the management and delivery of health and personal social services, which are the responsibility of the Health Service Executive under the Health Act 2004. Accordingly, my Department has requested the parliamentary affairs division of the executive to arrange to have this matter investigated and to have a reply issued directly to the Deputy.

Nursing Home Subventions.

186. **Mr. Ring** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Health and Children the changes made in relation to subvention; and the breakdown of the changes in relation to the people who applied for subvention. [4515/06]

Minister of State at the Department of Health and Children (Mr. S. Power): The nursing home subvention scheme was introduced in 1993 on foot of the Nursing Homes (Subvention) Regulations 1993, which were made under section 7 of the Nursing Homes Act 1990. These regulations laid down the criteria for assessing a person's eligibility for subvention, as well as the maximum amounts of subvention that may be paid to an eligible person.

The Nursing Home (Subvention) Regulations 1993 are administered by the Health Service Executive. There are currently three rates of subvention payable, €114.30, €152.40 and €190.50 for the three levels of dependency which are medium, high and maximum. Included in these payments is an increase of 25% which came into effect in April 2001. These rates remain in effect.

The HSE may pay more than the maximum rate of subvention relative to an individual's level of dependency in a case, for example, where personal funds are exhausted. The application of these provisions in an individual case is a matter for the HSE in the context of meeting increasing demands for subvention subject to the provisions of the Health Act 2004. The average rate of sub-

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vention paid by the HSE generally exceeds the current approved basic rates. Additional funding of €20 million was provided for the administration of the scheme for 2006, bringing the total available budget to €160 million.

Certain thresholds were set in the 1993 regulations in relation to the means and assets of a person applying for a subvention. These thresholds had not been updated since they were set in 1993. Amendment Regulations (the Nursing Homes (Subvention) (Amendment) Regulations, 2005), amended the thresholds contained in the 1993 regulations by increasing the threshold of assets to be disregarded for the purposes of subvention assessment from £6,000, €7,618, to €11,000, increasing the asset threshold above which subvention may be refused from £20,000, €25,394, to €36,000 and increasing the threshold of principal residence value above which subvention may be refused from £75,000, €95,230, to €500,000 or more, where the residence is located in the Dublin area, or €300,000 or more, where the residence is located outside the Dublin area, provided that the applicant's income is greater than €9,000, previously £5,000 or €6,349.

Health Services.

187. **Mr. O'Dowd** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Health and Children if a person (details supplied) in County Louth will have an earlier appointment for a CT scan; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [4537/06]

Tánaiste and Minister for Health and Children (Ms Harney): The Deputy's question relates to the management and delivery of health and personal social services, which are the responsibility of the Health Service Executive under the Health Act 2004. Accordingly, my Department has requested the parliamentary affairs division of the executive to arrange to have this matter investigated and to have a reply issued directly to the Deputy.

188. **Mr. N. O'Keefe** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Health and Children when a person (details supplied) in County Cork will be visited by the occupational therapist; if her attention has been drawn to the fact that the referral application form was lodged with the Health Service Executive southern area on 13 September 2005 but to date no visit has taken place; if her attention has further been drawn to the fact that this person has to await the occupational therapist report before applying to their local authority for grant aid to install a walk-in shower. [4538/06]

Minister of State at the Department of Health and Children (Mr. T. O'Malley): The Deputy's question relates to the management and delivery of health and personal social services, which are the responsibility of the Health Service Executive

under the Health Act 2004. Accordingly, my Department has requested the parliamentary affairs division of the executive to arrange to have this matter investigated and to have a reply issued directly to the Deputy.

Organ Donation.

189. **Ms McManus** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Health and Children further to her commitment to introduce legislation on post-mortems and organ removal, which she made on the publication of the Madden report, she will introduce legislation on organ transplant procedures; her views on the need for new and specific legislation in this area; if the reports published in 1987 by the transplant liaison committee still provide a useful starting point in this regard; if the absence of clear statutory rules in relation to issues such as property in a human corpse and the authorisation to remove organs is impeding the flow of donations and the number of transplants that could be performed; her further views on an opt-out, as opposed to an opt-in system in relation to consent to organ donation after death; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [4539/06]

Tánaiste and Minister for Health and Children (Ms Harney): Dr. Deirdre Madden's report on post-mortem practice and procedures, which was published on 18 January 2006, includes recommendations on the need for a legislative framework governing post-mortems. However, the report did not deal specifically with the issue of organ transplantation.

The European Commission is currently considering the question of a directive in respect of organ transplantation, including the issue of consent, and proposes to conduct a thorough scientific evaluation of the situation. It will present a report on its analysis to the Council of the European Union and it is expected that this report will inform decisions regarding the development of a legislative framework in this area.

There are two systems that can be used to ascertain an individual's wishes on organ donation: the opt-in system and the opt-out system. The former system, which operates in this country, requires that the specific consent to donation of each person, or their relatives, be obtained before organs or tissues are removed. The opt-out system presumes that all citizens consent to donation unless they have specifically expressed a wish to the contrary.

The practice in this country is that, even when a person has indicated his or her willingness to donate organs by way of carrying an organ donor card, or a driving licence marked accordingly, the consent of the next-of-kin is always sought.

Even where opt-out systems are in operation, the relatives of the deceased are approached as part of the donor screening process to seek a medical history of any high-risk behaviour. Thus,

the relatives will always be aware that a donation is being considered and can register an objection to the donation.

In the context of increasing the number of donor organs available for transplant, the Health Service Executive has been asked by the Department to undertake a review and analysis of the factors that impact on organ procurement and retrieval rates in hospitals around the country.

The annual organ donor awareness campaign, which is organised by the Irish Donor Network and administered by the Irish Kidney Association, highlights the necessity for organ donation generally. The campaign, which is supported by my Department, highlights the need for organ donors by promoting the carrying of a organ donor card.

Home Care Services.

190. **Mr. Stagg** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Health and Children the range of home care packages available for elderly people; the amounts available in the Health Service Executive south western area; if there is a differentiation in the grants available; if so, the reason therefor; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [4540/06]

Minister of State at the Department of Health and Children (Mr. S. Power): Home care packages deliver a wide range of services and have been piloted successfully in several regions in recent years. They include various disciplines and will vary according to the care needs of the person so that, for example, there might be a greater emphasis in some packages on home care assistants while other packages may require a greater level of therapy and nursing. Approximately 1,100 home care packages are provided to people at present. An additional €55 million has been allocated to this initiative, €35 million of which relates to 2006, so that by the end of 2006 a total of 2,000 additional home care packages will have been provided. There will be a well-funded and viable alternative to long-term residential care in the form of, among other supports, home care packages.

As the Deputy will be aware, home helps are also an essential part of supporting older people at home and thereby delaying or preventing admission to long stay residential care. They also help to keep people out of acute hospitals or help their early discharge from hospitals and can also form part of home care packages. There is a continuing demand for home helps because of the increased number of older people. An additional €33 million full year cost is now being allocated for this programme, €30 million of which will be for 2006. The additional funding of €30 million will provide 1.75 million more home help hours.

The Deputy's question also relates to the management and delivery of health and personal social services, which in any particular HSE region are the responsibility of the Health Service

Executive under the Health Act 2004. Accordingly, the Department has requested the parliamentary affairs division of the executive to arrange to have this matter investigated and to have a reply issued directly to the Deputy.

Health Service Staff.

191. **Mr. McCormack** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Health and Children her plans to lift the restriction which does not allow local health executives to exceed the ceiling on wholetime equivalent appointments, which is stopping local health executives from appointing additional home help assistants, who are required to restore home help hours which have been cut back or to allow for the provision of extra home help hours where necessary; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [4551/06]

192. **Mr. McCormack** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Health and Children if her attention has been drawn to the fact that Health Service Executives cannot employ any extra home help assistants due to the fact that they would breach the ceiling on appointment of whole time equivalent staff; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [4552/06]

193. **Mr. McCormack** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Health and Children the meaning of public sector pay and employment policies which is preventing the Health Service Executives in local areas appointing home help assistants even where these assistants are urgently needed to provide necessary home help services; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [4553/06]

Tánaiste and Minister for Health and Children (Ms Harney): I propose to take Questions Nos. 191 to 193, inclusive, together.

Public sector pay and employment policies do not prevent the Health Service Executive from appointing home helps or staff at any other grade. The policies to which I refer include the social partnership agreements, adherence to approved employment levels and the management of human resources, including staffing mix, in line with service needs and overall policies. It is a matter for the HSE to deliver its service plan priorities in line with such policies and the funding available. As a general principle, employment levels for the health service are adjusted to take account of approved service developments. As I indicated to the Deputy in response to a previous question, the Department of Health and Children has allocated an additional €30 million to the home help service in 2006, which will allow for the development of the service. That funding will provide for an additional 1.75 million home help hours in 2006 and not 1.6 million as I previously advised the Deputy.

Legal Services.

194. **Mr. Kenny** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Health and Children the amount of expenditure incurred by health boards (details supplied) in respect of legal services for 2002, 2003 and 2004; the name and address of each company; and the amount received in respect of the ten former regional health boards. [4557/06]

Tánaiste and Minister for Health and Children (Ms Harney): Section 5 of the Health Act 1970 and section 7 of the Health (Eastern Regional Authority) Act 1999 state that the health boards and the ERHA were corporate bodies prior to the enactment of the Health Act 2004. Therefore, the provision of legal services and the expenditure incurred by the boards and the authority were matters solely for them. The Department of Health and Children had no role to play. Accordingly, the Department has asked the parliamentary affairs division of the Health Service Executive to arrange to have the matter investigated and for a reply to issue directly to the Deputy.

195. **Mr. Kenny** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Health and Children the procurement process which existed for 2002, 2003 and 2004 for awarding contracts to provide legal services to the ten former regional health boards (details supplied). [4558/06]

Tánaiste and Minister for Health and Children (Ms Harney): Section 5 of the Health Act 1970 and section 7 of the Health (Eastern Regional Authority) Act 1999 state that the health boards and the ERHA were corporate bodies prior to the enactment of the Health Act 2004. Accordingly, the Department of Health and Children has asked the parliamentary affairs division of the Health Service Executive to arrange to have the matter investigated and for a reply to issue directly to the Deputy.

196. **Mr. Kenny** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Health and Children the number of legal firms currently providing legal advice to the Health Service Executive; and the Health Service Executive's procurement policy for the awarding of contracts to provide such services. [4559/06]

Tánaiste and Minister for Health and Children (Ms Harney): Section 6 of the Health Act 2004 states that the Health Service Executive is a corporate body. Accordingly, the Department of Health and Children has asked the parliamentary affairs division of the Health Service Executive to arrange to have the matter investigated and for a reply to issue directly to the Deputy.

197. **Mr. Kenny** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Health and Children the amount of expenditure incurred by the Health Service Executive for 2005; the name and address of each company who provided legal services to the

Health Service Executive in 2005; and the amount paid or due to be paid in respect of such services to each company. [4560/06]

Tánaiste and Minister for Health and Children (Ms Harney): Section 6 of the Health Act 2004 states that the Health Service Executive is a corporate body. Accordingly, the Department of Health and Children has asked the parliamentary affairs division of the Health Service Executive to arrange to have the matter investigated and for a reply to issue directly to the Deputy.

Nursing Home Subventions.

198. **Mr. Timmins** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Health and Children the position in relation to repayments to residents of public funded long-stay care homes for a person (details supplied) in County Wicklow; if payment will be made; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [4565/06]

Tánaiste and Minister for Health and Children (Ms Harney): The general rules and policies relating to the national repayment scheme, which have been set out in responses to previous parliamentary questions, can be made available to the Deputy if he requires them. The draft heads of a repayment scheme Bill were submitted to the Government in December and were approved. The draft heads have now been submitted to Office of the Chief Parliamentary Counsel for drafting. I intend to have the Bill published in the current parliamentary session and to have repayments commencing shortly after the Bill is approved and signed into law. As the Health Service Executive is responsible for administering the scheme, inquiries relating to individual cases are referred to its parliamentary affairs division. The Department of Health and Children has asked the HSE to arrange to have the matter investigated and for a reply to issue directly to the Deputy.

Departmental Correspondence.

199. **Mr. Lowry** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Health and Children if her attention has been drawn to a situation (details supplied); her views on correspondence; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [4574/06]

Tánaiste and Minister for Health and Children (Ms Harney): The Deputy's question relates to the management and delivery of health and personal social services, which are the responsibility of the Health Service Executive under the Health Act 2004. Accordingly, the Department of Health and Children has asked the parliamentary affairs division of the HSE to arrange for the matter raised and the correspondence furnished by the Deputy to be investigated and for a reply to issue directly to the Deputy.

Care of the Elderly.

200. **Mr. Lowry** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Health and Children if she has studied the implications of the NESF report on care for older people; if her attention has been drawn to the implications of the report on her Department; her plans to address the issues raised in the report; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [4575/06]

201. **Mr. Lowry** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Health and Children if she has studied the implications of the NESF report on care for older people; if she has advised the Health Service Executive of the implications of the report on the Health Service Executive; if the Health Service Executive have been instructed to address the issues raised in the report; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [4576/06]

Minister of State at the Department of Health and Children (Mr. S. Power): I propose to take Questions Nos. 200 and 201 together.

The NESF report on care for older people was launched on 29 January 2006. The Tánaiste and myself will be studying this report, along with officials in the Department, and will also be discussing it with the HSE in due course.

The Tánaiste and the Minister for Social and Family Affairs, Deputy Brennan, established a working group to identify the policy options for a financially sustainable system of long-term care, including improvements in community care and home care packages. The report of the working group on the future financing of long-term care has been presented to Government and the Government will decide on its publication.

Health Service Executive.

202. **Mr. Lowry** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Health and Children if she has ordered the Health Service Executive nationally to operate as a single service without boundaries; if her attention has been drawn to the fact that the Health Service Executive still operates under the existence of the former health board boundaries; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [4577/06]

Tánaiste and Minister for Health and Children (Ms Harney): The Health Service Executive was established under the Health Act 2004 as a national body to improve, promote and protect the health and welfare of the public. The delivery of services is an operational matter and is the responsibility of the executive. Under the Health Act 2004 the executive must prepare and submit to me its service plan for the coming year and must, amongst other things, indicate the type and volume of health and personal social services to be provided by the executive on a national basis. This national service plan was laid before the Oireachtas in early January.

Child Care Services.

203. **Mr. Carey** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Health and Children the measures she proposes to put in place to ensure that the providers of child care facilities are not permitted to increase their cost on the simple pretext that parents of children under six years of age will be in receipt of €1,000 per annum child care supplement as indicated in correspondence (details supplied). [4587/06]

Minister of State at the Department of Health and Children (Mr. B. Lenihan): Responsibility for the new national child care strategy 2006-2010, including the national child care investment programme 2006-2010 has been assigned to the Office of the Minister for Children under the aegis of my Department.

Under the national child care strategy, a new early child care supplement of €1,000 per annum is being introduced in respect of all children less than six years of age and will be effective from 1 April 2006. This will be a direct, non-taxable payment of €250 per quarter year, in respect of each eligible child, payable by the Office of the Minister for Children.

The new child care investment programme 2006-2010, which is Exchequer funded aims to provide a proactive response to the development of quality child care supports and services which are grounded in an understanding of local needs. It will build on the previous Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme, EOCP, 2000-2006 in supporting child care providers and will incorporate the following key objectives: increasing the supply by 50,000 additional child care places — this is over and above the 26,000 places already in place and the 15,000 due to come on stream under the EOCP; improving the quality of early childhood care and education services including part-time, full day care, school age child care and childminding; supporting families and breaking the cycle of disadvantage; supporting a co-ordinated approach to the delivery of child care which is centred on the needs of the child.

The Government does not have a role in setting the level of fees charged by privately owned child care centres. These fees would normally vary on a number of grounds, including level and quality of services provided, geographic location, the age of the children and the level of supply of child care services. While it is open to providers to review their fees, it is considered that the cost of providing the service and the supply of child care places in the area relative to demand, are the most relevant determinants governing the cost of child care.

The Government is satisfied that its commitment to significantly increasing the supply of child care places through the national child care investment programme, and previously the equal opportunities childcare programme, is the most effective way to assist parents with affordable child care.

Research Funding.

204. **Mr. Carey** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Health and Children her Department's position on EU funding for human embryonic research; and if consideration has been given to funding scientifically promising and ethically non-controversial adult stem cell research as outlined in correspondence (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [4590/06]

Tánaiste and Minister for Health and Children (Ms Harney): My colleague, the Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment, Deputy Martin, has lead responsibility for Ireland for negotiation of the EU seventh research framework programme under which research of this kind arises.

Medical Cards.

205. **Mr. Carey** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Health and Children if provisions in the Health Acts over cover the possibility of a person (details supplied) who has had to receive an emergency medical card in the USA, recovering some of the costs incurred; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [4592/06]

Tánaiste and Minister for Health and Children (Ms Harney): There is no reciprocal health agreement between Ireland and the United States. Persons residing in the US would likewise be required to pay the full economic cost of any treatment received in Ireland. It is normal practice for persons travelling to the US to take out travel insurance to cover themselves in case of emergency. It is unclear from the details provided

if this individual had any insurance cover. My Department has drawn the case to the attention of the Health Service Executive.

Health Service Staff.

206. **Ms McManus** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Health and Children the recommended ratio of social workers to population; the ratio recommended in areas of disadvantage; the number of social workers employed and the population generally by the Health Service Executive; the number employed and the population in areas of disadvantage; the rate of turnover of social workers; and the extent of the use of student social workers in the provision of social work by the Health Service Executive. [4594/06]

Tánaiste and Minister for Health and Children (Ms Harney): The Deputy's question relates to the management and delivery of health and personal social services, which are the responsibility of the Health Service Executive under the Health Act 2004. Accordingly, my Department has requested the parliamentary affairs division of the executive to arrange to have this matter investigated and to have a reply issued directly to the Deputy.

Nonetheless, employment information collected by my Department in relation to social work grades shows that the number of social workers employed in the public health service increased by 897 to 2061 or 77% in wholtime equivalent terms between 31 December 1997 and 30 September 2005. The table below shows a breakdown of these figures by Health Service Executive Area at end September 2005.

Social Workers — all grades

Health Service Executive Area	31/12/1997	30/09/2005	Increase	% increase
<i>Eastern — Shared Services</i>	191.2	302.6	111.4	58
<i>East Coast Area</i>	54.3	144.5	90.2	166
<i>Northern Area</i>	254.6	271.0	16.4	6
<i>South-Western Area</i>	112.0	261.0	149.0	133
Eastern	612.0	979.0	367.0	60
Midland	57.6	96.7	39.1	68
Mid-Western	77.8	156.6	78.8	101
North-Eastern	63.2	132.6	69.4	110
North-Western	60.7	128.8	68.1	112
South-Eastern	86.5	135.1	48.7	56
Southern	120.3	278.5	158.2	132
Western	86	154.2	68.1	79
Total	1,164.0	2,061.4	897.4	77

The Deputy may wish to note, also, that the report of the last survey of social work posts conducted by the National Social Work Qualifications Board on 1 September 2001 gives further information on the distribution of social workers

by work area. Data on the distribution of social work posts by type of service are also given but does not identify disadvantage as a category. Some consideration was given in the report, to the issue of ratios of population per social work

posts and practitioners. It was found that internationally it is difficult to discern a standard or ideal number of social work posts to population because the role of a social worker can be different in different jurisdictions and because the available information is not consistent. The number of posts may vary according to factors such as dependency ratios, models of social services and historical deficits.

Health Services.

207. **Ms McManus** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Health and Children the number of hospital bed places which are provided to treat people suffering from drug addiction; her plans to expand this number; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [4612/06]

Tánaiste and Minister for Health and Children (Ms Harney): The Deputy's question relates to the management and delivery of health and personal social services, which are the responsibility of the Health Service Executive under the Health Act 2004. Accordingly, my Department has requested the parliamentary affairs division of the executive to arrange to have this matter investigated and to have a reply issued directly to the Deputy.

208. **Mr. Gregory** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Health and Children if assistance will be given to a person (details supplied) for rehabilitation, as outlined in the correspondence supplied. [4629/06]

Minister of State at the Department of Health and Children (Mr. T. O'Malley): The Deputy's question relates to the management and delivery of health and personal social services, which are the responsibility of the Health Service Executive under the Health Act 2004. Accordingly, my Department has requested the parliamentary affairs division of the executive to arrange to have this matter investigated and to have a reply issued directly to the Deputy.

209. **Mr. Gregory** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Health and Children her plans for the provision of a national unit for stroke victims under 65 years; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [4630/06]

Minister of State at the Department of Health and Children (Mr. T. O'Malley): The Deputy's question relates to the management and delivery of health and personal social services, which are the responsibility of the Health Service Executive under the Health Act 2004. Accordingly, my Department has requested the parliamentary affairs division of the executive to arrange to have this matter investigated and to have a reply issued directly to the Deputy.

Health Service Allowances.

210. **Mr. P. McGrath** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Health and Children when an application for the domiciliary care allowance for a person (details supplied) in County Westmeath will be processed; the date this application was received; the reason for such a delay in making a decision in this case; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [4638/06]

Minister of State at the Department of Health and Children (Mr. T. O'Malley): The Deputy's question relates to the management and delivery of health and personal social services, which are the responsibility of the Health Service Executive under the Health Act 2004. Accordingly, my Department has requested the parliamentary affairs division of the executive to arrange to have a reply on this issue sent directly to the Deputy.

Health Service Staff.

211. **Mr. P. McGrath** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Health and Children when a senior area medical officer and an area medical officer will be appointed to the Health Service Executive midlands region at Mullingar; the length of time this appointment process has been ongoing; the reason for the delay in making these appointments; the steps that have been put in place to deal with the back log of applications for domiciliary care and so on which are awaiting input from these appointees; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [4639/06]

Tánaiste and Minister for Health and Children (Ms Harney): The Deputy's question relates to the management and delivery of health and personal social services, which are the responsibility of the Health Service Executive under the Health Act 2004. Accordingly, my Department requested the parliamentary affairs division of the executive to arrange to have the matter raised by the Deputy in November investigated and to issue a reply directly to the Deputy.

I have been informed by the Health Service Executive that a reply was issued in November. I have asked the HSE to send a copy of this reply to the Deputy. I have also requested that the HSE reply directly to the Deputy with regard to the additional issues now raised.

Child Care Services.

212. **Ms C. Murphy** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Health and Children the reason, in view of the very high number of children in the care of the Health Service Executive and the number of children with disabilities, little action has been taken to make adequate provision for the representation of those children by provision of a guardian *ad litem* service which could act as the voice of children in court proceedings; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [4725/06]

214. **Ms C. Murphy** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Health and Children when she anticipates the examination, by the national children's office advisory committee, of the Capita report and the various submissions from non-governmental organisations in its regard to conclude in order that action can be taken on the issue of guardian *ad litem* services; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [4749/06]

Minister of State at the Department of Health and Children (Mr. B. Lenihan): I propose to take Questions Nos. 212 and 214 together.

One of the three national goals identified in the national children's strategy, NCS, launched in November 2000 is that "children will have a voice in matters which affect them and their views will be given due weight in accordance with their age and maturity". Various actions to be taken towards the achievement of this national goal are identified in the NCS, including a review of the guardian *ad litem* service. Guardian *ad litem*s, GAL, are appointed in a number of different circumstances both in public and private law proceedings where the court perceives that such appointment would be in the interest of the child and consistent with the requirement of justice.

Within the public law sphere GALs are typically appointed by the courts under section 26 of the Child Care Act 1991 in the case of public law proceedings. This legislative framework means that a GAL can be appointed in public law proceedings in a range of circumstances at the discretion of the court and subject to the proviso that the child is not a party to the proceedings. These circumstances include: care proceedings, section 18; interim care proceedings, section 17; proceedings to vary or discharge a care or supervision order, section 22; applications by someone with parental responsibility for access, section 37; removal from placement, section 43; recovery of children removed from care, section 46; application for directions, section 47; and proceedings under sections 7,8 or 11 or Part III of the Guardianship of Infants Act 1964, under section 3(3), 11(b) or 16(g) of the Judicial Separation and Family Law Reform Act 1989.

The role of the GAL has been extended to some Irish private law proceedings under section 28 of the Guardianship of Infants Act 1964, as inserted by section 11 of the Children Act 1997 although this section of the Act has not yet been commenced. The proceedings covered are custody and access disputes, contested applications by natural fathers for guardianship and applications by relatives and those in *loco parentis* for access to a child. The criteria set out allow a court to appoint a GAL "if satisfied that having regard to the special circumstances of the case it is necessary in the best interests of the child to do so". The criteria are detailed in section 28(2) to include the age and understanding of the child, the findings of any section 47 report, the welfare and wishes of the child and the submissions of the other parties.

Another area in which there has been much involvement of GALs has been in cases brought under judicial review, and a range of cases in the superior courts. These have covered various topics, ranging from the need to secure care for a child through to a dispute over the reduction or ending of specific health or social care services for a child with a disability. In these cases, GALs have advised the court on the wishes and best interests of the child. These cases are covered by the Superior Court Rules which give extensive powers to appoint a guardian *ad litem* for infants.

The appointment of a guardian *ad litem* is a matter for the judge in a particular case in accordance with the legal provisions and or the rules of court. Arrangements for the provision of GAL services have tended to be made on an ad hoc basis. In public law cases under the Child Care Act 1991 guardian *ad litem* services appointed by the court are funded by the HSE formerly the health boards although they have no formal role in the selection of the guardian *ad litem*.

The National Children's Office has been undertaking an overall review of the operation of guardian *ad litem* services across the public and private law spheres. The purpose of this exercise was, *inter alia*, to review the organisation and management of current guardian *ad litem* services and to examine the need for detailed guidelines on the appointment, role, function and powers of a guardian *ad litem* in public and private law proceedings and the ethical and professional standards required of them.

The work was put out to tender and the contract was awarded to Capita-Nuffield Institute consortium in early 2003. The consultants review was received in March 2004 and the Capita report was circulated to the relevant Departments for consideration and observations. Submissions were also sought from non-Government organisations such as the Irish Association of Young People in Care, Barnardos, the Irish Social Services Inspectorate, the National Children's Advisory Council and the Law Society. The report was also posted on the NCO website to facilitate as wide dissemination as possible.

My officials are working to identify the issues that should be prioritised in the short term and to map out the best methods and processes for advancing the work in the longer term. The matter is now being given priority within the new administrative structures of the Office of the Minister for Children.

Health Services.

213. **Mr. Ring** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Health and Children if a person (details supplied) in County Mayo will be reassessed for orthodontic treatment in view of the fact that they have been told by a private dentist that they need this treatment. [4730/06]

Tánaiste and Minister for Health and Children (Ms Harney): The Deputy's question relates to

the management and delivery of health and personal social services, which are the responsibility of the Health Service Executive under the Health Act 2004. Accordingly, my Department has requested the parliamentary affairs division of the executive to arrange to have this matter investigated and to have a reply issued directly to the Deputy.

Question No. 214 answered with Question No. 212.

Mental Health Services.

215. **Mr. F. McGrath** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Health and Children the best advice and support to put a long-term care plan in place for a person with an intellectual disability; and the options on the north side of Dublin. [4757/06]

Minister of State at the Department of Health and Children (Mr. T. O'Malley): As the Deputy may be aware, the management and delivery of health and personal social services, including the putting in place of a long term care plan for a person with an intellectual disability, is a matter for the HSE area in which that person resides.

Health Services.

216. **Mr. F. McGrath** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Health and Children if more speech therapy public services will be invested in on the north side of Dublin; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [4758/06]

Minister of State at the Department of Health and Children (Mr. T. O'Malley): The Deputy's question relates to the management and delivery of health and personal social services, which are the responsibility of the Health Service Executive under the Health Act 2004. Accordingly, my Department has requested the parliamentary affairs division of the Executive to arrange to have a reply on this issue sent directly to the Deputy.

Mental Health Services.

217. **Mr. F. McGrath** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Health and Children the number of new places to be created in 2006 for residential, day-care and respite services for people with intellectual disabilities; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [4759/06]

Minister of State at the Department of Health and Children (Mr. T. O'Malley): As the Deputy is aware an integral part of the national disability strategy is the multi-annual investment programme published in December 2004 by the Government, which contains details of specific commitments in relation to the provision of specific high priority disability services over the period 2006 to 2009. These commitments include

the development of new residential, respite and day places for persons with intellectual disability and autism in each of the years covered by the programme. Additional funding amounting to €59 million is being provided in 2006 to meet costs associated with the various elements of this programme. This funding will be used to put in place 255 new residential places, 85 new respite places and 535 new day places for persons with intellectual disability and those with autism, and also to progress the programme to transfer persons with intellectual disability-autism from psychiatric hospitals and other inappropriate placements.

In addition to the specific high profile disability services which are included in the programme outlined above, further additional funding amounting to €41 million is being provided to enhance the multi-disciplinary support services for people with disabilities in line with the Government's commitment to build capacity within the health services in order to deliver on the various legislative provisions contained in the national disability strategy. Capital funding amounting to €55 million is also being provided in 2006 to support these developments.

EU Funding.

218. **Mr. Morgan** asked the Minister for Finance his position on the possible inclusion of a separate stand-alone article on the protection and improvement of the environment in the Structural Funds regulations, currently under negotiation, along the lines of existing article 14 on equality between men and women and non-discrimination as supported by the European Parliament in its first reading in July and as also supported by several member states in the Council. [4472/06]

Minister for Finance (Mr. Cowen): The Commission has the right to initiate legislation in this area and has not proposed the introduction of such a stand-alone requirement in the structural fund regulations. The Commission's approach in the draft regulations ensures that activities supported by the Structural and Cohesion Funds comply with and reinforce Community legislation. While some member states have supported the introduction of a specific provision on environmental protection, the majority of did not support this approach.

The general approach adopted in my Department's negotiating position has been to support the Commission's approach to simplification of the regulatory framework. This approach has the objective of streamlining the regulations of the Structural and Cohesion Funds, ensuring coherence with other Community policies and easing the administrative burden on managing authorities, implementing bodies and ultimately project promoters. Where there exists a general body of well developed Community legislation, as is the case for gender equality and the environment,

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my Department has supported the general approach proposed by the Commission. This position is consistent with that held by many member states. The objective is to ensure better regulation while ensuring that Community policies are reinforced.

The Structural Funds regulations already reflect a strong commitment to sustainable development and environmental protection which is supported in my Department's negotiating position in the Council working group. The Deputy may wish to note that a strategic environmental assessment is a mandatory requirement of all operational programmes developed for the future round of Structural Funds.

Garda Stations.

219. **Ms McManus** asked the Minister for Finance if he has received the petition signed by hundreds of residents in Ashford, County Wicklow in support of the protection of the Garda station in Ashford; his response to same; his plans for this important local building; and if he will ensure that proper public tendering procedures will be adhered to if he intends to dispose of same. [4607/06]

Minister of State at the Department of Finance (Mr. Parlon): The Commissioners of Public Works have advised me that no decision has been made in relation to the future of the vacated Garda station at Ashford, County Wicklow. Procedures as set down in the State Property Act 1954 will be adhered to if it is decided to dispose of this property.

Revenue Offices.

220. **Mr. Bruton** asked the Minister for Finance if his attention has been drawn to the lengthy delays occurring in Revenue tax offices; and if the Revenue Commissioners have developed proposals to reduce this problem which appears to be recurring on a seasonal basis every year. [4887/06]

236. **Mr. Haughey** asked the Minister for Finance if effective measures will be taken to deal with two hour queues in the Revenue Commissioners' offices in Cathedral Street, Dublin; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4692/06]

Minister for Finance (Mr. Cowen): I propose to take Questions Nos. 220 and 236 together.

I have been advised by the Revenue Commissioners that they are aware of the delays occurring in certain Revenue public offices. While the number of personal callers increases at the start of every tax year due to the number of queries related to budget changes and the issue of new tax credit certificates, more than 2 million of which will issue this month, the volume of callers to tax offices generally is increasing due to the

buoyant economy and the more frequent incidence of multiple employments, such as persons having two or more employments simultaneously and of persons changing employment.

Revenue has already taken initiatives to address the customer service requirements of personal callers. More than 60 temporary staff have been recruited and allocated to caller areas. A limited range of on-line facilities has been provided and these will be significantly expanded in the coming months, allowing PAYE taxpayers to file returns and make rebate claims, and to update their tax credits and reliefs. The availability of these services should reduce the need for taxpayers to visit Revenue offices and go a long way towards lessening the need for direct customer contacts.

A significant number of the customers now visiting Revenue offices do not have English as their first language. This contributes greatly to an increase in the time required to deal with each individual customer. Revenue, along with other Departments and agencies, is examining a range of procedures and information technology channels with a view to developing a co-ordinated response to address the issue. Revenue is acutely aware of the shortcomings in the provision of customer service in caller areas at certain times. However, the position is kept under constant review with the aim of providing solutions which are cost effective but also address customer concerns.

Specifically in relation to the Central Revenue Information Office or CRIO in Cathedral Street, Dublin 1, Revenue has advised me that measures are currently being taken to address the customer service requirements of personal callers to that office. The CRIO was opened in the current accommodation in 1992 and dealt with, on average, 120,000 to 125,000 personal callers per year. However, in recent years numbers have more than doubled and it is currently dealing with in the region of 250,000 personal callers per year. The Revenue Commissioners and the Office of Public Works have identified additional accommodation to deal with the growth in caller numbers. Confirmation of the accommodation schedule is expected in the next few days and it is hoped to have the new accommodation in place by the end of 2006. As a temporary measure, a new reception area was put in place on Monday, 6 February, and additional staff have recently been assigned to the public office.

Tax Code.

221. **Mr. Wall** asked the Minister for Finance if persons (details supplied) in County Kildare are in receipt of all of their allowances; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4454/06]

Minister for Finance (Mr. Cowen): I have been advised by the Revenue Commissioners that a certificate of tax credits and standard rate cut-off

point will issue to each taxpayer shortly, which will include all credits to which each is entitled.

222. **Mr. Wall** asked the Minister for Finance if a person (details supplied) in County Kildare has received all their tax benefits for the tax year 2005; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4455/06]

Minister for Finance (Mr. Cowen): I have been advised by the Revenue Commissioners that a letter issued to the taxpayer on 6 February 2006, requesting a completed tax return for 2005, together with forms P60 2005 for himself and his spouse. On receipt of the completed tax return, together with forms P60, this person's tax affairs for the year 2005 will be finalised and all relevant tax credits included.

National Lottery Funding.

223. **Mr. Wall** asked the Minister for Finance the funding realised by the national lottery fund for each of the past five years; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4456/06]

Minister for Finance (Mr. Cowen): The amount transferred from the national lottery fund account in the Central Bank of Ireland to the Exchequer was €172.684 million in 2001, €216.995 million in 2002, €204 million in 2003, €236.145 million in 2004 and €210.5 million in 2005. This funding was used to assist a wide range of projects in the areas of sport, youth activity, the arts, the Irish language, welfare, health and community initiatives.

Driving Tests.

224. **Mr. Perry** asked the Minister for Finance the reason for his refusal to recruit staff for the Department of Transport which has resulted in the present huge waiting time of 52-53 weeks for a driving test; his plans to implement a bonus scheme similar to the one in 2001; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4501/06]

Minister for Finance (Mr. Cowen): The Deputy's question relates to matters within the remit of the Minister for Transport and neither he nor I share the simplistic view expressed by the Deputy that the current backlog of driving tests is mainly due to the non recruitment of Department of Transport personnel. I have been fully supportive of the measures taken by my colleague, the Minister for Transport, and outlined by him last week in answer to various parliamentary questions on the matter.

Tax Code.

225. **Mr. O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Finance if a person (details supplied) in County Louth who has to move to a bungalow for medical reasons will have the stamp duty waived; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4526/06]

Minister for Finance (Mr. Cowen): Stamp duty is a tax on certain documents, generally legal documents used in transferring property or in creating rights for the parties concerned. While one may be sympathetic in regard to individual cases, the stamp duty code does not provide exemptions based on an individual's particular individual circumstances and introducing such a provision would represent a significant departure from normal stamp duty rules. Also, if an exemption were introduced for the type of situation outlined by the Deputy, other special cases would demand similar treatment, which would lead to a narrowing of the stamp duty base.

I point out that there is no stamp duty on the purchase of new residential property for owner-occupiers where the dwelling is not greater than 125 sq. m. and complies with certain conditions in respect of building standards. If the property is over 125 sq. m., stamp duty is charged on the site value or one quarter of the total value of the property, whichever is the greater. The Deputy will appreciate that stamp duty is a significant contributor to the Exchequer and stamp duty receipts allow for a broader tax base than would otherwise be possible. These receipts form an important element of State revenues, which permits Government spending on services such as health and education.

Tax Yield.

226. **Mr. Kenny** asked the Minister for Finance the yield per year of income tax for each of the income tax rates, 20% and 42% for the years 2002, 2003, 2004 and 2005; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4527/06]

Minister for Finance (Mr. Cowen): I am informed by the Revenue Commissioners that, as the application of the tax rates in a tax computation occurs before tax credits are applied, the credits are not apportioned between the tax charged at the different tax rates. It is not possible, therefore, to quantify reliably the amount of income tax directly attributable to the individual tax rates on a post tax credit basis.

However, I would refer the Deputy to page B.23 of the budget 2006 booklet, which contains a table detailing where all tax reliefs go. He will see that, of the €10.8 billion in relief for the tax year 2002, €5.6 billion or 52% went on personal tax credits and reliefs, €3.4 billion or 31% to help fund pensions and savings and well over €1 billion or 10% on capital allowances for traders, including farmers, to ensure their viability and job creation capacity. The vast bulk of tax relief each year thus goes to ordinary taxpayers at all income levels and to sustain business investment and jobs.

227. **Mr. Kenny** asked the Minister for Finance the annual yield of each rate VAT for the years 2002, 2003, 2004 and 2005; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4528/06]

Minister for Finance (Mr. Cowen): I am informed by the Revenue Commissioners that the

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figures for the annual VAT yield, on a net receipts basis, by rate are only available for the

years 2002 to 2004 inclusive and are estimated in a table.

VAT Rate	%	2002	2003	2004
		€ million	€ million	€ million
Farmers flat	4.3	-116	-108	
	4.4			-104
Reduced	12.5	2,963		
	12.5/13.5 ¹		3,310	
	13.5			3,554
Standard	20/21 ²	5,997		
	21		6,514	7,267
Total		8,844	9,716	10,717

1. The 12.5% rate was increased to 13.5% with effect from 1 Jan 2003.

2. The 20% rate was increased to 21% with effect from 1 March 2002.

The farmer's flat rate addition is shown in the above table as a minus figure because the rate is set to compensate unregistered farmers for the VAT that they incur on their business inputs. While a breakdown by rate of the annual VAT yield for 2005 is unavailable, the overall yield is a provisional €12.125 billion. The increase in VAT receipts reflects the underlying strength of the economy.

Tax Code.

228. **Mr. Kenny** asked the Minister for Finance if, in view of home mortgage interest secured loans, the cost of this relief to the Exchequer for the years 2002 to 2005 inclusive; if there are ceilings applied to the amount of loan and the amount of interest; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4529/06]

Minister for Finance (Mr. Cowen): I am informed by the Revenue Commissioners that the cost to the Exchequer of tax relief allowed for mortgage interest relief under the tax relief at source, TRS, system in each of the years 2002 to 2005 inclusive is:

Tax Year	Cost € million
	€ million
2002	192.8
2003	220.7
2004	231.5
2005	279.0

The position is that section 244 of the Taxes Consolidation Act 1997 places limits on the amount of interest for which mortgage interest relief may be claimed. In the case of first-time buyers in the first seven years of a mortgage, the limits are €4,000 per year for a single person and €8,000 per year for a married couple. For those who are other than first time buyers in the first seven years, the limits are €2,540 per year for a single

person and €5,080 per year in the case of a married couple. Section 244 does not impose any ceiling on the size of mortgages to which the relief applies or on the amount of interest that might be charged on such mortgages.

229. **Mr. Kenny** asked the Minister for Finance if, in view of medical insurance premia, the relief given to taxpayers for years 2002, 2003, 2004 and 2005 inclusive; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4530/06]

Minister for Finance (Mr. Cowen): I am informed by the Revenue Commissioners that the cost to the Exchequer of tax relief allowed for medical insurance premia in the tax relief at source, TRS, system in each of the years 2002 to 2005 inclusive is:

Tax Year	Cost
	€ million
2002	161.7
2003	190.6
2004	218.2
2005	229.6

230. **Mr. Kenny** asked the Minister for Finance if, in view of subscriptions to trade unions in respect of which the tax credit of the standard rate of income tax 20% is available the tax credit for 2006; the relief granted for 2002-2005 inclusive; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4531/06]

Minister for Finance (Mr. Cowen): The Finance Act 2001 introduced income tax relief for trade union subscriptions paid to specified trade unions for 2001 and subsequent years. The relief was introduced in recognition of the role played by the trade union movement in Irish society.

As the Deputy will be aware, I announced in Budget Statement 2006 that the standard rated tax allowance in respect of subscriptions paid by members of trade unions is being increased from €200 to €300 per annum. This is equivalent to a tax credit of €60 per annum and applies regardless of the level of subscription paid. I am informed by the Revenue Commissioners that the most recent year for which complete relevant information is available on relief for trade union subscriptions relates to the income tax year 2002, in respect of which some 229,600 claims for tax relief were allowed at an estimated cost to the Exchequer of approximately €11 million.

231. **Mr. Kenny** asked the Minister for Finance if, in view of service charges for which relief is given for charges paid in the previous year and in respect of which there are other limits, the cost of the relief granted for the income tax years 2002-2005 inclusive; the limits applied to each of these years; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4532/06]

Minister for Finance (Mr. Cowen): I am informed by the Revenue Commissioners that the most recent year for which complete information on tax relief is available in respect of local authority service charges is for the income tax year 2002. In that year an estimated number of 124,900 claimants availed of the tax relief for the service charges at an estimated cost to the Exchequer of €5.2 million.

Relief for service charges is allowed at the standard rate of tax in respect of charges taxpayers have paid in the previous financial year. For the financial years 2002 to 2004, where a fixed annual charge applied, the full amount of the payment qualified for tax relief provided it had been paid on time. Where a variable charge was applied for refuse collection, based on weight or volume, the tax relief was restricted to a maximum expenditure of €195 per annum.

Flood Relief.

232. **Mr. Gregory** asked the Minister for Finance the work proposed for the river wall along the Tolka at East Wall Road, Dublin 3; the time-scale for this work; if consideration will be given to increasing the height of the wall; and when this section of the Tolka from Annesley Bridge to the Railway Bridge will be dredged as a flood alleviation measure. [4561/06]

Minister of State at the Department of Finance (Mr. Parlon): The River Tolka flooding study, completed in November 2003, identified no flood relief measures to be undertaken in the East Wall area. It was acknowledged that some low lying areas were flooded via the drainage system, which would be addressed by Dublin City Council as part of the greater Dublin strategic drainage study.

Some of these issues were addressed in the Dublin coastal flooding protection project, completed in 2005. One of the recommendations contained in this report was that a section of the wall on the right bank looking downstream around Annesley Bridge was in poor condition with extensive vegetation throughout the general structure of the wall.

Following discussions with Dublin City Council, the Office of Public Works, OPW, has mobilised a crew on site this week to undertake the clearing of the vegetation and the repainting of the wall in this area. OPW has also requested the city council to provide a prioritised list of other works, identified in the Dublin coastal flooding protection project, which, when received, will be considered for funding under OPW's budget for flood relief measures. Neither report identified dredging of the channel as an option but the issue of general maintenance of the channel will be considered by both OPW and the city council in future discussions.

Tax Code.

233. **Mr. Carey** asked the Minister for Finance if provisions in the Finance Acts cover the possibility of a person (details supplied) who has had to receive an emergency medical card in the USA, recovering some of the costs incurred; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4591/06]

Minister for Finance (Mr. Cowen): I have been advised by the Revenue Commissioners that, under section 469 of the Taxes Consolidation Act 1997, tax relief is allowable on medical expenses incurred outside the State from a practitioner who is entitled to practice medicine under the laws of the country in which the care was provided.

The Revenue Commissioners will issue a health expenses relief claim form Med 1 to the taxpayer and will request the necessary details in order to carry out a review of her liability for the year ended 31 December 2005. The tax repayable is subject to a maximum of the actual amount of tax deducted in the relevant year.

234. **Cecilia Keaveney** asked the Minister for Finance if there are special incentives to exemptions available for artists to cover the erection of signs on roads to advertise their work; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4611/06]

Minister for Finance (Mr. Cowen): I am informed by the Revenue Commissioners that section 195 of the Taxes Consolidation Act 1997 exempts from income tax certain earnings of writers, composers and artists. Specifically, the exemption applies to the profits from the writing, composition or execution of an artistic work that has been determined by the Revenue Commissioners to be original and creative and as having

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cultural or artistic merit. There are no special incentives available to artists to cover the cost of advertising their work. However, any expenditure incurred by an artist in advertising works not covered by the tax exemption may be allowed as a deduction in the normal way as a business expense in computing any profits for tax purposes arising from such works.

Tax Clearance Certificates.

235. **Mr. Haughey** asked the Minister for Finance if the Revenue Commissioners will regularise the income tax affairs of a person (details supplied) in Dublin 5; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4691/06]

Minister for Finance (Mr. Cowen): I have been advised by the Revenue Commissioners that a certificate of tax credits and standard rate cut-off point will issue to this person's employer shortly. The Revenue Commissioners have been in contact with her employer to advise of her correct tax credits and standard rate band entitlements. Any tax that was over-deducted as a result of her being taxed on the emergency basis will be refunded without delay.

Question No. 236 answered with Question No. 220.

Energy Resources.

237. **Mr. Lowry** asked the Minister for Communications, Marine and Natural Resources if he intends to introduce a grant scheme to support the installation of wood-pellet stoves in family homes; the date by which such a grant be introduced; if such a grant will be available without a means test; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4580/06]

Minister for Communications, Marine and Natural Resources (Mr. N. Dempsey): The multi-annual financial package announced in budget 2006 includes funding for renewable energy schemes totalling €65 million for the period 2006 to 2010. The renewables package includes a grant aid package for the domestic sector, which will provide for individual grants to install renewable energy technologies including wood pellet boilers, solar panels and geothermal heat pumps.

My Department is developing the necessary detailed measures to roll out the new programme which will be announced as soon as possible. The level of funding to be committed to these schemes in 2006 and annual funding projections up to 2010 is being finalised in that context. It is not anticipated that the grants for the domestic sector will be means tested.

Telecommunications Services.

238. **Mr. P. Power** asked the Minister for

Communications, Marine and Natural Resources when the provision of broadband for Doon, County Limerick can be expected; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4447/06]

239. **Mr. P. Power** asked the Minister for Communications, Marine and Natural Resources when the provision of broadband for Casteconnell Village, County Limerick can be expected; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4448/06]

240. **Mr. P. Power** asked the Minister for Communications, Marine and Natural Resources when the provision of broadband for Coolriery, Castleconnell, County Limerick can be expected; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4449/06]

Minister for Communications, Marine and Natural Resources (Mr. N. Dempsey): I propose to take Questions Nos. 238 to 240, inclusive, together.

The provision of telecommunications services, including broadband, is a matter in the first instance for the private sector companies operating in a fully liberalised market, regulated by the independent Commission for Communications Regulation, ComReg.

My Department administers a group broadband scheme which delivers broadband to many underserved small rural areas. It is my intention to hold a third phase of the group broadband scheme and my officials are currently finalising the application procedure and documentation. I expect to be in a position to formally launch the third phase shortly.

Broadcasting Legislation.

241. **Ms Hoctor** asked the Minister for Communications, Marine and Natural Resources his plans in view of the ERC proposal to only make European cup rugby matches available on a premium subscription in 2006-2007 season, and to thereby restrict viewing of these matches, which are of national interest, to subscribers. [4480/06]

Minister for Communications, Marine and Natural Resources (Mr. N. Dempsey): The television without frontiers directive provides that member states of the European Communities may designate certain sporting and cultural events as being of major importance to society and that events so designated should continue to be available on a free television service.

In March 2003 the Broadcasting (Major Events Television Coverage) Act 1999 (Designation of Major Events) Order 2003 specified the events designated as events of major importance to society for which the right of a qualifying broadcaster to provide coverage on free television services should be provided in the public interest.

Section 9 of the Broadcasting (Major Events Television Coverage) (Amendment) Act 2003 requires me to carry out a review of designated events not later than three years after the passing of the 2003 Act, that is to say, not later than April 2006.

I announced my intention to commence this review in December 2005. The purpose of the review is to consider if the list of events designated in 2003 should be amended. As part of the review I initiated a public consultation process. The closing date for submissions was 27 January. A report on the consultation process is now being prepared in my Department.

If, following the review, I should decide to amend the list of designated events, then, in accordance with the provisions of the Broadcasting (Major Events Television Coverage) Act 1999, I will publish my intention to do so and seek the views of interested parties. This would involve a further formal consultation with event organisers and broadcasters. EU approval would also be required before I could lay an order before both Houses of the Oireachtas to give effect to the designation.

Regional Fisheries Boards.

242. **Mr. N. O’Keeffe** asked the Minister for Communications, Marine and Natural Resources the reason for the delay in having salmon fishing licences made available to a fishing retail outlet for sale in view of the commencement of the salmon fishing season. [4545/06]

Minister of State at the Department of Communications, Marine and Natural Resources (Mr. Gallagher): Agents for the issue of ordinary fishing licences are appointed by the regional fisheries boards in accordance with the provisions of Section 70 of the Fisheries (Consolidation) Act 1959. The appointment of agents is a matter for the individual boards and one in which I have no function.

Energy Resources.

243. **Mr. Eamon Ryan** asked the Minister for Communications, Marine and Natural Resources if, following provision for excise relief on biofuels in the Finance Act 2004, it was not until August 2005 that any excise relief on biofuels was granted to a small number of biofuel producers; the reason this administrative task took 17 months; and his views on whether such a delay is acceptable. [4597/06]

244. **Mr. Eamon Ryan** asked the Minister for Communications, Marine and Natural Resources if, in view of his announcement of €20 million excise relief on biofuels for 2006 the date by which this excise relief will be granted to biofuel producers on foot of this announcement. [4598/06]

245. **Mr. Eamon Ryan** asked the Minister for Communications, Marine and Natural Resources when growers will know whether or not they will be entitled to excise relief on their crop due to the fact that liquid biofuel crops have been sown in the spring. [4599/06]

Minister for Communications, Marine and Natural Resources (Mr. N. Dempsey): I propose to take Questions Nos. 243 to 245, inclusive, together.

The Finance Act 1999 was amended in 2004 to provide for the introduction of a pilot scheme for mineral oil tax relief for biofuels to underpin a pilot project designed either to produce biofuel or test the technical viability of biofuel for use as motor fuel. It was then necessary for my Department to devise a scheme and agree it with the Department of Finance. A commencement order, to be signed by the Minister for Finance, was required before the provision in the Finance Act in relation to biofuels could be implemented. The requisite State aid clearance was sought from the European Commission in December 2004 and approval was received in March 2005.

The scheme was publicly advertised as a competitive call for proposals on 20 April 2005 and the closing date for receipt of applications was 13 May 2005. A total of 34 applications were received under the call for proposals by the closing date. The volume of applications received was much higher than had been anticipated. The assessment panel met on several occasions to assess and score the applications. Letters of offer were issued to the eight successful applicants in August 2005 and the pilot scheme will continue until July 2007.

Building on the success of the pilot biofuels scheme, I have agreed with the Minister for Finance a further targeted package of excise relief valued at €205 million, which was announced in the budget. The new excise relief programme, which is also subject to State aid approval, will be rolled out from this year to 2010 and will enable us to reach the initial target of 2% market penetration by biofuels by 2008. I am also providing funding towards the capital cost of developing biofuels processing facilities, which will critically underpin the excise relief package.

Excise duty is payable on motor fuels, and relief under the mineral oil tax relief scheme applies to biofuels for transport purposes. Excise duty does not specifically apply to any crops, but rather to the fuel produced from energy crops or biomass products. The question of grant support for growing energy crops is not within my remit but would be a matter for the Minister for Agriculture and Food.

Coastal Protection.

246. **Ms McManus** asked the Minister for Communications, Marine and Natural Resources the studies carried out by his Department on the

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state of the coastal protection scheme at Bray seafront, County Wicklow; the conclusions which have been made in these studies; when their findings will be transmitted to Bray Town Council; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4601/06]

Minister of State at the Department of Communications, Marine and Natural Resources (Mr. Gallagher): The Bray coastal protection scheme was completed in 2001. In August 2002 this Department awarded a contract for the carrying out of regular surveys of the beach and off-shore areas for the purposes of monitoring the performance of the nourished beach. This contract has now been completed and the last survey was carried out in June 2005. The results of the surveys are currently being collated. Preliminary indications are that the scheme is performing very well and that the flooding that was a regular occurrence on the northern promenade has been eliminated. It is expected that a report on the studies will be finalised later this year. It is intended that a copy of the report will be forwarded to Bray Town Council.

In 2005 this Department allocated an amount of €80,000 for marine protection works at the southern end of Bray promenade. I understand that these works will be finally completed by March 2006.

Harbours and Piers.

247. **Mr. Deenihan** asked the Minister for Communications, Marine and Natural Resources when work will begin on the pier at Cromane, County Kerry; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4604/06]

Minister of State at the Department of Communications, Marine and Natural Resources (Mr. Gallagher): I am pleased to inform the Deputy that, as part of the Department's fishery harbours development programme for 2006, I have approved funding of €200,000 to progress the development at Cromane. This allocation will enable the purchase of lands for provision of the access road to the pier to be advanced. It is expected that this process will be completed in the current year. If so, it is also intended this year to commence preliminary works on access to the site including provision of boundary fencing.

Undocumented Irish Emigrants.

248. **Mr. Ring** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the proposals or approaches he will make to the American President regarding undocumented Irish citizens living in America, if the McCain Kennedy Bill is not successful and if it does not get passed at committee stage; the way in which the issue of the undocumented Irish

people will be addressed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4512/06]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Mr. D. Ahern): The legislative debate on immigration reform in the United States has entered a critical phase with various proposals under consideration, including the bill sponsored by Senators Kennedy and McCain. As the Deputy is aware, their approach is particularly attractive to the undocumented Irish as it offers a path to permanent residency.

The Government attaches the highest priority to the issue of the undocumented Irish. In all our contacts with US political leaders, including when the Taoiseach and I last met President Bush, we emphasise the importance of addressing their situation in a positive and sympathetic way. We welcome the engagement of President Bush on this issue and his support for a humane approach which involves reform as well as enforcement. The Deputy can be assured that we look forward to discussing this issue when we next meet President Bush.

In raising our concerns with key contacts in the US, we appreciate of course that immigration is a highly divisive and sensitive issue. The legislative debate in the US Congress involves differing approaches and strongly held opinions. Some members of the US Congress, for example, are strongly opposed to any proposals which would allow undocumented people the opportunity to regularise their status. It is clear that achieving the necessary compromise remains a formidable challenge.

In all of my meetings with US contacts I have made known the Government's support, and that of the Oireachtas, for the approach favoured by Senators Kennedy and McCain. In the critical period ahead, as various proposals are debated and compromises are put forward, we will continue to make known our strong support for the inclusion in final legislation of the key elements of the McCain Kennedy Bill. Overall, the situation requires, and is receiving, the most careful, active and on-going monitoring and assessment. In addition, as indicated, the Government's views will be conveyed at the highest level over the St. Patrick's Day period in Washington.

Landing Rights.

249. **Mr. F. McGrath** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if the Garda Síochána ever searched US aircraft at Shannon going to and coming from Iraq; and if he will make a statement on the allegations of abuse at the airport. [4753/06]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Mr. D. Ahern): Matters relating to operations carried out by An Garda Síochána should be referred to my colleague, the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform. In respect of questions relating to allegations of abuse at Shannon Airport, I refer the

Deputy to my many previous replies on the issue, most recently that of 2 February 2006.

Nuclear Disarmament Initiative.

250. **Mr. F. McGrath** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the steps he will take in the crisis regarding Iran and nuclear powers in the west; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4754/06]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Mr. D. Ahern): The question of Iran's nuclear programme is kept under constant review and is also the subject of regular discussions with my ministerial colleagues within the European Union. At the last meeting of the General Affairs and External Relations Council in Brussels on 30 January, we expressed grave concern at Iran's decision to resume enrichment related activities. Such unilateral steps are not only contrary to Iran's commitments as set out in several International Atomic Energy Agency, IAEA, resolutions, but can only serve to further erode international confidence.

Iran's actions also effectively ended talks with the EU3 to explore a possible resumption of negotiations, since maintaining the suspension of all enrichment-related and reprocessing activities was the necessary basis for such negotiations. Consequently, the EU3, France, Germany and the United Kingdom, called for the matter to be discussed at an extraordinary meeting of the IAEA board of governors in Vienna last week.

The IAEA board of governors meeting on 2 to 4 February adopted by a large majority a resolution reporting Iran to the Security Council. The resolution requests Iran to undertake a number of confidence building measures, notably the re-establishment of full and sustained suspension of all enrichment-related activities and the implementation of transparency measures, as requested by the IAEA director general. The resolution also requests the director general to report on Iran's implementation of the resolution and previous resolutions to the March board of governors meeting and, immediately thereafter, to convey, together with any resolution from the March board, that report to the Security Council. The broad support for the resolution underscores the fact that this is not a dispute between Iran and nuclear powers in the west but between Iran and the great bulk of the international community.

There is an important window of opportunity between now and March. It is my hope that Iran will not make matters more difficult by taking further unilateral decisions that would impede the work of the IAEA in its ongoing investigations into the Iranian nuclear programme. Iran's full co-operation with the IAEA is not only necessary but clearly long overdue. It is a matter of great concern that after nearly three years of

intensive verification activity, the IAEA is not yet in a position to clarify some important issues relating to Iran's nuclear programme or to conclude that there are no undeclared nuclear materials or activities in Iran. Together with our partners in the EU, we will remain fully engaged at this time.

Sports Capital Programme.

251. **Mr. Wall** asked the Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism the funding allocated to the capital lottery fund by his Department; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4456/06]

252. **Mr. Wall** asked the Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism the number of applications received for capital lottery funding; if the number is an increase on applications for the previous allocation of funding; the number of applicants for 2005 that were refused; the number that were successful; the number that were successful but have not drawn down any funds to date in 2006; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4457/06]

253. **Mr. Wall** asked the Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism the number of successful capital grant applications over the past five years that have not drawn down funding or have not drawn their total allocation of funding; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4458/06]

254. **Mr. Wall** asked the Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism the number of applications for capital lottery funding that have failed in their application for the past five years; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4459/06]

256. **Mr. Wall** asked the Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism the allocation of lottery capital funding on a county basis for each of the past five allocations; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4461/06]

Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism (Mr. O'Donoghue): I propose to take Questions Nos. 251 to 254, inclusive, and 256 together.

A total of €394.8 million has been allocated in 4,923 sports capital grants to sporting and community organisations since 1998. An amount of €67.724 million is provided in subhead C1 of my Department's Vote from which payments of grants allocated under the sports capital programme are made.

A total of 1,362 applications were received under the 2005 sports capital programme, of which 628 were provisionally allocated grants and 734 were unsuccessful. Applications for funding under the 2006 programme were invited through advertisements in the press on November 27 and 28 2005. The closing date for receipt of appli-

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cations was January 20 last. A total of 1,337 applications were submitted before the deadline. I intend to announce provisional grant allocations under the programme as soon as possible after the applications have been assessed by my Department in accordance with the assessment criteria outlined in the terms and conditions of the programme.

Following the making of the provisional grant allocations under the 2005 programme the grantees were informed by my Department of the various detailed requirements to be met in order to

draw down that funding. To date, 581 of the 645 grantees have not drawn down a payment since the 2005 grants were provisionally allocated. Overall, a total of 1,070 of the 3,575 grantees in the last five years, 2001 to 2005, have not drawn down a payment and a further 484 have not fully drawn their grant.

The number of unsuccessful applications to the last five sports capital programmes were 734 in 2005; 567 in 2004; 720 in 2003; 513 in 2002 and 771 in 2001. The sports capital allocations by county for the past five years are contained in the following schedule.

Sports Capital Funding by County 2001-2005

County	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	Total
Carlow	369,494	1,168,159	489,000	440,000	632,000	446,000	3,544,653
Cavan	452,027	591,698	691,200	580,000	1,075,000	785,000	4,174,925
Clare	1,170,699	898,975	1,123,000	1,125,000	1,727,000	1,356,000	7,400,674
Cork	3,850,481	4,769,132	7,257,000	5,747,400	6,524,000	8,172,000	36,320,013
Donegal	5,142,439	3,211,168	5,049,000	1,177,500	1,802,000	1,572,000	17,954,107
Dublin	15,579,305	13,908,710	23,075,900	14,763,733	14,691,000	15,739,419	97,758,067
Galway	1,512,258	3,192,122	3,058,000	3,058,000	3,435,014	5,760,000	20,015,394
Kerry	1,258,310	2,119,193	3,335,200	3,748,000	4,476,000	3,603,000	18,539,703
Kildare	2,541,381	3,853,655	4,870,000	3,366,000	3,357,000	1,550,000	19,538,036
Kilkenny	529,481	763,747	1,116,500	1,042,500	850,000	1,284,000	5,586,228
Laois	437,425	1,197,363	1,189,000	450,000	786,000	771,000	4,830,788
Leitrim	666,612	439,964	821,600	454,800	479,000	660,000	3,521,976
Limerick	956,113	2,705,812	2,776,000	2,785,500	1,925,000	3,092,000	14,240,425
Longford	751,685	648,836	759,400	780,000	745,000	499,000	4,183,921
Louth	559,954	1,339,574	2,545,000	1,372,100	1,644,000	1,347,000	8,807,628
Mayo	982,777	1,625,265	2,284,000	1,574,600	1,594,000	1,422,000	9,482,642
Meath	1,192,284	1,477,975	1,605,000	2,560,000	2,260,000	1,576,000	10,671,259
Monaghan	502,181	615,823	1,233,000	685,000	996,000	744,000	4,776,004
Offaly	688,198	618,997	405,000	1,004,000	1,157,000	1,260,000	5,133,195
Roscommon	714,863	1,206,251	1,301,000	777,600	1,027,000	880,000	5,906,714
Sligo	591,063	1,250,692	1,527,600	963,000	1,453,000	2,020,000	7,805,355
Tipperary	1,042,455	1,802,393	2,478,000	1,657,000	2,398,000	2,177,000	11,554,848
Waterford	1,010,711	3,133,714	3,253,000	2,710,000	2,080,000	1,425,000	13,612,425
Westmeath	651,376	1,319,258	2,569,000	1,307,000	1,083,000	1,305,000	8,234,634
Wexford	1,227,837	915,481	2,206,000	1,221,000	1,887,000	2,267,000	9,724,318
Wicklow	1,115,465	1,405,600	1,813,000	1,003,000	1,700,000	1,527,000	8,564,065
Total	45,496,874	56,179,561	78,830,400	56,352,733	61,783,014	63,239,419	361,882,001

Departmental Agencies.

255. **Mr. Wall** asked the Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism when the report on recent events in Bord na gCon sought by him will be published; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4460/06]

Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism (Mr. O'Donoghue): As the Deputy is aware, on Tuesday, 31 January 2006, I requested Mr. Tim Dalton, former Secretary General of the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform, to

carry out an independent assessment into issues relating to corporate management in Bord na gCon as well as its management of positive tests for banned substances. I have asked Mr. Dalton to report back to me on these specific issues as soon as possible and his report will then be considered in my Department. It would be my wish to publish the report but as the Deputy will appreciate, I must be guided by legal advice on the propriety of doing so.

Question No. 256 answered with Question No. 251.

Sports Funding.

257. **Mr. O'Connor** asked the Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism if his attention has been drawn to local media reports (details supplied) in Tallaght, Dublin 24; the views of the local community that this stadium in Tallaght be completed; if discussions are being held with South Dublin County Council, Shamrock Rovers, the GAA and other interests; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4502/06]

Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism (Mr. O'Donoghue): I share the view of the local community that the project to develop a stadium at Tallaght should be completed quickly and in a cost efficient manner. My Department has already invested €2.44 million in the development of this stadium. In the period since 2002, when work ceased on the project, my Department has worked closely with South Dublin County Council and the FAI to ensure that the common objective of developing a soccer stadium in Tallaght is achieved.

Following the intervention of South Dublin County Council and its efforts to regain ownership of the site, my Department indicated a willingness to support the council in putting together a financial package that would ensure the early completion of the stadium. This support was based on the plan to provide a soccer stadium for Tallaght which would serve as a viable long-term home for Shamrock Rovers Football Club. South Dublin County Council articulated the proposal in a press release issued following its meeting on January 10 2005 where it stated that “other non-soccer sporting organisations must develop their own sporting facilities”.

I am aware that the FAI has made considerable investment in the project to date. I recently met the chief executive of the FAI, who expressed to me the concerns of his organisation regarding the recent decision of South Dublin County Council on the project. I have also discussed the matter with representatives of the Dublin County Board of the GAA.

It is clear that the original objective of all the parties involved was to develop a modern soccer stadium in Tallaght which together with ancillary facilities would also serve the local community. Given the fact that almost none of the submissions made as part of the public consultation process refer to catering for other sports, it is my belief that the local community supports this objective.

Work has already been undertaken on this development and at this stage there would be considerable cost implications if the stadium had to be adjusted to cater for sports other than soccer. The capacity of the stadium would be reduced and the ground sharing option for two Eircom League clubs, as recommended in the recent Genesis report, would not be achieved. This project has had a difficult history and like

those most directly involved over the years, I am anxious that the stadium is completed as a matter of urgency.

I cannot therefore support the recent South Dublin County Council decision to deviate from the previously agreed approach which is likely to lead to further delays and increased costs. My Department is in regular contact and discussions with South Dublin County Council and I remain hopeful that a decision will be made to complete the stadium as originally intended.

National Minimum Wage.

258. **Mr. Morgan** asked the Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment if, in view of the fact that provision of board and lodgings has been connected with many cases of exploitation of migrant workers, the minimum wage legislation will be amended to remove the provision whereby if an employer provides an employee with full board and lodgings, or lodgings only, or full board only, a monetary allowance can be included as reckonable pay for the purpose of compliance with the national minimum wage. [4555/06]

Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Mr. Killeen): The national minimum wage legislation provides for a monetary deduction to be made from the statutory minimum pay of an employee if the employee is provided with board and/or lodgings as follows: for full board and lodgings €54.13 per week or €7.73 per day; for full board only per week €32.14 per week or €4.60 per day; for lodgings only per week €21.85 per week or €3.14 per day. The inclusion of this provision in the national minimum wage legislation was recommended by the inter-departmental group on implementation of a national minimum wage. This approach is consistent with the inclusion of such monetary allowances in certain employment regulation orders, EROs, which set the terms and conditions of employment for workers in sectors such as hotels and catering. It was the view of the inter-departmental group that the monetary value of the allowances for the purpose of the national minimum wage would not be set at market value but rather would be similar to the amount provided for in the EROs. I have no plans to remove these provisions from the minimum wage legislation.

The Payment of Wages Act provides a range of rights for all employees in relation to the payment of wages, including protection against unlawful deductions from pay. The Act provides a right of complaint to a rights commissioner for any employee who has had an unlawful deduction made from wages.

The Deputy should also be aware that the labour inspectorate is empowered to investigate complaints concerning breaches of the National Minimum Wage Act 2000 and I urge anyone who

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has specific evidence of the mistreatment of workers to furnish all the relevant details and any related materials to the inspectorate with a view to pursuing the matter.

EU Directives.

259. **Mr. Lowry** asked the Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment if all aspects of the European employment directive have been transposed into Irish law; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4572/06]

Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Mr. Killeen): I presume the Deputy is referring to Directive 96/71/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 16 December 1996 concerning the posting of workers in the framework of the provision of services.

I am satisfied that all of the mandatory provisions of this directive have been transposed fully into Irish law by section 20 of the Protection of Employees (Part-Time Work) Act 2001 which provides that all employee protection legislation on the statute book in the State applies to posted workers in the same way as it applies to Irish workers. Section 20 also applies all employee protection legislation to other overseas workers who have contracts of employment that provide for them being employed in the State.

Age Discrimination.

260. **Mr. Lowry** asked the Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment if legislation is planned to end age discrimination in employment and vocational training associated with forced retirement at 65 years of age; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4573/06]

Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Mr. Killeen): There is no age discrimination in employments rights legislation and there is no compulsory retirement age. Such legislation describes an employee as “a person of any age who has entered into or works under (or, where the employment has ceased, entered into or worked under) a contract of employment. . .”.

In some employments, a “normal retirement age” exists for that employment only. In such cases, the normal age of retirement can be below or above 65 years of age, in order to give flexibility to employers and employees, having due regard to the nature of the work being performed. In these circumstances, I do not propose to introduce legislation to set a mandatory retirement age.

The upper age limit of 66 for bringing claims under the Unfair Dismissals Acts 1977 to 2001 was removed by the Equality Act 2004. The effect of this is that a person who is over the age of 66

when dismissed is not excluded from taking a case under the Unfair Dismissals Acts unless he or she has already reached the normal retirement age for that employment, if one exists.

With regard to vocational training, there is no upper age restriction on access to the Department’s in-company training schemes or to FÁS vocational training programmes.

Job Losses.

261. **Mr. Deenihan** asked the Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the number of IDA assisted jobs that have been lost and created in Kerry in 2005; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4610/06]

Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Mr. Martin): IDA Ireland is the agency with statutory responsibility for the attraction of foreign direct investment, FDI, to Ireland and its regions. The Forfás annual employment survey records jobs gained and lost in companies supported by the industrial development agencies. Data are compiled on an annualised basis and provisional data on a county basis for 2005 in respect of IDA client companies will not be available from that agency until the end of February. Once the data become available, I will arrange to have it forwarded to the Deputy.

Health Levy.

262. **Mr. Kenny** asked the Minister for Social and Family Affairs if, in view of the health levy, the yield per annum for this levy for the years 2002 to 2005, inclusive; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4534/06]

Minister for Social and Family Affairs (Mr. Brennan): The health levy yield for each of the years 2002 to 2005 is as set down in the following table:

Year	€ million	Notes
2002	701.4	final figure
2003	793.7	final figure
2004	822	provisional figure
2005	979	provisional figure

Departmental Schemes.

263. **Mr. Durkan** asked the Minister for Social and Family Affairs the extent to which he has assisted or will assist in the provision of free travel in rural areas; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4735/06]

Minister for Social and Family Affairs (Mr. Brennan): The free travel scheme is available to all people living in the State aged 66 years, or over. It is also available to carers and to people

with disabilities who are in receipt of certain social welfare payments.

The scheme provides free travel on the main public and private transport services for those eligible under the scheme. These include road, rail and ferry services provided by companies such as Bus Átha Cliath, Bus Éireann and Iarnród Éireann, as well as services provided by over 80 private transport operators. The vast majority of private contractors providing services under the scheme operate in rural areas. The underlying feature of the scheme is the use of spare capacity on these transport services.

I am always willing to consider applications from licensed private transport operators who may wish to participate in the free travel scheme. However, while my Department pays transport providers to operate the free travel scheme, it is not in a position to provide transport services where none exist.

The issue of access to public transport in rural areas is being addressed at present through the rural transport initiative, which is being managed by Pobal, formerly Area Development Management, ADM, on behalf of my colleague, the Minister for Transport.

My Department contributed €500,000 to the initiative in 2004, €750,000 in 2005 and is contributing €850,000 for the initiative in 2006. This will ensure that free travel pass holders continue to have full access to community based transport services.

Significant improvements have been made to the free schemes, including the free travel scheme, in recent budgets both in terms of the qualifying conditions and the coverage of the schemes. I will continue to review the operation of these schemes with a view to identifying the scope for further improvements as resources permit.

Social Welfare Benefits.

264. **Mr. Stanton** asked the Minister for Social and Family Affairs the steps his Department is taking to ensure that eligible persons are made aware of their social welfare entitlements; and if he will make a statement on the matter.
[4476/06]

Minister for Social and Family Affairs (Mr. Brennan): The provision of information in a clear and accessible manner is an essential element in the effective delivery of social welfare services. The underlying objective of my Department's information policy is to ensure that all citizens are made aware of their entitlements under social insurance, social assistance and other supports and are kept informed of changes and improvements as they occur.

My Department provides a comprehensive information service at local and regional level through its extensive network of offices throughout the country. We have approximately 130

offices at local level through which customers can obtain information and guidance in relation to their entitlements. This locally based service is supported by a central information unit which uses a variety of methods of communication to ensure that customers are aware of the full range of services available to them and of any improvements or new services which are introduced from time to time.

My Department produces a comprehensive range of information leaflets and booklets covering each social welfare payment or scheme and these are widely available at local social welfare offices, from post offices and from other agencies such as Comhairle and the community information centres. These leaflets are regularly revised to ensure that the public are kept up to date with information regarding their entitlements. All of my Department's information booklets can be ordered free of charge from our lo-call leaflet line 1890 20 23 25. In addition information on all our schemes and services are available on the Department's website, www.welfare.ie. Information leaflets can also be downloaded from this site.

Information regarding changes and improvements to schemes and services is advertised in the national and provincial media and through fact sheets, posters and direct mailshots. A freephone service is used to advise customers of new schemes or improvements to existing schemes at particular times of the year, for example, a freephone service is operated at budget time.

My Department seeks feedback from customers to ascertain their satisfaction with the quality of information services being provided, so that we can tailor the delivery of these services to meet their needs. Customer panels and customer surveys are among the mechanisms used for this purpose. The findings of these surveys are, in the main, very positive and show a high satisfaction rating with the services provided.

Comhairle, the national information agency, under the aegis of my Department has responsibility for supporting the provision of independent information, advice and other supports to citizens, including those with disabilities. Citizen information centres based in 247 locations provide information to members of the public on the full range of social services. My Department works closely with and provides funding for certain voluntary organisations, which provide welfare rights and information services for their target groups. I am satisfied that my Department is taking all necessary steps in order ensure that people are made aware of their entitlements.

Homeless Persons.

265. **Mr. Quinn** asked the Minister for Social and Family Affairs the criteria used to define whether a person is homeless; the number of nights a person must spend on the street or in a hostel in order to be defined as homeless; and if

[Mr. Quinn.]

he will make a statement on the matter.
[4482/06]

Minister for Social and Family Affairs (Mr. Brennan): The issue of determining if a person is regarded as homeless is a matter for the housing authorities. Neither I nor my Department have any function in relation to the matter.

Homeless persons have the same entitlements as any other Irish citizen under the social welfare system. There is no requirement that a person must spend any length of time on the street or in a hostel in order to qualify for any social welfare payment.

If a homeless person is unemployed but capable of and genuinely seeking work, then they can apply for unemployment assistance. They can be paid basic supplementary welfare allowance, SWA, if they do not fulfil the conditions for any other primary weekly payment from my Department. In addition, they can also apply for payments such as rent supplement, diet supplement and exceptional needs payments under the supplementary welfare allowance scheme.

One of the most important supports provided to homeless people through the social welfare system is assistance with rent deposits to enable them to secure private rented accommodation. Some €5.8 million was provided for rent deposits in 2005.

Social Insurance.

266. **Mr. Kenny** asked the Minister for Social and Family Affairs the yield per annum for each rate of PRSI for the years 2002 to 2005, inclusive; the employee exemption limits for each year; and if he will make a statement on the matter.
[4519/06]

Minister for Social and Family Affairs (Mr. Brennan): The PRSI yield for the year 2003 for each PRSI class collected through the PAYE system is as outlined in the following table:

2003

PRSI Class	Yield €m	A	5,288,168,772
B	68,961,337	C	2,534,308
D	237,333,129	E	467,180
H	43,869,294	J	11,162,240
K	21,849,605	M	1,765,524
P	4,105	S	145,209,651
Unknown	5,405,029	Total	5,826,730,174

This analysis is carried out when the bulk of the detailed contribution information has been received from employers after the end of the particular tax year. It should be noted that the data in the above table are subject to continuous

change as remittances and details relating to 2003 continue to be received.

The total yield for PRSI collected through the PAYE system for the year 2002 was €5,409,827,580 but an analysis of each class is not available. The analysis of the PRSI yield for 2004 is not yet available but it is expected to be available by end March 2006. The analysis for 2005 will not be available before the end of March 2007.

PRSI contributions operate on a tiered basis in order to enhance employment incentives for low-earning employees. Employees are exempt from liability for PRSI contributions on weekly reckonable earnings below a specified threshold while still enjoying the benefits of social insurance coverage.

The PRSI exemption threshold for each year during the period between 2002 and 2005 was €287. On 1 January 2006, the employee PRSI threshold for liability to social insurance contributions was increased from €287 to €300 per week at a full year cost of €8.7 million. The new €300 threshold benefits employees earning the national minimum wage of €7.65 per hour.

At and above this exemption threshold, the employee rate becomes operable for all earnings. However, contributors are entitled to a PRSI-free allowance of €26 or €127 per week, as appropriate, which reduces the immediate step-effect of exceeding the threshold.

Local Authority Charges.

267. **Mr. Lowry** asked the Minister for Social and Family Affairs his views on waiving the fees associated with refuse collection for people over the age of 65; the approximate cost of such a waiver; and if he will make a statement on the matter.
[4569/06]

Minister for Social and Family Affairs (Mr. Brennan): The setting of waste management charges and the introduction of waivers in respect of waste charges is, as stated by my colleague the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government, a matter for each local authority.

The introduction of a national social welfare scheme to address the issue is not considered feasible given the wide range of charging regimes and cost structures that exist in respect of waste management throughout the State. Any system put in place to assist people who rely on private domestic waste collection would have to be sensitive to the different local arrangements.

It is tentatively estimated that the cost of a waiver in respect of waste disposal charges for social welfare recipients aged 66 years and over would be in the region of €55 million per annum. This estimate is based on an average charge of €6 per week for waste disposal services.

Social Welfare Benefits.

268. **Mr. Durkan** asked the Minister for Social and Family Affairs when rent support will be awarded to persons (details supplied) in County Kildare; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4744/06]

Minister for Social and Family Affairs (Mr. Brennan): The supplementary welfare allowance scheme, which includes rent supplement, is administered on my behalf by the community welfare division of the Health Service Executive. Neither I nor my Department have any function in relation to decisions on individual claims.

Under supplementary welfare allowance rules, rent supplement is not normally payable to couples where either of them is engaged in full-time employment. For these purposes, employment for 30 hours or more per week is regarded as full-time.

The executive has advised that the persons concerned were refused a rent supplement on the grounds that one of the applicants was engaged in full-time employment. It is open to the persons concerned to appeal this decision to the executive's designated appeals officer.

Public Transport.

269. **Mr. Gormley** asked the Minister for Transport if his attention has been drawn to the fact that approximately 60% of public service vehicle licences have not been renewed and that many taxi drivers could be working with an expired public service vehicle licence; if persons who are operating with an expired public service vehicle licence are insured to carry passengers; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4462/06]

Minister for Transport (Mr. Cullen): The licensing of small public service vehicles is currently governed by the Road Traffic (Public Service Vehicles) Regulations 1963 to 2002. Under these regulations, small public service vehicle licences are granted and renewed by individual local licensing authorities. Information regarding the number of licences that have not been renewed at any given time is not available in my Department.

Section 43 of the Taxi Regulation Act 2003 specifically provides that a person shall not drive or use a mechanically propelled vehicle in a public place for the carriage of persons for reward unless the person holds a licence to drive a small public service vehicle and there is a small public service vehicle licence in force in respect of the vehicle. Contravention of this provision is an offence. Enforcement is the responsibility of the Garda Síochána.

Insofar as insurance is concerned, all mechanically propelled vehicles, whether for private use or hire for reward, are required to be covered by third party insurance under the Road Traffic Acts. The policy of insurance is a private contract

between the policy holder and the insurance company and must be for unlimited liability for personal injury. Any other terms or conditions are matters between the policy holder and the insurance company.

Search and Rescue Services.

270. **Mr. P. Breen** asked the Minister for Transport if discussions with a landowner for a suitable site for a new station house for the coastal unit at Doolin, County Clare are complete; the progress which has been made in the provision of a station house; the envisaged cost of constructing a station house; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4600/06]

Minister for Transport (Mr. Cullen): I refer the Deputy to the reply given to Question No. 352 of Tuesday, 7 February 2006 which sets out the current position regarding the acquisition of a suitable site for a new station house for the Doolin coastal unit. Until the site acquisition has been finalised it will not be possible to determine the cost of construction of the accommodation.

Driving Tests.

271. **Mr. P. McGrath** asked the Minister for Transport the receipts in 2005 in fees for driver testing; and the associated costs with operating this process. [4492/06]

Minister for Transport (Mr. Cullen): The fees received in respect of driving tests for 2005 amounted to €7.09 million. The total cost of operating the service in 2005 is estimated to be approximately €12 million. There is not a direct correlation between receipts and expenditure in any given year as while cash is received with applications, the test may be conducted in a subsequent year.

272. **Mr. P. McGrath** asked the Minister for Transport the number of driving tests carried out per day per instructor. [4493/06]

Minister for Transport (Mr. Cullen): The number of driving tests conducted by a driver tester each day depends upon the time of year, the category of vehicle being tested, the test location and if the tester is working overtime. On average 7.6 standard car test equivalents should be conducted per driver tester per day.

273. **Mr. P. McGrath** asked the Minister for Transport the position regarding a bonus scheme being offered to driving test instructors to carry out additional tests; the times when these additional tests will be carried out; the cost of implementing the bonus scheme; the timeframe for the length of time this bonus scheme will operate; and the estimated additional number of tests which will be carried out as a result of the scheme. [4494/06]

Minister for Transport (Mr. Cullen): My Department in consultation with the Minister for Finance has developed a package of measures to deal with the backlog of driving test applications.

One aspect of the package is a bonus scheme for driver testers. A total of 90 driver testers have signed up for the bonus scheme which is due to commence on 6 February 2006 for one year. This is expected to deliver a minimum of 30,750 extra tests based on commitments given. The bonus tests will be conducted at lunchtime, evenings and on Saturdays. The direct cost of the scheme will be in the region of €1.5 million to €2 million.

Rail Services.

274. **Ms O. Mitchell** asked the Minister for Transport the independent advice, distinct from Irish Rail, he has received to advise him with regard to the development of the Irish rail freight industry; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4495/06]

Minister for Transport (Mr. Cullen): The strategic rail review commissioned by my Department and published in 2003 contained an examination of the rail freight business and its realistic potential to support economic development and contribute to sustainable development. In preparing the report, the public were invited to make submissions on rail policy and a number of public consultation sessions were held around the country.

Iarnród Éireann, in responding to the challenges contained in the review, held wide-ranging consultations with business interests around the country to identify those freight activities which are best suited to rail transport. Arising from this process, the company has developed a business plan for freight with the objective of achieving break-even by 2006; increasing the profitability of the existing profitable business; withdrawing from those businesses that are heavily loss-making; and targeting trainload traffic.

The company advises that it is making good progress in growing the rail freight business in areas where it holds a competitive advantage over road haulage. The key areas in this respect are sugar beet, mineral ore, pulpwood and keg distribution. Iarnród Éireann continues to pursue a policy of growing its rail freight business where opportunities present. Separately, I am open to receiving representations in this regard, particularly given that full liberalisation of rail freight services will come into effect from 1 January next.

Driving Tests.

275. **Mr. Perry** asked the Minister for Transport the reason his Department is ten driving testers short; and the further reason for the non-appointment of staff in view of the huge demand for driving tests and the length of time people have to wait: his views on the reason, with 5,000

applications in the current competition for driving testers, only ten contract staff will be recruited; if it is less expensive to redeploy existing civil servants rather than outsource; the further reason there is an embargo on recruitment when there is a shortage of staff; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4500/06]

Minister for Transport (Mr. Cullen): I refer the Deputy to my reply to Questions Nos. 113, 133 and 207 of 1 February 2005. As I have indicated to this House previously, the delay in providing driving tests is a matter of concern to me. I believe it not only represents a poor service to the public but it is also hampering the development of initiatives which I wish to pursue and which will contribute further to road safety. The driving test and those who deliver it are a key element in the road safety strategy. It is my objective to eliminate the backlog of driving tests by mid-2007 and my Department has developed a package of measures in consultation with staff interests to achieve this.

I am pleased to acknowledge that a very high number of the existing driver testers have indicated that they will participate in a bonus scheme which will make a significant contribution to the reduction of the backlog over the coming 18 months. Furthermore in a unique cross-departmental and cross-union agreement, a further eight civil servants from the Department of Agriculture and Food have successfully passed interviews and tests and will shortly be trained as driver testers and start working in April to reduce the backlog. Later in the year they will be augmented by another ten new recruits on two-year contracts. This increased volume of testing is putting administrative staff in Ballina under considerable pressure and I want to publicly recognise the contribution they make to resolving a difficult situation. They are often the first point of contact between the public and the Department in difficult times and they have responded admirably.

However, despite all these efforts I am convinced that more needs to be done in the short term and that the temporary use of outsourcing has to be an option to which I have recourse. Outsourcing not only provides access to additional staff resources but also to training options and to infrastructure and facilities that are needed to overcome the problems we face in the coming months. I believe Sustaining Progress provides that option but there is union disagreement on this. I accept that this disagreement reflects a genuinely held difference of opinion on the meaning of clauses in Sustaining Progress. Departmental and union officials have worked hard together to reach solutions and although good progress has been made, I do not believe it is sufficient to overcome the overriding need to eliminate the backlog as quickly as possible and to allow those same staff concentrate on developing and imple-

menting a road safety regime and services which are part of this Government's programme.

Therefore, I intend to further the outsourcing option. I understand that this decision is likely to be tested under the arbitration provisions of Sustaining Progress. If so, that will give both sides a binding decision. Meanwhile, I have mandated my Department to progress outsourcing. I strongly believe that this is a prudent decision which is necessary in the interests of road safety and the avoidance of any unnecessary subsequent delays in eliminating the backlog.

I want to be unequivocally clear to the staff in the Department that I appreciate the level of service and commitment they have given and continue to give to the delivery of a driver testing service. They will continue to be the backbone of the service into the future. While I believe that outsourcing is needed now in exceptional circumstances to augment their work I can give them an assurance that it is a temporary measure and not intended to replace their work. I can also assure them that if outsourcing points to deficiencies in the infrastructure or systems which are available in the public service, I intend to continue to secure and provide the resources needed to improve the public service infrastructure. In tandem with eliminating the backlog I am determined to support a better public service delivery of the driving test to the benefit of both customers and staff. Along with eliminating the backlog I intend to deliver a service in which existing staff will be proud to work.

Rail Network.

276. **Mr. P. Breen** asked the Minister for Transport if he has received detailed plans and designs for each phase of the western rail corridor project from Iarnród Éireann; if not, when he expects to do so; the timeframe for the receipt of such plans; the projected cost of each phase of this project; his views on whether phase one will be completed by 2008; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4546/06]

Minister for Transport (Mr. Cullen): The McCann report recommended a phased approach to the construction of the western rail corridor. Following the launch of Transport 21, I asked Iarnród Éireann to commence the design and planning stages of the western rail corridor from Ennis to Claremorris.

The line between Ennis and Athenry will be the first section to be developed and I await specific proposals from Iarnród Éireann in this regard. The indicative timescale for completion of this first section is 2008. The indicative timescale for completion of the Athenry to Tuam section is 2011 and for the Tuam to Claremorris section is 2014. The necessary steps to preserve the section of line between Claremorris and Collooney will be taken this year.

Transport 21 includes a financial provision to cover the anticipated cost of the western rail corridor project. I do not propose to release this commercially sensitive information until the public procurement process for this project is completed.

Public Transport.

277. **Ms O. Mitchell** asked the Minister for Transport the amount of funding for the provision of additional buses sought by Dublin Bus; the amount of buses this would procure; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4548/06]

Minister for Transport (Mr. Cullen): On 20 January 2006, Dublin Bus submitted an application for funding for 200 additional buses to be provided over the two-year period 2006 to 2007 and the construction of a new garage. The projected total capital cost of the proposals contained in the application is €120 million. My Department is currently examining this application in accordance with the requirements of the Department of Finance guidelines for the appraisal of capital projects, and I will make a decision when this is completed.

278. **Mr. Eamon Ryan** asked the Minister for Transport if his attention has been drawn to plans to provide a bus route along the R112 road in South Dublin linking both Luas lines with the DART and the 16A airport bus; and if the provision of such a route can be facilitated. [4564/06]

Minister for Transport (Mr. Cullen): The Dublin Transportation Office, DTO, strategy for the greater Dublin area, A Platform for Change, proposes a network of radial and orbital quality bus corridors, QBCs, and additional bus priority measures.

The proposed orbital QBC referred to by the Deputy, linking as it would a series of radial Luas lines, red and green, existing QBCs, N11 and the Rock Road, future QBCs and the DART system, Blackrock station, would be an excellent example of the progressive development of an integrated public transport system and would play an important role in promoting the use of, and integrating, public transport in the south and south western section of the Dublin region.

Statutory responsibility for the implementation of quality bus corridors rests with the relevant local authorities and a decision on proceeding with roll out is a matter for those bodies. While preliminary designs have been drawn up in respect of certain segments of the route in the Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council area, and public consultation commenced, I understand no decision has been made at this point to proceed with the project.

My Department, through the DTO traffic management grants, makes funding available for

[Mr. Cullen.]

QBC development. I understand from the DTO that no funding has yet been sought to implement this project.

Road Network.

279. **Mr. Bruton** asked the Minister for Transport his estimate of the cost to the Exchequer of buying back the right to toll the East Link bridge; and his plans to buy back those rights in line with his proposal for the West Link. [4752/06]

Minister for Transport (Mr. Cullen): Issues relating to the tolling of the East Link Bridge are matters for Dublin City Council in the first instance.

Rural Social Scheme.

280. **Mr. Ring** asked the Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs if a person (details supplied) in County Mayo is entitled to a place on a rural social scheme. [4473/06]

Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs (Éamon Ó Cuív): The conditions of eligibility, which need to be fulfilled to participate in the RSS are as follows: applicants must be in receipt of farm assist or have been allocated a valid herd or flock number from the Department of Agriculture and Food, and be in receipt of one of the following allowances from the Department of Social and Family Affairs: unemployment assistance, unemployment benefit, if previously on CE, or disability allowance; or applicants are self-employed fishermen on a fishing boat which has been entered in the register of fishing boats or have been issued with a fishing licence for fishing for salmon at sea, from the Department of Communications, Marine and Natural Resources, and are in receipt of one of the following allowances from the Department of Social and Family Affairs: unemployment assistance, unemployment benefit, if previously on CE, or disability allowance. The conditions of eligibility include that the person in question, prior to commencement on this scheme, was signing for credited social insurance contributions or “credits” with the Department of Social and Family Affairs. Credited contributions are notional social insurance contributions, which are awarded to an insured person without a PRSI payment being received from the insured person. The conditions also include that my Department has established, following legal advice, that a person signing for credits has no underlying entitlement to participate on the scheme. The conditions further include that the person concerned spent one year on the scheme but following the legal clarification was informed that he could not continue to participate for a further period on the basis of credited social insurance contributions. To be eligible

going forward a person must meet the criteria outlined.

Community Development.

281. **Mr. Durkan** asked the Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs his plans to address social or economic deprivation in urban or rural areas; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4733/06]

283. **Mr. Durkan** asked the Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs the extent to which he proposes to assist directly in urban or rural regeneration; if community-based applications of this nature will be accepted; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4736/06]

Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs (Éamon Ó Cuív): I propose to take Questions Nos. 281 and 283 together.

My Department operates directly, or through bodies under its aegis, a wide range of schemes and projects which address rural and urban disadvantage throughout the country. The descriptions of these schemes are available on my Department's website at www.pobail.ie. I also refer the Deputy to my replies to Questions No. 40 of 22 February 2005; Nos. 118 and 119 of 14 April 2005; No. 3 of 19 May 2005; No. 420 of 15 November 2005; and No. 217 of 30 November 2005.

282. **Mr. Durkan** asked the Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs if financial assistance will be offered towards community-based programmes for the restoration of urban and rural-based buildings or structures; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4734/06]

Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs (Éamon Ó Cuív): I assume the Deputy is referring to the restoration of urban and rural-based heritage buildings or structures. My Department has no function in this matter.

Question No. 283 answered with Question No. 281.

284. **Mr. Durkan** asked the Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs if, having regard to his previously expressed views on the subject, he is satisfied that An Taisce has ceased to interfere in the area of rural housing; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4737/06]

Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs (Éamon Ó Cuív): I refer the Deputy to my reply to Questions Nos. 121 to 123, inclusive, of 14 April 2005 and to my reply to Question No. 236 of 14 December 2004.

Grant Payments.

285. **Mr. Durkan** asked the Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs the closing

dates for applications for grant aid under various headings in his Department; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4738/06]

286. **Mr. Durkan** asked the Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs the main headings under which grant aid has been offered to various projects in the past 12 months; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4739/06]

289. **Mr. Durkan** asked the Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs the amount awarded by way of grant or other financial aid to various groups or bodies on a county basis in the past 12 months; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4742/06]

Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs (Éamon Ó Cuív): I propose to take Questions Nos. 285, 286 and 289 together.

Expenditure across the three main programme areas, including administration, for 2005 is as follows:

	2005 (Provisional Outturn)
	€ million
An Ghaeilge agus an Ghaeltacht	88.395
Community Affairs	158.803
Rural Affairs	91.734
Administration	15.571

Expenditure within these programme areas takes place across a wide range of schemes and projects, descriptions of which are available on my Department's website at www.pobail.ie. It is the practice of both my colleague, Minister of State, Deputy Noel Ahern, and myself to make details of all announcements relating to grant approvals and other expenditure-related decisions under these programmes available on the Department's website. The many schemes have varying closing dates, details of which are also on my Department's website. If the Deputy would like information regarding a particular scheme, I would be glad to provide details to him.

Telecommunications Services.

287. **Mr. Durkan** asked the Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs if his Department will offer financial assistance towards a community-based initiative to provide telecommunications or other community enhancing facilities at the Black Valley, County Kerry or other areas deficient in such services; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4740/06]

Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs (Éamon Ó Cuív): My Department does

not provide funding for telecommunications services.

National Drugs Strategy.

288. **Mr. Durkan** asked the Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs the expenditure by his Department by way of grant or other forms of aid to community or other groups involved in combating drugs; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4741/06]

Minister of State at the Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs (Mr. N. Ahern):

My Department has overall responsibility for co-ordinating the implementation of the National Drugs Strategy 2001-2008. In this context it has responsibility for the work of the local and regional drugs task forces and the young people's facilities and services fund. Through these initiatives a range of community and voluntary groups are funded to tackle drug misuse. To date, approximately €95 million has been allocated to implement approximately 440 projects under two rounds of local drugs task force plans; approximately €90 million has been allocated under the young peoples facilities and services fund to support in the region of 450 initiatives; a further €13.66 million has been allocated to projects under the LDTF premises initiative which is designed to meet the accommodation needs of community based drugs projects; and expenditure on the implementation of the new action plans of the regional drugs task forces commenced in 2005 and allocations totalling just under €5 million have been made to facilitate getting a range of projects up-and-running in the regions this year. I am pleased that my Department was allocated €34.027 million for the drugs initiative-young people's facilities and services fund in the Abridged Estimates Volume for 2006. This represents an increase of 8% on the allocation for 2005.

Question No. 289 answered with Question No. 285.

Grant Payments.

290. **Mr. Aylward** asked the Minister for Agriculture and Food the progress to date in 2006 on an application under the single payments scheme by a person (details supplied) in County Kilkenny. [4450/06]

Minister for Agriculture and Food (Mary Coughlan):

The person named submitted applications for consideration in respect of the private contract clause and Inheritance measures of the single payments scheme. Following processing of these applications, the entitlements were transferred by way of inheritance. The person named submitted an application for payment under the

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single payment scheme on 6 May 2005. Following validation of the lands declared, problems arose on three parcels. The person named has been written to seeking clarification. Payment will be processed upon resolution of these queries.

291. **Mr. Deenihan** asked the Minister for Agriculture and Food when payment under the single payment scheme will be awarded to a person (details supplied) in County Kerry; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [4451/06]

Minister for Agriculture and Food (Mary Coughlan): The person named submitted an application under the single payment scheme on 11 May 2005. The herdowner also applied to have his entitlements consolidated under the 2005 single payment scheme. This application has been processed and full payment of €33,833.22 will issue shortly.

292. **Mr. Kehoe** asked the Minister for Agriculture and Food the reason a person (details supplied) in County Wexford has not received the full single farm payment; when remainder of the payment will be made; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [4478/06]

Minister for Agriculture and Food (Mary Coughlan): An application under the single payment scheme was received from the person named on 16 May 2005.

While an initial payment issued to the person named on 1 December 2005 based on the entitlements held by the applicant on that date, a further payment will be issued shortly to the person named when an application to transfer entitlements has been processed.

Departmental Staff.

293. **Mr. Perry** asked the Minister for Agriculture and Food her views on the reason only 45 staff applied out of a possible 200 being offered to transfer to the Department of Transport to help alleviate the problem with waiting times for driving tests; the incentives which were given to staff; the reason there was such a low take-up of opportunity to transfer; if the figures will increase; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [4499/06]

Minister for Agriculture and Food (Mary Coughlan): In order to clear a substantial backlog of driving tests, the Department of Transport sought to avail of the temporary redeployment of staff from my Department in locations where surplus local office staff were available. Applicants were invited to apply by Monday 12 December 2005. This closing date was further extended to Friday, 16 December, at the request of staff associations to facilitate as many potential

applicants as possible. Clerical officers, staff officers and executive officers were invited to apply. Successful applicants below the grade of EO would be placed in the EO grade in a temporary capacity for the period of redeployment.

The option to apply for the post of temporary driver tester was a matter for each individual staff member. In considering whether to apply, staff had to take a number of factors into account. These were as follows. The position is intended to be temporary for a period of 18 months or so after which time redeployed staff will have to return at their existing grade to alternative posts as arranged by the Department of Finance. Applicants had to have an unblemished driving licence for at least five years. Applicants would be required to successfully complete a compulsory qualifying driving test. Applicants would then be called to a competitive interview. Successful candidates would be required to attend a six-week training course and, on completion of this programme, must meet the necessary standard in order to be appointed as a driver tester. In all, 30 eligible applications were forwarded to the Department of Transport for consideration. Eight applicants have been selected for training which will start shortly.

Grant Payments.

294. **Mr. N. O'Keeffe** asked the Minister for Agriculture and Food if payment of grant aid in respect of the development of new farm buildings will be issued to the widow of a deceased person (details supplied). [4541/06]

Minister for Agriculture and Food (Mary Coughlan): As the deceased's son succeeded to the land and is also the current registered herdowner, payment will be made in this case to the deceased's widow on receipt of a signed declaration from the herdowner consenting to the payment concerned.

295. **Mr. N. O'Keeffe** asked the Minister for Agriculture and Food the reason for the delay in having payment issued to a person (details supplied) in County Limerick under the EU single farm payment scheme. [4542/06]

Minister for Agriculture and Food (Mary Coughlan): The person named submitted an application under the single payment scheme on 13 May 2005. The herd owner also applied to have his entitlements consolidated under the 2005 single payment scheme. In addition, the person named also successfully submitted an application for the transfer of entitlements by way of private contract clause. All the applications have been processed and full payment of €9,399.22 will issue shortly.

296. **Mr. N. O’Keeffe** asked the Minister for Agriculture and Food when payment of the EU single farm payment will issue to a person (details supplied) in County Cork. [4543/06]

Minister for Agriculture and Food (Mary Coughlan): The person named submitted an application under the single payment scheme on 10 May 2005. The herdowner also applied to have his entitlements consolidated under the 2005 single payment scheme. This application has been processed and full payment of €37,391.56 will issue shortly.

297. **Mr. Lowry** asked the Minister for Agriculture and Food when single payment will issue to a person (details supplied) in County Tipperary; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [4570/06]

Minister for Agriculture and Food (Mary Coughlan): The person named submitted an application to transfer entitlements with lands by way of inheritance under the provisions of the single payment scheme. However, the single payment entitlements could not be transferred as she did not receive lands by way of gift or inheritance.

298. **Mr. Lowry** asked the Minister for Agriculture and Food when single payment will issue to a person (details supplied) in County Tipperary; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [4571/06]

Minister for Agriculture and Food (Mary Coughlan): The person named submitted an application for the transfer out of entitlements by way of private contract clause under the provisions of the single payment scheme. However, prior to processing the private contract clause application, she is required to have the entitlements transferred to her by way of lands and inheritance.

An application form for the Inheritance measure has been forwarded to the person named for completion. On receipt of the completed Inheritance application and supporting documentation, my Department will advise the applicant of the outcome of both applications.

299. **Mr. Durkan** asked the Minister for Agriculture and Food when the single farm payment will be awarded in the case of a person (details supplied) in County Kildare; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [4743/06]

Minister for Agriculture and Food (Mary Coughlan): An application under the single payment scheme was submitted by the spouse of the person named on 6 May 2006. Following the death of the single payment scheme applicant, the herd number was transferred to the person

named. Arrangements have been put in place to transfer the entitlements from the single payment scheme applicant to the person named and payment will issue shortly.

300. **Mr. Walsh** asked the Minister for Agriculture and Food if the full payment of the single farm payment will be arranged for a person (details supplied) in County Cork. [4751/06]

Minister for Agriculture and Food (Mary Coughlan): An application under the single payment scheme was received from the person named on 16 May 2005. The payment which issued to the person named on 1 December 2005, reflects the position following the transfer out of some of his entitlements with lands by way of inheritance-gift and, therefore, represents the full payment due.

Maternity Leave Entitlements.

301. **Ms C. Murphy** asked the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform if it is possible for women to engage in unpaid maternity leave prior to the birth of their child or if the order in which maternity entitlements must be claimed is paid first followed by unpaid leave; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4471/06]

Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform (Mr. McDowell): Advice on the law is not a matter for the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform. However, I can say that policy in the Maternity Protection Acts 1994 and 2004 is that an employee is entitled to additional unpaid maternity leave commencing immediately after the end of her maternity leave.

The entitlement will increase from eight weeks to 12 weeks with effect from 1 March 2006 and to 16 weeks with effect from 1 March 2007 following an order recently made by me under the Maternity Protection Acts in line with the announcement made by the Minister for Finance in his Budget Statement 2006.

Information on maternity leave entitlements can be obtained from the Equality Authority.

Visa Applications.

302. **Mr. Ring** asked the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform when a visa application will be approved for a person (details supplied). [4446/06]

Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform (Mr. McDowell): The application referred to by the Deputy was received in my Department’s visa section on 27 January 2006, and is pending assessment. Applications are dealt with in date order and a decision on this case will be made in the near future.

Deportation Orders.

303. **Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin** asked the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform if humanitarian leave will be granted to a person (details supplied) to remain here. [4468/06]

306. **Mr. F. McGrath** asked the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform if a person (details supplied) will not be deported; and if the National Youth Council of Ireland will be supported on this matter. [4485/06]

307. **Mr. Penrose** asked the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform the steps he will take to review the decision to deport a person (details supplied) who has made a significant contribution to youth work and to Irish society generally through their work with a group; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4486/06]

311. **Mr. Lowry** asked the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform the reason for deportation of a person (details supplied); if this decision will be reconsidered and grant the person permission to remain; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4581/06]

320. **Mr. Durkan** asked the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform if a review can or will be undertaken in the case of a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4746/06]

Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform (Mr. McDowell): I propose to take Questions Nos. 303, 306, 307, 311 and 320 together.

I refer the Deputies to the reply I gave to Questions Nos. 459 and 469 on Tuesday 7 February 2006 in which I outlined the position. The enforcement of the deportation order is now an operational matter for the Garda national immigration bureau.

Citizenship Applications.

304. **Mr. Quinn** asked the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform if time spent here on the now discontinued inter-company transfer scheme visa is considered towards the requirements for time living legally here when assessing applications for naturalisation; the waiting time for a naturalisation application; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4481/06]

Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform (Mr. McDowell): Section 15 of the Irish Nationality and Citizenship Act 1956, as amended, provides that applicants for naturalisation, other than spouses of Irish citizens, must have been resident in the State for five years of the nine year period prior to the date of application. Residence in this context means residence for which the applicant

had the permission of the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform and where such permission was not for the purpose of study or seeking asylum. Generally speaking, reckonable residence is calculated from stamps in applicants' passports and from departmental and Garda records.

I understand that persons who arrived in the State as a result of an inter-company transfer were regarded as having the permission of the Minister and the exclusions mentioned above did not apply. In such circumstances, time spent in the State by a person on an inter-company transfer is reckonable for naturalisation purposes as long as that person had the permission of the Minister to reside here.

Persons who received permission to reside in the State on the basis of an inter-company transfer — a scheme that is now defunct — were expected to remain in the State for a limited period of time and then return to the parent organisation abroad which posted him or her to Ireland. In those circumstances, I would not normally expect a person who came to Ireland as an inter-company transferee to remain long enough here to qualify for naturalisation. However, each application for naturalisation by a inter-company transferee will be examined on its merits.

Prison Accommodation.

305. **Mr. Quinn** asked the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform if the practice of slopping out is still in place in prisons; the timeframe in which he estimates that slopping out will be completely eliminated from all institutions here; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4483/06]

Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform (Mr. McDowell): Approximately 72% of prisoners in custody now have 24-hour access to in-cell sanitation thanks to substantial investment in the prison estate since 1997.

I plan to eliminate the practice of slopping out completely. This will require the replacement of Mountjoy and Cork prisons. I look forward to the support of the Deputy and his party colleagues in achieving this objective. The purchase of the site at Thornton and the ongoing work to develop new prison facilities there represents a major step in this direction, as do my plans to develop a new prison on Spike Island.

Questions Nos. 306 and 307 answered with Question No. 303.

Garda Strength.

308. **Mr. O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform when he will provide a full detailed reply to Question No. 224 of 24 November 2005. [4514/06]

Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform (Mr. McDowell): As the Deputy will be aware, the information requested in November 2005 in regard to Garda resources in the Ardee and mid-Louth area was not readily available in the detail sought at the time. The information requested has now been compiled by the Garda authorities and has been sent to the Deputy directly.

Residency Permits.

309. **Mr. N. O’Keefe** asked the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform the position regarding an application for residency in respect of a person (details supplied) in County Cork. [4544/06]

Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform (Mr. McDowell): The person in question arrived in the State as a member of the crew of a ship which docked in Waterford port on 17 February 2004. He failed to return to the ship prior to its departure and subsequently made an application for asylum at Waterford Garda station on 4 March 2004. This application for asylum was withdrawn on 30 September 2004 in favour of an application for permission to remain in the State on the basis of his marriage to an Irish national which had taken place on 8 July 2004.

Marriage to an Irish national does not grant any automatic right to enter or reside in the State solely on that basis. Applications of this type are dealt with on a strict chronological basis and, in fairness to all other applicants, are currently taking approximately 16 months to process.

The immigration division of my Department has growing experience of marriages being entered into for the sole purpose of enabling the non-national in question gain entry to the State. In order to prevent abuses of the system, in so far as is possible and without unduly interfering with the Irish citizen’s private circumstances, the immigration division will seek to establish various matters. These include the context in which the marriage took place, the validity of the marriage and whether the couple is residing in a family unit. This may involve requesting supporting documentation as evidence of the relationship and/or an interview by the immigration authorities of either or both parties. A decision on the residency application in question will be made after full consideration of all the circumstances particular to this case.

Road Traffic Offences.

310. **Ms Shortall** asked the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform the reason the Chief State Solicitor’s office pursues drink driving convictions in Dublin while superintendents do so in all other Garda divisions; his views on the impact this has on the conviction rate in Dublin; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4554/06]

Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform (Mr. McDowell): I am informed by the Garda authorities that the use of members of An Garda Síochána as prosecutors in the case of drink driving convictions in all Garda divisions other than the Dublin metropolitan region has benefits for the operation and management of prosecutions. Members of the Garda Síochána who have to present the prosecution case in open court and who have to face the rigour of court procedures, judicial supervision and criticism are likely to be diligent in assembling and assessing evidence. In cases where senior Garda officers prosecute, the normal managerial supervision of performance is strengthened when the manager, in his role as prosecutor, has to be comprehensively briefed by the investigating Garda.

I am further informed that it has been tradition, because of demands made in the Dublin metropolitan region, to request the assistance of the chief prosecution solicitor in the prosecution of offences before the Dublin District Courts.

Question No. 311 answered with Question No. 303.

Closed Circuit Television Systems.

312. **Mr. Lowry** asked the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform the reason a town (details supplied) in County Tipperary was unsuccessful in applying for closed circuit television; when security cameras will be provided in the town; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4582/06]

Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform (Mr. McDowell): As the Deputy may be aware, I launched the community based CCTV scheme last year in response to a demonstrated demand from local communities across Ireland for the provision of CCTV systems. The purpose of the scheme is to support local communities who wish to install and maintain CCTV security systems in their area, with the aim of increasing public safety and reducing the risk of anti-social and criminal activity. The day-to-day administration of this scheme is being carried out by Pobal, formerly Area Development Management Limited, on behalf of my Department.

I am informed by Pobal that an application for stage 2 grant aid funding under the community based CCTV scheme was received from Thurles Chamber of Commerce. Applications for funding were thoroughly assessed against the criteria set out in the community based CCTV scheme application guidelines with a view to forming a list of projects suitable for funding under the scheme. All applications, including those recommended for funding by Pobal, were then considered by the community based CCTV project board, which is

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chaired by this Department, before I made a final decision on the matter.

Following a thorough assessment of its application, Thurles Chamber of Commerce's application for funding was deemed not to reach a high enough standard to be granted funding. I understand that Pobal recently provided feedback directly to all unsuccessful applicants under the scheme, including Thurles Chamber of Commerce.

It is intended to invite a new round of applications for funding under the community based CCTV scheme in the coming months, and it is, of course, open to Thurles Chamber of Commerce to submit another application for funding at that stage.

I am advised that an application for a Garda CCTV system in Thurles from local Garda management and Thurles Chamber of Commerce, which had been submitted to the CCTV advisory committee for consideration, was withdrawn in early 2003 as it was the chamber of commerce's intention to install a community based CCTV system. I am further advised that no new application for a Garda CCTV system in Thurles has since been received by the advisory committee.

All applications for such Garda CCTV systems must meet the relevant criteria, be prepared in co-operation with the local Garda district and divisional officers and receive their full support. The application is then considered by the CCTV advisory committee which makes a recommendation, through the Garda Commissioner, to myself.

Garda Deployment.

313. **Mr. Lowry** asked the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform his plans to instruct the Commissioner of the Garda Síochána to return resident gardaí to many rural Garda stations with living accommodation for a member of the force and family; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4584/06]

Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform (Mr. McDowell): I have been informed by the Garda authorities, who are responsible for the detailed allocation of resources, including personnel, that the allocation of Garda personnel is determined by a number of factors including population, crime trends and other operational policing needs of each division. All habitable Garda accommodation is advertised throughout the service and in accordance with the foregoing suitable personnel are allocated to occupy it.

Prisoner Transfers.

314. **Mr. Carey** asked the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform when a person (details

supplied) will be repatriated; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4585/06]

Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform (Mr. McDowell): I refer the Deputy to my reply to his parliamentary question of 22 November 2005 on this matter.

The position remains that my Department awaits a warrant authorising both the transfer into the country and the continued detention of the prisoner in this jurisdiction. My Department has requested that this application for a warrant be given high priority by the State's legal officers. On receipt of a warrant, final arrangements for the transfer will be made.

Road Traffic Offences.

315. **Mr. Gregory** asked the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform further to his reply to Question No. 304 of 1 February 2006, if such impounded vehicles will only be returned to adults with proof of ownership who may then be requested to return to the Garda station with driving licence, vehicle tax and insurance cover to provide against such vehicles being in the control of juveniles. [4631/06]

Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform (Mr. McDowell): I am informed by the Garda authorities that vehicles seized under the provisions of section 41 of the Road Traffic Act 1994 are restored where the person provides proof of ownership and has paid the relevant charge. Production of a valid driving licence, certificate of insurance and tax may also be required unless the vehicle is not being used in a public place or is being towed from the Garda station.

Crime Levels.

316. **Mr. Gregory** asked the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform further to his reply to Question No. 402 of 6 December 2005 the number of burglaries in the districts covered by the three Garda stations at Cabra, Bridewell and Mountjoy covering the Dublin 7 area in 2004 and 2005; and the detection rates in each case. [4632/06]

Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform (Mr. McDowell): Correspondence relating to my reply to Question No. 402 of 6 December 2005 issued to him from my office on 6 February 2006 covered the periods 1 January to 31 December 2004, inclusive, and 1 January to 31 October 2005, inclusive.

The information detailed in the following table shows the number of burglaries recorded and detected for the periods 1 January to 31 December 2004, inclusive, and 1 January to 31 December 2005, inclusive. The figures provided for 2005 are provisional, operational and liable to

change. Cabra Garda station is included in the Blanchardstown Garda district and Mountjoy

Garda station is in the Fitzgibbon Street Garda district.

District	2005		2004	
	Recorded	Detected	Recorded	Detected
Blanchardstown	624	49	852	52
Fitzgibbon Street	558	92	545	92
Bridewell	222	37	204	36

Garda Recruitment.

317. **Mr. Haughey** asked the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform if a re-application by a person (details supplied) in Dublin 3 to join the Garda Síochána again after ten years will be sanctioned; if the file is in his Department for a decision; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4694/06]

Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform (Mr. McDowell): I have been informed by the Garda authorities, who are responsible for the detailed allocation of resources, including personnel, that the individual referred to by the Deputy served in the Garda Síochána from 15 May 1981 until he resigned his position on 26 August 1999 to take up a post with the United Nations, International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia.

The Commissioner recently proposed this individual's re-appointment under the provisions of Regulation 13 of the Garda Síochána (Admissions and Appointments) Regulations 1988 and subject to appropriate medical certification by the Garda chief medical officer. I have approved the Commissioner's proposal and notified him accordingly.

Garda Vetting Procedures.

318. **Mr. Howlin** asked the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform further to parliamentary Question No. 292 of 1 February 2006 if the information requested is being compiled by his Department; if so, when same will be made available; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4695/06]

Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform (Mr. McDowell): In 2005 approximately 150,000 vetting requests were processed by the Garda Síochána, of which approximately 1,200 related to the education sector. Statistics in respect of such requests disaggregated by county are not maintained.

The vetting process involves the disclosure by the Garda Síochána, in appropriate circumstances, of criminal history information on an individual. The Garda Síochána is not involved in making recruitment decisions or in determining the suitability or otherwise of an applicant for a

post; this decision is solely a matter for the recruiting organisation. Accordingly, statistical data on the number of persons vetted who may not have secured posts for whatever reason following vetting are not available to the Garda Síochána.

Residency Permits.

319. **Mr. Gogarty** asked the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform when a decision will be made on the appeal for family reunification for a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4732/06]

Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform (Mr. McDowell): The refugee in question made a family reunification application in respect of his second wife, her son and his two adult children in December 2003. This application was refused in March 2005.

An appeal against this decision was subsequently lodged. A decision has been recently made on this application and the person in question has been informed of same.

Question No. 320 answered with Question No. 303.

321. **Mr. Durkan** asked the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform if the application for family reunification in the case of persons (details supplied) in County Kildare will be reviewed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4747/06]

Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform (Mr. McDowell): The person in question made an application on behalf of family members in February 2005. The application was refused in January 2006.

My Department has received no correspondence on a request for review of this case to date. If additional information or documentary evidence are submitted, the application will then be reviewed.

Psychological Service.

322. **Mr. Coveney** asked the Minister for Education and Science the percentage of primary

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schools in Cork city and county that have national educational psychological service cover. [4509/06]

323. **Mr. Coveney** asked the Minister for Education and Science the percentage of second level schools in Cork city and county that have national educational psychological service cover. [4510/06]

Minister for Education and Science (Ms Hanafin): I propose to take Questions Nos. 322 and 323 together.

All schools in Cork city and county have access to psychological assessments, either directly through the National Educational Psychological Service, NEPS, or through the scheme for commissioning psychological assessments, SCPA, full details of which are available on my Department's website. The latest figures indicate that 49% of primary schools and 73% of post-primary schools in Cork city and county enjoy a dedicated NEPS service at present. In addition, NEPS provides a service to every school and school community in Cork city and county in the event of a critical incident regardless of whether the school already has a dedicated service from a NEPS psychologist. For all schools, NEPS processes applications for reasonable accommodations in certificate examinations and responds to queries on individual children from other sections of my Department and from the specialist agencies.

Schools Completion Programme.

324. **Mr. O'Connor** asked the Minister for Education and Science the action she will take to ensure that a school (details supplied) in Dublin 24 will be included in the school completion programme; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [4496/06]

Minister for Education and Science (Ms Hanafin): Urban and town primary schools and post primary schools selected to participate in the new integrated school support programme, as part of the new action plan for educational inclusion, delivering equality of opportunity in schools, DEIS, will have access to a range of supports, both academic and non-academic, after school and holiday time supports, for young people, based on best practice identified through the school completion programme. The school support programme will replace all of the existing arrangements for targeting schools for participation in initiatives to address disadvantage.

The identification process is being finalised and we anticipate being in a position to issue an invitation to selected schools to participate in the new school support programme shortly.

Schools Building Projects.

325. **Ms O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Education and Science when the extension to a school (details supplied) in County Tipperary will be approved. [4497/06]

Minister for Education and Science (Ms Hanafin): The building project for the school referred to by the Deputy is at an advanced stage of architectural planning. The school in question was listed in my announcement of April 2005 as a project to progress through the architectural planning process.

My Department's officials are in receipt of a stage 4-5 submission, planning permission — fire certification and bill of quantities — tender documentation, and this will be examined in due course. Should my Department require any additional information on the received submission, my officials will contact the school authorities.

I am anxious to ensure that a consistent flow of projects to tender and construction can be sustained into the future. A decision on which school building projects will advance to tender and construction will be considered in the context of the school building and modernisation programme 2006-09.

Schools Refurbishment.

326. **Mr. O'Connor** asked the Minister for Education and Science the reason the summer works scheme application from schools (details supplied) in Dublin 24 was not successful in view of the needs in the matter. [4498/06]

Minister for Education and Science (Ms Hanafin): The schools in question made a joint application for funding under the summer works scheme for 2006. However, the application did not comply with the terms and conditions of the scheme in that it was not accompanied by the necessary consultant's report and the application was unsuccessful for this reason. It will be open to the schools to make application under future summer works schemes.

Irish Language.

327. **Ms Enright** asked the Minister for Education and Science if an Irish exemption will be granted to a person (details supplied) in County Laois; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [4535/06]

Minister for Education and Science (Ms Hanafin): As part of the primary school curriculum Irish is a compulsory subject. Exemption from the study of Irish may, however, be granted to primary pupils under certain circumstances as outlined in Department circular 12/96. A condition for the granting of an exemption to a pupil

with a specific or general learning difficulty is that evidence of such a disability must be furnished by a qualified psychologist. There is, however, no provision in the Department's circular for the automatic granting of exemptions to pupils on foot of a recommendation in a psychologist's report. Under the terms of the circular delegated authority to grant exemptions from Irish, within the conditions laid down, has been vested in the individual school authority.

With regard to the particular case referred to by the Deputy, the position is that the school concerned determined that the pupil in question did not satisfy the requirements of circular 12/96 and turned down the application for exemption from Irish. Following consideration of representations received in the matter, the case was reviewed by my Department. However, it was decided that exemption from Irish is not warranted in this case.

School Transport.

328. **Mr. Howlin** asked the Minister for Education and Science if a secondary school pupil (details supplied) in County Wexford, whose application for school transport is the subject of an appeal, is entitled to school transport; if her attention has been drawn to the fact that the private bus transport arranged for this pupil pending a decision on their appeal to her Department has been withdrawn and the family is not in a position to transport the pupil to school; the position in relation to this case; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [4536/06]

Minister of State at the Department of Education and Science (Miss de Valera): I can confirm that the family of the pupil referred to by the Deputy recently appealed my Department's decision in this case to the school transport appeals board. I understand that the board will consider the case at its next meeting on 16 February 2006.

The school transport appeals board is independent of my Department and it would not be appropriate for me to comment further on the matter pending the board's determination of the appeal.

Schools Amalgamation.

329. **Mr. Aylward** asked the Minister for Education and Science further to Question No. 420 of 6 December 2005 the progress which has since been made on the matter (details supplied). [4549/06]

Minister for Education and Science (Ms Hanafin): Discussions are ongoing with the trustees in regard to progressing the agreed amalgamation of the schools to which the Deputy refers.

Schools Refurbishment.

330. **Mr. F. McGrath** asked the Minister for Education and Science the reason funding for refurbishment of the science laboratories at a school (details supplied) in Dublin 3 were not approved. [4563/06]

Minister for Education and Science (Ms Hanafin): The refurbishment projects applied for under the summer works scheme by the school in question were not deemed suitable under this scheme owing to the extent of works required.

The school planning section of my Department will write to the school authorities shortly advising them of the options available for addressing the required works.

Adult Literacy.

331. **Ms Enright** asked the Minister for Education and Science if a person appointed to a post (details supplied) has the relevant qualifications for that post; if an investigation will be held to determine whether the person has a minimum of three years working in adult literacy; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [4603/06]

Minister of State at the Department of Education and Science (Miss de Valera): The VEC that made the appointment has confirmed that it is fully in conformity with the regulations for appointments to the post in question, including the requirement that persons appointed have a minimum of three years working in adult literacy. In the light of this assurance, I do not propose to intervene in the matter.

Schools Refurbishment.

332. **Mr. Gregory** asked the Minister for Education and Science if funding has been sought for a new classroom, new roof and rewiring by the school authorities (details supplied); and her Department's response to this request. [4633/06]

Minister for Education and Science (Ms Hanafin): The school referred to by the Deputy has been included on the list of schools which have been successful under the summer works scheme 2006. The school has been approved for a combined project comprising mechanical, roofing and classroom conversion works.

All the schools covered by the initiative will be contacted directly by the school building section of the Department with details of the grant aid being provided and instructions on how to proceed.

333. **Mr. Stagg** asked the Minister for Education and Science further to Question No. 1397 of 25 January 2006, the reason the Church of Ireland national school in Edenderry was not

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included in the summer works scheme; and if her decision will be reconsidered. [4634/06]

Minister for Education and Science (Ms Hanafin): The school referred to by the Deputy applied for an external environment project under the summer works scheme 2006. The school planning section of my Department also has on hands an application for additional accommodation from the management authority of the school and this proposed building project is being considered under another scheme. In light of this, the school's summer works scheme application was deemed unsuccessful as it was considered poor value for money for the school to undertake external environment works prior to the proposed building project.

The management authority of the school has appealed this decision and this appeal is being considered. Officials in school planning will contact the school directly when a decision is reached.

Pupil-Teacher Ratio.

334. **Mr. P. McGrath** asked the Minister for Education and Science the average class size and the pupil teacher ratio in primary schools in Westmeath in each of the past five years. [4635/06]

335. **Mr. P. McGrath** asked the Minister for Education and Science the average class size and pupil-teacher ratio in primary schools in Longford in each of the past five years. [4636/06]

Minister for Education and Science (Ms Hanafin): I propose to take Questions Nos. 334 and 335 together.

The most recent data on average class size in primary schools in County Longford is as follows: year average class size — 2000-01, 21.1; 2001-02, 21.4; 2002-03, 20.9; 2003-04, 21.0; and 2004-05, 21.5. The average class size in Longford is substantially lower than the national average of 24.

The most recent data on average class size in primary schools in County Westmeath is as follows: year average class size — 2000-01, 24.4; 2001-02, 24.4; 2002-03, 23.9; 2003-04, 24.1 and 2004-05, 23.9. The average class in Westmeath is therefore in line with the national average of 24.

The information on the pupil-teacher ratio is not available in my Department on a county basis.

Major improvements in school staffing have been made in recent years with the hiring of more than 5,000 additional primary teachers. This represents the largest increase in teacher numbers since the expansion of free education. Today there is one teacher for every 17 children, the

lowest pupil teacher ratio in the history of the State.

Aside from decreasing average class size, the unprecedented increase in school staffing in recent years has also greatly improved the services provided for children with special needs and those from disadvantaged areas. Under the action plan for tackling disadvantage published in 2005, there will be a reduction in class sizes of 24:1 at senior level and 20:1 at junior level in 150 primary schools serving communities with the highest concentrations of disadvantage. With more than 600 extra resource teachers put in place this term, children with special needs are getting more support than ever before. It should be acknowledged how much progress has been made in this area in recent years.

Recently I announced that I have secured sufficient funding to provide even smaller classes in our primary schools in the next school year, and the Minister for Finance has committed to a further reduction in class size in the following year. Accordingly, over the next two years, my Department will put 500 extra teachers into primary schools to reduce class size and to tackle disadvantage.

The staffing of a primary school is determined by reference to the enrolment of the school on 30 September of the previous school year. The number of mainstream posts sanctioned is determined by reference to a staffing schedule which is issued annually to all primary schools.

The general rule is that the schedule provides at least one classroom teacher for every 29 pupils in the school. Schools with only one or two teachers have much lower staffing ratios than those with two teachers for just 12 pupils in some cases and so on but the general rule is that there is at least one classroom teacher for every 29 children in the school. Next year this is being reduced to 28 children per classroom teacher and in 2007-08 it will be reduced to 27 children per classroom teacher. Officials of my Department are drawing up the revised staffing schedule necessary to achieve this. Schools will be asked to use the extra class teachers provided as a result of the revised schedule to provide for smaller classes in the junior grades.

We have consistently said that priority would be given in the first instance to children in disadvantaged schools and those with special needs. We have done this and now, in line with the Government commitment, mainstream class sizes are also being reduced.

School Transport.

336. **Mr. P. McGrath** asked the Minister for Education and Science the number of school buses in the fleet which are now seatbelt-compliant for every passenger; the number of school buses which currently do not have seatbelts for

passengers; the estimated date when all buses will have seatbelts; the average age of a bus from the school bus fleet; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [4637/06]

Minister of State at the Department of Education and Science (Miss de Valera): The information requested by the Deputy has been requested from Bus Éireann and will be forwarded as soon as it is available.

Schools Building Projects.

337. **Mr. J. O’Keeffe** asked the Minister for Education and Science when steps will be taken to ensure that the extension to a college (details supplied) in west Cork will be provided; the reason no progress has been made since commitments to appoint a design team were given in 2002; and if priority will be given to ensure that there will be no further delay with the project. [4690/06]

Minister for Education and Science (Ms Hanafin): An application for capital funding towards the provision of an extension at the school has been received from the school referred to by the Deputy.

The long-term accommodation needs of the school are being examined at present. When that has been completed, the building project required to address the long-term accommodation needs of the school will be considered in the context of the School Building and Modernisation Programme 2006-2010.

Departmental Correspondence.

338. **Mr. Ring** asked the Minister for Education and Science when a letter was received in her office on behalf of a person (details supplied) in County Mayo; the person who dealt with the query; when the reply issued; the reason it took so long for a response to issue; if a written apology will issue to the person in view of the length of time it took to answer the query. [4731/06]

Minister of State at the Department of Education and Science (Miss de Valera): The letter in question was sent on 23 November 2005. It was received in my Department some days later and acknowledged on 30 November 2005. A final reply was issued on 26 January 2006.

I regret that the final reply was not issued sooner. However, I must point out that my Department was not the public body primarily responsible for the matter raised in the letter. In addition, the position was explained in full in my replies to Questions Nos. 474 and 475 on 29 November 2005.

Early Childhood Education.

339. **Mr. F. McGrath** asked the Minister for

Education and Science the position regarding funding projects dealing with pre-school children in disadvantaged areas on the north side of Dublin; and her plans to invest in early childhood education in 2006. [4755/06]

Minister for Education and Science (Ms Hanafin): Early education in Ireland covers the period from birth to six years. At present, almost all five year olds and half of four year olds attend junior infant and senior infant classes in primary schools. Outside junior classes in primary schools, my Department’s main role in the area of early childhood education focuses on pre-school provision for children from disadvantaged areas, for Traveller children and for those with special needs.

A Government decision was made in December 2005 to establish an Office of the Minister for Children. The decision to establish the Office of the Minister for Children will bring together the relevant staff working on the range of functions in the Departments of Health and Children, Justice, Equality and Law Reform, and Education and Science to maximise the co-ordination of policies for children and young persons. A new early years education policy unit has been established in my Department, and it will be co-located in the Office of the Minister for Children in accordance with the Government decision.

The Early Start programme is a pre-school intervention programme targeted at three to four year old children in areas of social disadvantage. With that programme, young children can experience an educational programme to enhance their overall development, to help prevent school failure and to help offset the effects of social disadvantage. The Early Start pre-school project was established in 40 primary schools in designated areas of urban disadvantage in Dublin, Cork, Limerick, Waterford, Galway, Drogheda and Dundalk. There are currently 12 Early Start projects in the north Dublin area.

The new action plan for educational inclusion, DEIS, delivering equality of opportunity in schools, which I launched in May 2005, aims to concentrate early childhood education actions on those children, aged from three up to school enrolment, who will subsequently attend the 150 urban or town primary schools, participating in the new school support programme, and identified as serving the most disadvantaged communities. The identification process is nearing completion, and we anticipate being in a position to issue an invitation to selected schools to participate in the new integrated school support programme shortly.

My Department currently funds 46 pre-schools for Traveller children, with 48 pre-school classes. In the special needs sector, there are currently 15 pre-school classes for children with autism located throughout the country. In addition, 12

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stand-alone autism facilities that provide an applied behavioural analysis, ABA, model of response to children with autism cater for a number of children of pre-school age. My Department has also sanctioned the establishment of a pre-school for six children with hearing impairment on a pilot basis.

There are seven pre-schools for Travellers and three pre-schools for autism in north Dublin. In addition, the Rutland Street project in Seán McDermott Street has been operational since 1969. It caters for approximately 95 pupils aged from three to five years and includes a pre-school centre, a special staff teaching allocation, classroom assistants, secretarial services and cooks, together with the provision of school meals.

The bulk of pre-school places in the country are financed by the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform, which has provided unprecedented levels of funding for child care in recent years. The Department of Health and Children also provides grants to child care groups, including to community groups in areas of social and economic disadvantage.

The Northside Partnership has developed an integrated plan entitled "Preparing for Life" which is intended to address the needs of children at each stage of their development to prepare them better for school. The plan involves mentoring and group training for parents to improve their skills and esteem and their aspirations for their children. It is intended that the project result in improved physical and psychological health and better educational outcomes for children at key stages in their development to the point of reception in school. The proposal is currently being examined by my Department.

The Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education was established in 2002 to develop and co-ordinate early childhood education and to advise the Department on policy issues in the area. The centre has drafted a quality framework for early childhood education which is currently under consideration in my Department.

Decisions of a policy nature relating to early childhood education will now be pursued as part of the overall strategic policy framework developed by the Office of the Minister for Children.

School Absenteeism.

340. **Mr. F. McGrath** asked the Minister for Education and Science the number of primary school pupils who drop out of the system after sixth class; and the number who leave school at 16. [4756/06]

Minister for Education and Science (Ms Hanafin): Statistical returns made to my Department show that, between October 2003 and

September 2004, 237 pupils from across all standards left ordinary classes in national schools and did not emigrate or go to any other school within the State. In addition, over the same period, 548 pupils left whose destination was unknown. Pending the introduction of an individualised primary pupil database, it is not possible to provide more accurate information on the destination or distribution of leavers by standard or to verify the accuracy or completeness of the above numbers.

In the case of post-primary education, data provided through the post-primary pupil database show that, between October 2003 and June 2004, 3,009 pupils left junior cycle without a formal qualification. Some of those would have emigrated with their families. In addition, over the same period, 1,384 pupils left at the end of junior cycle with a junior certificate.

The Government has taken several initiatives in recent years to encourage more of our young people to finish school, including the setting up of the National Education Welfare Board and the provision of extra supports for those at risk of dropping out through the school completion programme and home-school community liaison scheme. Also, under the new action plan for educational inclusion, the DEIS initiative, which I launched last May, extra resources are being provided to schools serving the most disadvantaged communities to help them to improve their retention rates.

It should also be remembered that many of those who leave school without a formal qualification proceed to various other education and training programmes, including Youthreach, as well as to pursue educational opportunities outside the State in the case of students who emigrated with their families.

Data from the Central Statistics Office highlight the inadequacy of any assumption that considering only what qualifications young people get in the formal school system gives one a fair picture of their level of educational achievement.

CSO figures indicate that the number of persons aged 20 to 24 that had attained at least a leaving certificate or equivalent level of education or training increased between 1999 and 2004. That growth reflects the increasing numbers of students now participating in second-chance further education and training programmes. The level of educational attainment of Irish young people is ahead of the EU average on that measure.

The Government has pursued a dual strategy of encouraging more young people to finish school and ensuring much greater second-chance and further education opportunities for those who left school early. That kind of strategy ensures that young people are empowered to achieve their full potential, be it by sitting the leaving certificate or by pursuing qualifications through other pathways, such as FÁS apprentice-

ships, which may be more appropriate to their individual interests. Thus, it is important that the Deputy appreciate that looking at just the level of achievement at school is not a fair assessment of the educational attainment of young people.

Defence Forces Property.

341. **Mr. Wall** asked the Minister for Defence if his Department has allocated funding to Kildare City Council regarding the takeover by the council of the road at Blackrath, Curragh, County Kildare; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4479/06]

Minister for Defence (Mr. O’Dea): Following consultation between my Department and Kildare County Council last year, it was agreed that the council would take in charge the road at Blackrath. As part of that agreement, €8,600 was lodged by the Department of Defence with Kildare County Council on 10 October 2005 for the purpose of bringing the road up to the requisite standard prior to its being taken in charge.

Planning Issues.

342. **Cecilia Keaveney** asked the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government if there are special exemptions available for artists to erect signs; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4608/06]

Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government (Mr. Roche): Part 2 of Second Schedule to the Planning and Development Regulations, as amended, provides that advertisements such as those exhibited at the entrance to any business or trade premises are exempt from the need to apply for planning permission, subject to specified conditions and limitations. Such exempted development signing is subject to a licence fee payable to the planning authority.

Environmental Policy.

343. **Mr. Gormley** asked the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government the steps he intends to take to deal with the increasing problem of graffiti; his views on whether the perpetrators should be made to remove this as punishment; if litter wardens should be given greater powers to deal with the problem; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4463/06]

Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government (Mr. Roche): Primary responsibility for management and enforcement responses to litter pollution, including the defacement of structures, lies with local authorities. The legislative and other supports available to the local authorities in that regard are kept under review. I am satisfied that the penalties and

enforcement provisions in the Litter Pollution Acts 1997 to 2003 empower local authorities to respond appropriately to the problem of graffiti.

Water and Sewerage Schemes.

344. **Mr. P. Breen** asked the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government, further to Question No. 1334 of 28 September 2005, the position regarding the Broadford sewerage scheme; and if his Department has received a submission of Clare County Council’s revised preliminary report for the scheme for approval; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4469/06]

Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government (Mr. Roche): The Broadford sewerage scheme has been approved for funding in my Department’s Water Services Investment Programme 2005-2007 under the rural towns and villages initiative.

My Department is awaiting submission of Clare County Council’s revised preliminary report for the scheme for approval.

Local Authority Schemes.

345. **Mr. O’Shea** asked the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government his proposals to provide a 100% disabled person’s grant to people who are on invalidity pension and are house-owners; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4517/06]

346. **Mr. O’Shea** asked the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government his proposals to increase the disabled person’s grant; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4518/06]

Minister of State at the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government (Mr. N. Ahern): I propose to take Questions Nos. 345 and 346 together.

The disabled person’s and essential repairs grant schemes are intended, like a number of other housing grant schemes operated by my Department, to assist works which provide additional or adapted accommodation in private houses. However, they are not designed to cover the full cost of works for all applicants. Local authorities may provide reconstruction loans to qualified applicants who have difficulty in obtaining finance to meet the balance of the cost. The focusing of the scheme on real needs, both financial and accommodation-related, and its operation by local authorities in an efficient manner will be critical in ensuring that it achieves its aim. The outcome of the review of the operation of the scheme, which is at present being finalised in my Department, will significantly contribute to that achievement.

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One of the primary aims of the review has been to ensure that the available resources be targeted at those in most need of such assistance. The needs of applicants with limited means, including those dependent on social welfare benefits, and the amount of the grant available have been considered in that light.

Water and Sewerage Schemes.

347. **Mr. McGinley** asked the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government the position regarding the proposed sewerage scheme for Gweedore, County Donegal; and when it is expected that work will commence on the project. [4547/06]

Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government (Mr. Roche): The Gweedore sewerage scheme is included in my Department's Water Services Investment Programme 2005-2007, as a scheme to commence construction this year at an estimated cost of €25.2 million.

Donegal County Council's preliminary report and contract documents for the scheme will be further considered by my Department on receipt of a certificate of completion of planning and a revised water services pricing policy report which have been requested from the council. Once the contract documents have been approved the council will be in a position to invite tenders for the construction of the scheme.

Air Pollution.

348. **Mr. Ferris** asked the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government if the burning of non-smokeless coal is permitted in the town of Tralee; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4595/06]

Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government (Mr. Roche): The Air Pollution Act 1987 (Marketing, Sale and Distribution of Fuels) Regulations 1998, as amended by the Air Pollution Act 1987 (Marketing, Sale and Distribution of Fuels)(Amendment) Regulations 2003 and 2004, introduced a ban on the marketing, sale and distribution of bituminous coal in the town of Tralee and in certain adjoining areas with effect from 1 October 2003.

Water and Sewerage Schemes.

349. **Mr. Deenihan** asked the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government when Castleisland sewerage scheme stage two will receive approval to proceed to contract document stage; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4605/06]

Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government (Mr. Roche): I refer to the reply to Question No. 1511 of 25 January 2006.

350. **Mr. Deenihan** asked the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government when Listowel town water supply scheme will receive approval to proceed to contract document stage; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4606/06]

Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government (Mr. Roche): The Listowel town water supply upgrade scheme is included in my Department's Water Services Investment Programme 2005-2007 as a scheme to commence construction in 2007.

Kerry County Council's design review report for the scheme is under examination in my Department and is being dealt with as quickly as possible. Following approval of the design review report the council will be in a position to prepare contract documents for the scheme.

351. **Mr. Deenihan** asked the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government when the design brief for the preparation of a preliminary report regarding the sewerage scheme at Tarbert, County Kerry will be approved; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4613/06]

352. **Mr. Deenihan** asked the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government when the design brief for the preparation of a preliminary report regarding the sewerage scheme at Lixnaw, County Kerry will be approved; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4614/06]

353. **Mr. Deenihan** asked the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government when the design brief for the preparation of the preliminary report regarding the sewerage scheme at Kilflynn, County Kerry will be approved; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4615/06]

354. **Mr. Deenihan** asked the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government when the design brief for the preparation of the preliminary report regarding the sewerage scheme at Finuge, County Kerry will be approved; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4616/06]

355. **Mr. Deenihan** asked the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government when the design brief for the preparation of the preliminary report regarding the sewerage scheme at Fenit, County Kerry will be approved;

and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4617/06]

356. **Mr. Deenihan** asked the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government when the design brief for the preparation of the preliminary report regarding the sewerage scheme at Castlemaine, County Kerry will be approved; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4618/06]

357. **Mr. Deenihan** asked the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government when the design brief for the preparation of the preliminary report regarding the sewerage scheme at Castlegregory, County Kerry will be approved; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4619/06]

358. **Mr. Deenihan** asked the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government when the design brief for the preparation of the preliminary report regarding the sewerage scheme at Brandon, County Kerry will be approved; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4620/06]

359. **Mr. Deenihan** asked the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government when the design brief for the preparation of the preliminary report regarding the sewerage scheme at Boolteens, County Kerry will be approved; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4621/06]

360. **Mr. Deenihan** asked the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government when the design brief for the preparation of the preliminary report regarding the sewerage scheme at Ballylongford, County Kerry will be approved; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4622/06]

361. **Mr. Deenihan** asked the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government when the design brief for the preparation of the preliminary report regarding the sewerage scheme at Ballyduff, County Kerry will be approved; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4623/06]

362. **Mr. Deenihan** asked the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government when the design brief for the preparation of the preliminary report regarding the sewerage scheme at Aughacasma, County Kerry will be approved; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4624/06]

363. **Mr. Deenihan** asked the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government when the design brief for the preparation of a

preliminary report regarding the sewerage scheme at Asdee, County Kerry will be approved; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4625/06]

364. **Mr. Deenihan** asked the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government when the design brief for the preparation of a preliminary report regarding the sewerage scheme at Ardfert, County Kerry will be approved; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4626/06]

365. **Mr. Deenihan** asked the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government when the design brief for the preparation of a preliminary report regarding the sewerage scheme at Annascaul, County Kerry will be approved. [4627/06]

366. **Mr. Deenihan** asked the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government when the design brief for the preparation of a preliminary report regarding the sewerage scheme at Abbeydorney, County Kerry will be approved; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4628/06]

Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government (Mr. Roche): I propose to take Questions Nos. 351 to 366, inclusive, together.

Funding has been allocated under my Department's Water Services Investment Programme 2005-2007 to enable Kerry County Council to undertake a preliminary assessment of proposals to upgrade wastewater treatment facilities at a number of locations throughout the county.

I understand that Kerry County Council has appointed consultants to draw up preliminary reports for 28 towns and villages, including the 16 locations referred to in the question. Five of these locations, Asdee, Aughacasma, Boolteens, Brandon and Finuge, have already been approved for construction in the water services investment programme as part of the Kerry villages wastewater project Phase 1. Consideration will be given by my Department to the approval of the remaining schemes when the preliminary reports are submitted by the council for approval.

Urban Renewal Schemes.

367. **Mr. Durkan** asked the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government the position regarding the urban renewal scheme in Kilcock, County Kildare; the extent to which refurbishment or new building projects have or will be supported; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4748/06]

Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government (Mr. Roche): Under the town

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renewal scheme 2000, a total of ten sites in Kilcock were designated for tax incentive purposes, eight for refurbishment incentives and two for refurbishment-new-build incentives. Further

information on the current position regarding specific projects in the towns concerned may appropriately be sought from the local authority concerned.