



# DÁIL ÉIREANN

## DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

### TUAIRISC OIFIGIÚIL OFFICIAL REPORT

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

*Paidir.*  
*Prayer.*

#### Leaders' Questions.

**Mr. Kenny:** Yesterday, I raised the issue of the remarks made by the Minister of State, Deputy Tim O'Malley, who has responsibility for mental health. The Taoiseach replied that the Minister of State does his job to the best of his ability. One must consider that 3,000 children are waiting for assessments, never mind treatment. This waiting list was dismissed as something with which to beat up the Department or a creation of power-hungry psychiatrists. Does the Taoiseach believe professional psychiatrists deliberately lengthen their waiting lists to put themselves in a position to use their power and influence, as the Minister of State, Deputy Tim O'Malley, stated?

I recall that in February of this year, the Minister of State, Deputy Tim O'Malley, told the Dáil the constant reiteration and repetition of problems in the mental health services was becoming a bit tiresome. This Minister of State has responsibility for mental health and he regards it as a bit tiresome. He regards a waiting list of 3,000 as being deliberately created by psychiatrists who want to use their power and influence.

Plans to build seven specialised units date back to when the Minister, Deputy Hanafin, was a

Minister of State. The agency to which the Minister of State, Deputy Tim O'Malley, works, namely, the HSE, is clearly hanging him out to dry. He states we will have four units by the end of next year. The HSE states it will be 2008 or 2009. In his earlier report to the Seanad, he stated these four units will be operational by the end of 2006. It is another example of not being able to translate the words of Government into practice.

Yesterday, the Taoiseach stated with regard to these extremely vulnerable people that the Minister of State is doing the job to the best of his ability. I happened to see some of the programme last night where one psychiatrist stated that the Minister of State, Deputy Tim O'Malley, should go to a group meeting where they can only deal with people who either inflict self-harm or are clearly suicidal.

The Government has taken in €8 billion more than was projected during the past number of years. Surely, without any thought, the area of mental health, where the budget percentage declined from 11% to 7%, should be a priority. The person in charge, a Progressive Democrats Minister of State, backs up the Tánaiste and leader of that party who stated inequality is good for Irish society.

[Mr. Kenny.]

The Taoiseach is standing over the competency and statements of a Minister of State who stated it is all a bit tiresome. Does the Taoiseach believe it is a bit tiresome? Does he believe psychiatrists deliberately lengthen waiting lists to use their power and influence? What will he do about the Minister of State, Deputy Tim O'Malley's half-hearted statement of regret? It was not an apology. It was regret he was caught out.

**The Taoiseach:** I can go back over some of what I stated yesterday.

**Mr. Gormley:** That is tiresome.

**Mr. N. Dempsey:** Not half as tiresome as Deputy Kenny.

**The Taoiseach:** Perhaps it is, but it is necessary. Deputy Kenny raised the exact same question yesterday so I must deal with the issue again.

**Ms O. Mitchell:** The Taoiseach did not deal with it yesterday.

**Mr. D. Ahern:** The Taoiseach would be accused if he did not answer the question.

**Mr. Durkan:** Deputy Kenny asked a specific question. Does the Taoiseach stand over the Minister of State?

**The Taoiseach:** Yesterday, Deputy Kenny also asked the Minister for State, Deputy Tim O'Malley, to clarify his remarks. He did so. The Minister of State congratulated and complimented the programme, most of which I saw last night. In the programme, he outlined the details of what he stated last January and March, that harrowing cases existed where families were subjected to inordinate delays in getting assessment and treatment. He fully accepted that waiting lists are real and many people wait too long for psychiatric services. He also acknowledged the work done by the psychiatric services — so do I — as they work hard. As I stated yesterday, that is why during the past number of years we have trebled the staff resources of consultant psychiatrists.

**Mr. Hayes:** The Taoiseach was not asked that.

**The Taoiseach:** Almost 100 additional consultant psychiatrists were provided. More than 300 psychiatrists deal with people with mental illness.

**Mr. Durkan:** That was not the question.

**The Taoiseach:** We accepted the report of the expert group on mental health policy launched at the beginning of this year covering adults and children on the basis of future development and what we should do for mental health. The report has been broadly welcomed by representatives

and psychiatrists. The independent monitoring group established in March by the Minister of State, Deputy Tim O'Malley, is working on it. It set out what we are required to do over the coming years, building on what was done over the past number of years.

Last night, I had an opportunity to see where the service was before I became Taoiseach, but I will not give the litany of the sad stories of what it was then.

**Mr. Durkan:** The Taoiseach seldom backs off from a litany.

**The Taoiseach:** More staff have been put into the service during my time as Taoiseach than were put in since the foundation of the State. I am the first Taoiseach since the foundation of the State to substantially change and take this issue seriously.

**Mr. Durkan:** Does the Taoiseach stand over what the Minister of State said? That is the question the Taoiseach was asked.

**The Taoiseach:** Deputy Durkan is correct. His party did nothing about mental health.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** This is Leaders' Questions. Deputy Durkan is not the leader of his party. His leader is entitled to hear the answer.

**Mr. Durkan:** Nor do I wish to be.

**Mr. D. Ahern:** He is not likely to be either.

**Mr. F. McGrath:** He might be the Minister for Foreign Affairs.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** The Taoiseach without interruption.

**The Taoiseach:** Deputy Kenny asked about additional child and adolescent teams. Eight additional child and adolescent teams were put in place and recruitment is under way. We resourced them this year. We also included resources for additional teams for next year in the Book of Estimates published a few weeks ago. The report clearly points out that, between now and 2011, we must increase and resource the teams. Currently, 45 child and adolescent teams are in place. The report states we require an additional 40 child and adolescent mental health teams. We have recruited eight teams this year and must recruit approximately eight teams per year to get this service up to what would be considered adequate by this report. The report accepted that this could not be done in a short period of time. Looking at the recommendations last night, the need to put in additional resources was highlighted, and we did that this year. We took on 400 additional staff to build up mental health services. We need to get up to approximately 1,800 new posts, together with a non-capi-

tal investment of €150 million. Again, we have put in a substantial amount of the non-capital programme.

We have dramatically increased the numbers in the past few years but we must further increase them. That is where we must get to in respect of the teams. That is the plan with the HSE. We recruited approximately 400 staff this year, which shows the substantive effort to do that. It will not be easy to recruit staff, as has been pointed out by the professionals. This is why the professionals are under pressure in their work, but they know we are committed to doing it, and we will do so.

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

**Mr. Durkan:** Does the Taoiseach, therefore, stand over it?

**A Deputy:** The children in the gallery are tired of listening to him.

**Mr. Kenny:** It is like the Taoiseach's comment about sitting close to President Bush — one would need to get very close to be really assured here. This is an important day in the life of any Government, particularly for the Minister for Finance. Obviously, the economic circumstances are very different from those on the last occasion when the former Minister for Finance, Deputy Quinn, presented the first budgetary surplus in 27 years, which was £11 million.

My problem is that the Taoiseach has not answered the two questions I asked, which relate to accountability on the part of the Government. I will bring him back to a couple of fundamental issues. The Mental Health Commission reported earlier this year that there is no fully functioning multidisciplinary facility in the country 22 years after it made that recommendation. The problem is that the Minister of State, Deputy Tim O'Malley, issued a half-hearted regret at being found out not so much for the words he uttered but for his complete incomprehension of the scale of what he is dealing with. Mental health is the only area with which he must deal.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Deputy Kenny's time has concluded.

**Mr. Kenny:** A total of 3,000 people are on the waiting list and 300 children are in adult psychiatric units, which is disgraceful, while the Taoiseach talks about the moneys that have been allocated. The Taoiseach referred to some of the questions I raised yesterday. I will ask him two questions that I already put to him this morning but which he did not answer. He knows the answers to these questions because they are either "yes" or "no". We are dealing with Leaders' Questions and the Taoiseach is the leader of the Government.

My first question is very clear. Does the Taoiseach believe that professional psychiatrists in this country deliberately maintain long waiting lists to exert power and influence — yes or no? Second, does the Taoiseach believe that the continuous repetition and mention of problems in the mental health area is tiresome — yes or no? I ask the Taoiseach to answer as leader of the Government and not to associate himself with the incomprehension, incompetence and lack of accountability of the Minister of State, who represents a party that supports inequality in Irish society.

**Mr. Durkan:** Hear, hear.

**The Taoiseach:** The answer to both questions is "no". The report on the programme, *A Vision for Change*—

**Mr. F. McGrath:** More detail is needed.

**The Taoiseach:** —highlights what has happened in recent years and we should take full account of that. A commitment to what we must do in the period to 2011 was made in *A Vision for Change* by the expert group and it has been implemented. This year alone, the HSE will recruit 400 staff to build up mental health services. That is a very strong resource. We have trebled the amount of resources, which effectively all relate to staff.

We have put a significant amount of resources into the teams, all of which is due to the service and work of the Minister of State, Deputy Tim O'Malley. The only point he made was that child mental health services in Kildare reduced their waiting times following the appointment of an advanced nurse practitioner who worked in close collaboration with what Deputy Kenny said we should have, namely, a multidisciplinary team to improve access services. The Minister of State said he would urge the HSE to evaluate the model and extend it to other areas. That was not an unreasonable thing for the Minister of State with responsibility for that area and for the massively extended budget in this area to say.

The Government knows and has identified in *A Vision of Change* what it needs to do over the coming years. By and large, that involves recruiting additional staff. Extra money is required for that and in our Estimates for next year, and for the next three years—

**Mr. Allen:** There is always next year.

**The Taoiseach:** We have taken on 400 staff this year and increased the number of consultant psychiatrists by 100. From the foundation of the State—

**Mr. Neville:** Waiting lists have grown longer.

**The Taoiseach:** At the foundation of the State, there were 200 psychiatrists, but in a very short period of time, we have increased that number to

[The Taoiseach.]

300. The Deputy should not refer to next year. This is what we have done this year. We have done an enormous amount of work in this area. We are endeavouring to implement that programme and put in the resources, which are staff resources, so that the expert group on mental health policy, which was launched this year, can build on what has happened in recent years. I believe that can be successfully done. Deputy Kenny is correct in that, because of the good management of the economy, we have far more resources to put into services, which is why we are doing so.

**Mr. Rabbitte:** I will deal with the Taoiseach's last point about resources. The budgetary provision for mental health services, as a proportion of the health budget, was 8.96% in 1997. The figure was 8.6% in 1998, 8.21% in 1999, 7.73% in 2000, 7.09% in 2001, 6.9% in 2002, 6.8% in 2003 and so on. The fact in black and white is that the proportion of the health budget spent on mental health services is declining.

The Taoiseach seems to think, having seen the programme, that it is all right to come in here and rhyme off statistics with no concept of the hurt that is felt by parents who cannot access services where they exist and who cannot get assessments where they do not exist. Having listened to the Taoiseach's reply, it seems that it is not only the Minister of State, Deputy Tim O'Malley, who is weary of this problem, the Taoiseach seems to be weary of it. If he admits to having watched the programme last night on tape and seen the plight of those parents, how can he come in here and defend it in terms of the millions the Government has spent?

There is not a Deputy on any side of this House who has not met some of these parents whose child manifests signs of psychiatric illness, suffers from Asperger's syndrome, may be autistic or suffers from a behavioural disorder, and have to wait up to four years and four months in this best of all possible worlds, with the most of all possible money, before they can even get an assessment.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Deputy Rabbitte's time has concluded.

**Mr. Rabbitte:** The Government is out by almost €8 billion in its projections in terms of budgetary forecast. We will be boasting later today about how much money we have, yet there are parents at their wits end trying to find respite care or an assessment service for their children in these circumstances. The Taoiseach seems to think it is fine that the Minister of State, Deputy Tim O'Malley, comes in here and tells us he has apologised to the psychiatrists. What about the parents? Did he apologise to them? The Taoiseach comes in here and says the Minister of State is doing the job to the best of his ability, but is that not the problem? The man may be

eminently well suited to some other aspect of Government, but it is transparently the case that he has no feel for this area, that he does not understand it and does not empathise with it.

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

**Mr. Rabbitte:** Any man who would say the professionals are manipulating the waiting lists to encourage their sense of self-belief and power, thus leaving parents in the aforementioned circumstances, is not suited to be charge of this area. All the Taoiseach is doing is standing up to defend the indefensible. Once more he is demonstrating no accountability. Will he deal with this problem or turn a blind eye to it and tell the people and parents that there are committees sitting, task force reports imminent and so forth? The circumstances are far more grave than the Taoiseach seems to appreciate.

**The Taoiseach:** Unfortunately Deputy Rabbitte's mind was elsewhere when I was answering Deputy Kenny. I answered the question on what the Minister of State, Deputy Tim O'Malley, said. If Deputy Rabbitte had bothered to listen to what he said last night, he would realise he empathised fully with the parents. If he had watched the programme with other than a political mindset, he would have seen the Minister of State was very supportive of them.

*(Interruptions).*

**An Ceann Comhairle:** The Taoiseach without interruption.

**Mr. D. Ahern:** Deputy Rabbitte will never learn.

**The Taoiseach:** Deputy Rabbitte said we are talking about implementation groups and reports. I am not talking about these but about policies that are being implemented which provide that one in every five primary school teachers deals with special needs and autism and 8,000 special needs assistants are employed every day in schools. We have taken on 400 staff this year and trebled the staffing resources. We are doing this to help staff in the field. We provided 400 staff to help the psychiatrists and trebled the number of consultant psychiatrists, not so much because it was a good idea but because it was necessary. These are not matters we are merely talking about. Deputy Rabbitte has just heard about this issue in the past few days and knows nothing about the subject.

**Mr. D. Ahern:** Hear, hear.

**Mr. Neville:** That is not true.

*(Interruptions).*

**An Ceann Comhairle:** The Taoiseach without interruption.

**Ms McManus:** That is not true. The Ceann Comhairle should tell the Taoiseach to tell the truth.

**The Taoiseach:** Regardless of whether it is intellectual, physical or sensory disability, autism or mental health, we have been investing considerable resources this year and for the past number of years. These resources have been put into revenue, buildings and staff and we have been improving dramatically the services that exist.

**Mr. Durkan:** They do not exist.

**The Taoiseach:** We have provided several hundred new residential places this year for persons with intellectual disability and autism, in addition to new respite and day places. We have continued to transfer persons from psychiatric hospitals and other appropriate places—

**Mr. O'Dowd:** They were put into Leas Cross and Bedford House.

**The Taoiseach:** The issue is—

**Mr. O'Dowd:** Leas Cross and Bedford House.

**The Taoiseach:** —that the Opposition has nothing to talk about—

*(Interruptions).*

**Mr. F. McGrath:** The issue is the waiting lists.

**Mr. Durkan:** Waiting lists.

**The Taoiseach:** They decided they would have a go at one or two lines of what the Minister of State, Deputy O'Malley, said. The fact is we are doing something rather than talking about it.

**Mr. Durkan:** The fact is there are waiting lists.

*(Interruptions).*

**The Taoiseach:** It is sad that the Opposition has no real interest in mental health other than—

**Mr. O'Dowd:** We have.

**Mr. Howlin:** That is shameless.

*(Interruptions).*

**The Taoiseach:** —trying to win political points.

**Mr. Durkan:** The Taoiseach has no knowledge of or respect for—

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Allow Deputy Rabbitte without interruption.

**Mr. Rabbitte:** I am not going to reply to the Taoiseach in kind. I regret very much that he does not regard this as an appropriate subject to talk about. If he talks to parents, including some of those who appeared on the programme, he will understand why the issue is appropriate for the House to debate. He will also understand that all the professionals have concluded that early intervention is the key.

**Mr. M. Higgins:** Hear, hear.

**Mr. Rabbitte:** That is exactly the issue in question, even if the Taoiseach cannot understand it. The facts to which I refer are attributable to the HSE and not to me. The Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government, Deputy Roche, should stay out of it — he is only trying to divert the Taoiseach. Let the Taoiseach think for himself.

**Mr. Roche:** Come on, the ould Stalinism comes to the surface—

**Mr. Rabbitte:** Three thousand—

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Allow Deputy Rabbitte without interruption.

*(Interruptions).*

**Mr. Roche:** The ould Stalinism has come up to the surface—

**Mr. Rabbitte:** According to the HSE, 3,000—

**Mr. Allen:** Smugness himself.

**Mr. Roche:** Take us out to shoot us.

**Mr. Rabbitte:** Is Deputy Roche finished? According to the HSE, 3,000 children await assessment, bearing in mind that early intervention is the key.

Consider the provision of inpatient child and adolescent beds. It is said that 236 are required while there are 20 available.

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

**Mr. Rabbitte:** The areas of greatest need are the areas of least staffing. If this is not an appropriate subject to raise in this House, I do not know what is. If, in two days, the Taoiseach is to accept the resignation or retirement of one of his Ministers of State, could anything be more appropriate than his acceptance, in two days, of the resignation or retirement of two of his Ministers of State? The Minister of State at the Department of Health and Children, Deputy Tim O'Malley, is entirely unsuited to this particular post.

**Mr. T. O'Malley:** That is in Deputy Rabbitte's opinion and he is not always right.

**Mr. Rabbitte:** In the opinion of the parents who are confronted with the circumstances we saw on television——

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Deputy Rabbitte's time has concluded.

**Mr. Rabbitte:** ——and in the opinion of people charged with mental health services and the professionals and psychiatrists who have written to the newspapers about the Minister of State's grasp of this subject——

**Mr. T. O'Malley:** The majority of psychiatrists support me——

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Allow Deputy Rabbitte without interruption. Deputy Rabbitte's time has concluded.

**Mr. Rabbitte:** A majority of psychiatrists——

**Mr. T. O'Malley:** Noel Browne would turn in his grave.

**Mr. Rabbitte:** ——know very well that while the Minister of State, Deputy Tim O'Malley, is responsible for mental health services, it does not matter what money is invested in them.

**Mr. Durkan:** Correct.

**Mr. Rabbitte:** He has no feel, understanding, grasp or suitability——

**Mr. T. O'Malley:** On the contrary, I have way more grasp——

**An Ceann Comhairle:** The Minister of State should allow Deputy Rabbitte to contribute. Deputy Rabbitte's time has concluded.

**Mr. Rabbitte:** He is making public statements that anger parents and leave them in despair. They are at their wits' ends trying to manage the domestic situation. They do not know where to go for help and are told they must wait for psychological and psychiatric assessment for their children in the knowledge that they are most at risk of becoming chronically mentally ill if there is no such assessment——

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I ask the Deputy to give way to the Taoiseach.

**Mr. Rabbitte:** ——and will be immensely costly on the State later in life.

**The Taoiseach:** I agree with one point Deputy Rabbitte made, namely, that this is a very important issue to be discussing. That is why we are so determined to continue to implement and resource the A Vision for Change programme,

which was agreed for this year, and not to talk about it. As I stated, regardless of all the staff we provided over recent years, we provided 400 for mental health services this year alone. We provided eight extra teams and identified, over recent years, what we need to do. The comments of the Minister of State, Deputy Tim O'Malley, in March outlined what we need to do over the next five years. In this regard, he set up the independent monitoring group, which we have resourced for the coming years.

I totally agree with what is stated in A Vision for Change. Deputy Rabbitte is repeating this and it is Government policy. I obviously agree with him that we need to deal with people early. This is why all primary and post-primary schools have access to psychological assessments for their pupils.

**A Deputy:** The Taoiseach should talk to the people.

*(Interruptions).*

**Ms Shortall:** The Society of St. Vincent de Paul must pay for assessments.

**The Taoiseach:** My side of the House listened carefully to Deputy Rabbitte. Schools do not currently have psychologists assigned to them availing of the scheme. In the ten years——

**Mr. Stagg:** They have not enough.

**Mr. D. Ahern:** Let the Taoiseach answer.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Allow the Taoiseach without interruption.

**The Taoiseach:** Why must I put up with this?

**Mr. Allen:** Because the Taoiseach should be accountable, that is why.

**The Taoiseach:** I was asked questions by Deputy Rabbitte and just want to answer on what we are doing and trying to do for mental health services.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Seven minutes are allotted for Leaders' Questions. Deputy Rabbitte used eight this morning.

**Mr. Stagg:** A very good use of time.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** The least the Taoiseach or another member of the Government replying is entitled to is to be heard in silence. I call the Taoiseach.

**The Taoiseach:** In the ten months to the end of October this year, there were 3,500 assessments. Bearing in mind the number of schools, the service providers try to deal with the issue we need to deal with, as identified correctly by

Deputy Rabbitte. It was pointed out in the report and in the statements made by the Minister of State, Deputy Tim O'Malley, this year, as will be clear to anyone who was listening to what he was saying, that the schools served directly by the educational psychologist programme comprise half the picture. We must remember all the other schools access assessments through the NEPS.

I am happy to report the number of psychologists has trebled in a very short period since we set up the service. There are 127 psychologists in the scheme, four assigned to national behaviour support services which are badly needed, six are being recruited and in addition we will increase the staff for the fifth time for next year. That will allow further expansion of the number of psychologists next year. The actual number of extra staff will be worked out shortly. As well as recruiting more psychologists in the educational psychologist system we have taken steps to reduce the need for assessments through the introduction of a general allocation model for providing resource teachers in primary schools. One in five of our teachers is a resource teacher, 8,000 work as assistants in our schools.

Since last year all schools have been allocated resource teaching hours, based on their enrolment figures to support children with a high incidence of special needs and learning difficulties, dyslexia and other issues. This means that the individual assessment is no longer needed in each and every case. That frees up the psychologists for children with low incidence needs such as autism, and allows more individual assessment. More than 600 additional teachers were put in place under the model introduced this year.

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

**The Taoiseach:** Since we established the scheme, not so long ago, we have trebled the number of psychologists in the service, and funded in the region of 3,500 private assessments so far this year. We are committed to expanding the coverage of the service. We are recruiting extra staff and plan to hire more in 2007. We have agreed and are committed to a programme under A Vision for Change. Most of it is in the multi-annual programme so to say that I, or the Minister of State at the Department of Health and Children, Deputy Tim O'Malley, or anyone in this Government is not paying total attention to mental health services is wrong.

**Mr. Crawford:** Is this the budget speech?

**Mr. Neville:** There are 3,000 on the waiting list.

**The Taoiseach:** The Minister of State, Deputy Tim O'Malley, has stated that he was making a point about a scheme and he intended no offence

to parents or staff. He has made that position clear and the point should not be repeated.

**Mr. Durkan:** Why do we not have a service?

**Mr. Sargent:** It is incredible to hear the Taoiseach say that everything is fine, no worries, the Government is in charge, everything is under control. When one hears the Taoiseach say that the Minister of State, Deputy Tim O'Malley, is working to the best of his abilities and we should leave him alone I wonder whether the Taoiseach understand the degree of shortfall, and the problems and trauma it creates for people with intellectual disabilities and their families?

He need only look at his national intellectual disability database which states the problem in black and white. Apart from the absence of standards, a serious problem with which we must deal, 1,906 people with intellectual disabilities will need places for residential services in the coming year. In 2006 only 255 places were given out. Is the Taoiseach telling the rest of those people that there is no problem? That is the impression he gives us. Is he telling the 1,877 people who are looking for respite services or residential support services that they will get places in the coming year? That has not been their experience in previous years. Will the 264 people looking for day services get places next year? These are the answers we need.

Is the Taoiseach able to tell those aging parents, who are worried sick that if they do not survive the year their children will be left without care or services, that they will get residential places? What will the Taoiseach say to those looking for places who do not have places and who on past experience will not be able to get places?

To be specific, in an area with a fast-growing population, my area in north Dublin, which the Taoiseach knows, the number of residential places sought——

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

**Mr. Sargent:** This is my final point but it is important to state the reality so that the Taoiseach can say whether it will be addressed. A total of 115 people sought residential places in areas 6,7 and 8 of the Health Service Executive in the past year. Of those 32 got places. Is the Taoiseach saying that everything is under control or will he tell admit there are serious problems and tell us he will deal with them in the year ahead, before the general election? That is what people want to know.

**The Taoiseach:** I apologise if I am repeating myself but I said yesterday and this morning that A Vision for Change spells out the difficulty and the areas where there are insufficient staff. It points out where we need additional teams and



[The Taoiseach.]

resources. That is why the Minister of State, Deputy Tim O'Malley, and his colleagues in the Department of Health and Children, produced the report of the expert group on mental health this year in January which covers adults and children. It is the blueprint for the next few years, built on what has been done in recent years.

Deputy Sargent is right, that report shows that we have a five year programme to bring the service up to what it requires. We are into year two. The Health Service Executive, HSE, says that it has 45 child and adolescent mental health teams and needs 40 more. Until we get that 40 we will not have satisfied the requirement. It is not a question of saying that everything is right. That is what the report highlights. That is why we put the resources into it and why the expenditure has risen so much. Apart from the requirement for €150 million to finish the closure of the old hospitals as recommended in the 1984 report, Mental Health Planning for the Future, all of that expenditure goes on staff. We spent an additional €26 million on the eight teams set up this year.

The staff have not all been recruited, not because anybody was sitting on his or her hands, but because it is hard to get them. The HSE is committed to doing that. Next year it needs the same until we reach the 40 teams, 32 of which are still outstanding. That will deal with the assessments and the increase in consultant posts, from 200 to 300 posts, which we have begun and will continue.

Deputy Sargent also mentioned the campaign by St. Michael's House and others to deal with the residential waiting lists for the people of various ages who depend mainly on their parents. This will enable them to feel secure in their old age that there will be proper residential accommodation for their children. Over the past few years we have invested substantial resources in the bricks and mortar required. Most of these organisations, of which there are several around the country, such as St. Michael's House in Deputy Sargent's area, are building new houses and renovating houses to make them suitable for the staff to work with groups of between four and six elderly or young people to protect them for the future.

They have quite long waiting lists, which are growing even though we have invested and they acknowledge that we have done so. Due to the age profile, they have problems and made the case this year for additional resources which they received. Funding must be provided every year. They can do only so much each year but they have built up a waiting list which the Minister for Health and Children and the Minister for Finance, Deputy Cowen, who started this programme when he was Minister for Health and Children, require further resources to address in order to have more units in 2007. They have made their case and the Minister is dealing with it.

That is only the residential part of the work. Many other areas are being dealt with, apart from those discussed this morning, for example the national strategy action on suicide prevention, Reach Out, the work on the central mental hospital, and many other areas with which we must deal. Everything is not perfect but at least we have an action programme which we are resourcing and staffing and which is making a significant difference and must continue to do so until we get on top of this problem.

Members should acknowledge the major increase in staff this year whereby we have employed 98 consultant psychiatrists in recent years. This year alone we have taken on 400 additional staff but we have some way to go to reach the figure of 1,800 outlined in the report last January.

**Mr. Sargent:** The Taoiseach is right, that is some way to go. Listening to him, one would think it is somebody's else's problem, such as those in St. Michael's House. I was talking about national figures and Government responsibility. The Taoiseach will be familiar with the saying to the effect that the greatness of a nation is to be judged on the way it treats its most vulnerable. By that yardstick, this Government is appalling. I refer also to standards. Surely lessons have been learned. The former Minister, Deputy Woods, certainly knows a thing or two about failing to keep an eye on residential institutions in the past. The Leas Cross report tells us a thing or two about not having sufficient inspection in nursing homes. Where are the standards, the inspections and the yardsticks for people in residential care with an intellectual disability? The national standards for disability services report which dates back to 2004 has not been implemented. We have no uniform costs——

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

**Mr. Sargent:** ——no standards or inspections to uphold any standards, yet the Taoiseach stated more resources have been invested. How is that being checked? How are the people working in those institutions to measure the standards and what is expected of them, other than the standards they set for themselves? Does the Taoiseach not believe there is a need to refocus Government policy so that by the time he leaves office, he will not just be issuing press releases stating, "We did our best", he will be able to say, "We met needs". Currently, needs are not being met and it is being left to voluntary bodies to make up for that.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Deputy Sargent's time has concluded.

**The Taoiseach:** I do not accept that. I agree that voluntary bodies play a big part but they are

almost entirely funded by State grants from capital programmes, as is right.

**Mr. Sargent:** There is a lot of fund raising.

**The Taoiseach:** They do excellent fund raising. The Mental Health Act is considered to be one of the most advanced of its kind. The final part of it only came into operation on 1 November last. That is where the powers are set out.

**Mr. Sargent:** No standards are in place.

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

**The Taoiseach:** That is not true. Legislation has only been implemented since 1 November this year. Deputy Sargent's accusation is totally wrong.

**Mr. Sargent:** There are no standards.

**The Taoiseach:** Is Deputy Sargent saying the Mental Health Act that has only come fully into operation since 1 November this year is a nonsense?

**Mr. Sargent:** I was not talking about the Act. The professionals tell me——

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

**The Taoiseach:** That is not what they are saying. With the greatest respect, for the Deputy to make a comment like that, he just does not know what he is talking about.

**Mr. Sargent:** Yes, we do.

**Mr. Gormley:** Where are the inspection reports?

**The Taoiseach:** On the disability——

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Deputy Sargent had his opportunity.

**Mr. Sargent:** I am looking for facts.

**Mr. Boyle:** He is looking for further information.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** It is the Taoiseach's turn now and he is entitled to be heard, as was Deputy Sargent, with courtesy and silence.

**Mr. Sargent:** He was asking the questions.

**The Taoiseach:** A monitoring and implementation group is in place this year for A Vision for Change. The legislation and standards are in place.

**Mr. Sargent:** There are no inspections.

**The Taoiseach:** A total of €2.4 billion has been invested in the area of intellectual, physical and sensory autism. Practically all that money has been spent on staff. The money is used to employ professionals. It is not a case of billions of euro being thrown around the place. Staff are employed to help the needs of these people on a daily basis. It is right that we invest this money in services for people with intellectual disability. This year 255 residential respite places have been provided for people with autism. A total of 535 day care places have also been provided. The expenditure is being made and a vast amount of money has been invested in this area. I am glad——

**Mr. Durkan:** It is not there now.

**The Taoiseach:** It is. A total of €2.4 billion has been invested this year in——

**Mr. Durkan:** The services are not there.

**Mr. Connolly:** The provisions of Planning for the Future was never implemented and neither was A Vision for Change.

**The Taoiseach:** Staff are working in the areas of intellectual, physical and sensory autism and mental health.

**Mr. Connolly:** It never happened.

**The Taoiseach:** The State is investing in these areas. As I pointed out several times this morning, we need to do more in this area. We need to increase staffing levels to the 1,800 posts that were set out in the action programme. We also need to spend €150 million dealing with it in the coming years.

I meant to pick up on a point made by Deputy Rabbitte earlier on the figures he gave. He is aware that those figures relate to a number of different areas. The figures for mental health come from the Departments of Health and Children and Education and Science. The percentage figures are far higher than those quoted by the Deputy because they are not all in one subhead.

**Mr. Rabbitte:** The figures come from a reply to a parliamentary question.

**The Taoiseach:** We are currently spending €850 million on special needs in the education system. It is right that we do that at an early stage. Previously, we did not do that, as we had no money. When I first became Taoiseach there was probably a handful of people in the education system dealing with special needs, now there are thousands. It is right that we have done that. In less than a decade we have moved to a position where 20% of primary teachers, not to mind thousands of special needs assistants in schools and the thousands of other people in the community, are working in this area. The fact is we are investing

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significant resources, but, as the report outlines, we will have to continue to increase these numbers over the next five years.

### Ceisteanna — Questions.

#### Departmental Bodies.

1. **Mr. Kenny** asked the Taoiseach the outcome of the meeting of the cross-departmental team on housing, infrastructure and PPPs which took place on 8 November 2006; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37074/06]

2. **Mr. Rabbitte** asked the Taoiseach the outcome of the November 2006 meeting of the cross-departmental team on housing and infrastructure; when the team is next due to meet; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [38683/06]

3. **Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin** asked the Taoiseach the outcome of the November 2006 meeting of the cross-departmental team on housing, infrastructure and public private partnerships; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [40252/06]

4. **Mr. Sargent** asked the Taoiseach the outcome of the most recent meeting of the cross-departmental team on housing, infrastructure and PPPs; when the team is next due to meet; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [40349/06]

**The Taoiseach:** I propose to take Questions Nos. 1 to 4, inclusive, together.

The role of the cross-departmental team is to identify and assist in progressing and resolving issues related to infrastructure planning and delivery, ensuring that they are adequately prepared for consideration by the Cabinet committee on housing, infrastructure and PPPs and, where necessary, by Government.

This preparation has helped to improve significantly the capacity for the delivery of national infrastructure, especially in terms of time and cost. However, lead responsibility remains clearly with the relevant Minister and Department in respect of each policy area or individual infrastructure project.

Meetings of the cross-departmental team were held on 8 November 2006 and on 29 November 2006. These considered key issues in regard to housing and transport infrastructure which, in turn, fall to be considered by the Cabinet committee. As the House is aware, Cabinet committees are an integral part of the Cabinet process and questions as to the business of Cabinet or Cabinet committee meetings have never been allowed in the House on the grounds that they are internal to Government.

This well established precedent is founded on sound policy principles and the need to respect and uphold the constitutional protection of Cabinet confidentiality. The cross-departmental team is due to meet again on 21 February 2007.

**Mr. Kenny:** Can I ask the Taoiseach if the cross-departmental team discussed the progress being made under Transport 21, in particular, in regard to the four main rail projects, the Kildare rail project, the Cork commuter rail project, the linking up of the Luas lines and the extension of the Luas to Cherrywood? I am a firm believer in public transport on the basis that one can move more people per hour by train than by any other method of transport. Money has been allocated for these projects. I understand some funding has been drawn down and spent by the Department of Transport. Perhaps the Taoiseach would indicate whether that was discussed at the meeting, whether an update was given and what is the position?

Arising from that, did the cross-departmental team discuss other major issues such as the necessity for rail lines from Dublin to Navan, from Mullingar to Athlone and the western rail corridor from Ennis to Sligo? Perhaps the Taoiseach would give an update on these matters, in so far as the committee may have discussed them?

**The Taoiseach:** Regular updates have been made on different aspects of Transport 21. On some occasions they referred to roads and on other occasions they referred to rail. Regarding the mainline rail projects referred to by Deputy Kenny, most of the intercity carriages on the Dublin to Cork line have been delivered. When the trains have completed their commissioning process they will enter in service progressively. As I understand it, most of the work has been finished on that line.

The new high specification railcars on the Dublin to Ballina, Westport, Galway, Limerick, Tralee and Waterford lines are in place. The delivery of 150 railcars is due to commence at the beginning of January 2007 for the Rosslare and Sligo lines. That work will continue throughout the year. The introduction of these railcars will see the removal from service of all of the older stock and the provision of improved service frequencies on a phased basis on all intercity routes. Work on the first part of the western rail corridor is to start in 2007 but I am not sure when. The planning and other work on it is going ahead. The RPA has submitted applications for railway orders for the projects on the extensions from Sandyford to Cherrywood and from Connolly Station to the docklands. The Deputy did not ask about the metro lines. Most of the projects he mentioned are either well advanced or under way. Under the national development plan and Transport 21, CIE has been given very large budgets. It has much challenging rail work ahead

in the next few years. I agree with the Deputy that the more work that can be done on the rail the better. There is an hourly rail service to Cork during the day and also to the west. This should increase the numbers travelling by rail. I have not seen the provisional figures for this year but I understand the figures for 2006 show a huge increase and that there will be a further huge increase in 2007 with the availability of the new stock for a full year. There has been a substantial improvement.

**Mr. Rabbitte:** Has the committee done any assessment of the likely impact of traffic, about 6,500 trucks, that will spill on to the M50 and the toll bridge when the Dublin Port tunnel opens? Is the Taoiseach's face still set against throwing open the toll bridge, even on a trial basis, to see what the impact would be? In respect of the Minister for Transport, Deputy Cullen, deciding not to put any figures into the public domain on the likely cost of the metro north and the subsequent announcement of the metro west, does the committee have available to it a cost benefit analysis of these projects? Do members of the committee possess that information given it proceeded to make decisions based on that information being in their possession?

**The Taoiseach:** For a number of years there are detailed reports on the impact of trucks on to the M50. As the Deputy is aware Dublin City Council has made a number of changes this year on how it will be operated, zoned and ringed and the type of trucks to be allowed on it. Originally all types of vehicles were to be pressed on to the M50 but it will now be five axle trucks. That is not the entire volume of traffic that would have gone from Dublin Port originally but it will take the heavy vehicles. According to these reports most of the traffic going west or north, a substantial amount of the traffic, is already making its way to the M50. The exception is the traffic on the quays. That was the original reason for the suggestion that there should have been two tunnels, one of which would be under the Liffey. I regret that did not happen. I still think that creates a problem.

As Deputy Rabbitte said the easiest solution would be to open the toll bridge irrespective of the cost. However, all the studies concluded that this would create a bigger problem. All the wizards say it would help through traffic but that until work on the M50 and the various junctions, including the Red Cow junction, is complete it is better that this works its way through. There are also legal issues to be undertaken. There is no doubt it will be challenging on the M50. Given that the tunnel will be limited to five axle trucks they have covered themselves well. However, the downside is that the traffic will not be eliminated from the streets to the extent that is necessary. I have been pressing hard at the committees to have the work done. Admittedly it will take a few

years but it is better to get it done, one way or the other, even if we all have to suffer it in the meantime. Some €1 billion will be spent on the M50. They have a good programme and have, technically, found a solution to the Red Cow interchange which will help. Thank God for that. Barrier free tolling will take two years and it will be Christmas 2008 before that issue is dealt with.

I have been pressing at the committee for work to be done on the orbital road. Looking at the figures, my view, which may not be shared by all the technical experts, is that the M50 was based on approximately a quarter to one third of the current volume of traffic. In light of the rate of growth during the past half a dozen years where the traffic volume has increased by 800,000 I have been pressing to have the work done on the orbital road. Ultimately we need an upgraded M50, work on which will take a solid four years and possibly five if the airport interchange is included. All the work should be done by 2011, which I appreciate is a long time. Planning, advancement and work on the outer orbital road is also under way. There is a tight programme. I wish it could be done faster but at least the entire work on all the phases and the contracts on the M50 are done for the next four years, including barrier free tolling, the three phases and the airport interchange. A considerable team of our best engineers are working on that and the feasibility of the outer orbital road. Dublin City Council has designed it in such a way that it is not pressing all traffic on to the M50 in the short term. That should alleviate some of the difficulty if all traffic had been forced on to the M50 in January.

**Mr. Rabbitte:** I asked a question on the cost benefit analysis in terms of the metro.

**The Taoiseach:** There are detailed assessment figures worked out by the RPA. The reason the RPA is not putting those into the public domain is because of the experience elsewhere on large tendering projects of international firms. All of the firms that will be tendering for this work are large international firms. They have different expertise. To show our hand would not be wise. That is the only reason for not putting the figures into the public domain. There are detailed assessments but until we see real quotations it would be unwise to put any figures into the public domain. The Department and the RPA have assessments.

**Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin:** Can the Taoiseach give an indication of what proportion of the cross-departmental team's work is taken up addressing the issue of our housing needs? Is he aware if the cross-departmental team has carried out a detailed study of the report on housing carried out by the National Economic and Social Council? The cross-departmental team must be aware that the NESC recommended the construction of an additional 73,000 social housing units

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between 2005 and 2012. Can the Taoiseach give us a sense of the importance the cross-departmental team places on the whole issue of housing provision? Can he give us a sense of the extent of that address given there are some 44,000 household units currently on waiting lists at local authority level throughout the State and that for many today the idea of aspiring to home ownership, where the current national average cost is €308,000, is totally prohibitive? Will the Government adopt the NESC report as policy and will the Taoiseach ask the cross-departmental team to play its part in progressing the proposals contained therein?

**The Taoiseach:** The entire housing section in the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government deals with housing, but it is mainly the affordable parts of it that are discussed by the cross-departmental team. There is a range of affordable housing mechanisms, the shared ownership scheme, the 1999 affordable housing scheme, Part V and the State-local authority lands element and the affordable housing initiative. The reports suggest they are making significant progress in assisting people to achieve their goal of home ownership. In the last report that covered the period from January 2003, almost 8,500 affordable homes had been delivered, which is totally separate from the local authorities or the social housing scheme programme. For this year, the latest information suggests that delivery of some 3,000 homes will be achieved. This does not take account of initiatives by the local authorities such as the tenant purchase scheme. That scheme alone will probably bring in approximately 1,700 homes.

In Towards 2016, we have set a target of delivering some 17,000 affordable houses in the period from January next over three years. That is ambitious, but the increasing yield from Part V, which is now yielding because the planning permissions have gone through the system, and from the State and local authority lands element of the affordable housing initiative will make a significant contribution towards meeting the target. The establishment of the affordable homes partnership, which recently gave a report to the committee, is making an important contribution to the greater Dublin area. Particularly important for the operation of the partnerships are land exchanges and a “call for lands” process, which they have launched. They have studied the NESC report, but I will bring the Deputy’s comments to them.

Taken together, the total Part V yield to date from finished units, land and individual sites is the equivalent of some 4,000 homes. In addition, up to the end of June, some €38m in cash settlements had been received by the local authorities under Part V. While some characterise the cash option as the developers buying their way out, the officials concerned say that is not what is hap-

pening. Completed homes, land and sites account for the vast majority of Part V agreements.

**Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin:** No construction is taking place.

**The Taoiseach:** The legal obligation under Part V can be satisfied by way of a cash contribution only if the local authority considers it appropriate, taking account of its housing needs. It is important to remember that payments received by local authorities through Part V agreement are ring-fenced. The allocation received in the Book of Estimates is substantially increased for housing next year and particularly for social housing.

**Mr. Sargent:** I asked this question the last time this topic was discussed. No cost-benefit analysis has been carried out on the proposed second parallel runway at Dublin Airport. From the point of view of the Taoiseach and the inter-departmental team, it is a basic requirement that a project of such significance should have a cost-benefit analysis. Does he feel the inter-departmental group would make such a recommendation? According to the Taoiseach the group informs the Environmental Protection Agency on Government policy. Has it made recommendations on, for example, incineration, and the proposed super dump at the Nevitt in north County Dublin? Is it part of its remit to make such recommendations?

The issue of housing really highlights the problem of Government policy. Has the inter-departmental group had any reason to reflect on the way that Part V of the Planning and Development Act has been designed? Since 2002, some 7% of the 400,000 new houses have been social houses. Is there not a need to increase that number? Would the Taoiseach not agree that the 20% originally outlined in Part V is obviously better than the 7% and we require it to be——

**An Ceann Comhairle:** The policy is a matter for the line Minister.

**Mr. Sargent:** The recommendation of the inter-departmental group is to see——

**An Ceann Comhairle:** That is a question for the line Minister.

**Mr. Sargent:** I appreciate that and I will not dwell on the matter. Has the interdepartmental group had any cause to recommend a change given that we are not getting delivery of the infrastructure, particularly housing?

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

**The Taoiseach:** The runway issue was not discussed and I do not want to give answers off the top of my head. In the normal course, I would

have thought that a cost-benefit analysis would be done.

**Mr. Sargent:** It has not been done.

**The Taoiseach:** It was not discussed, so perhaps the Deputy could take it up with the line Minister. On Part V, approximately 100,000 planning applications for housing units were extant in the system and it took a number of years for them to go through. Many developments in the past four or five years had earlier planning permissions and did not come under the requirements of Part V. This year has seen a change in that, which is why the figures for this year are almost 4,000. That is changing and as we go forward it will change. In conjunction with the cross-departmental group the Minister and his officials have issued guidelines to all the local authorities — I am sure the Deputy has seen them — on how Part V should operate. It is a very clear document which removes many of the ambiguities. The officials also presented it to the CIF and various house builders' groups. Many of the difficulties and ambiguities in it have been removed in 2006 and it is far clearer.

Environmental impact and infrastructure are local authority issues, working with the guidelines. The cross-departmental group has been trying to get local authorities to move away from landfill sites and to find sustainable and environmentally friendly ways to deal with the issues. However, it has not gone into individual projects.

**Mr. Naughten:** Has the issue of rail freight been discussed by the cross-departmental team and what progress has been made in that regard? It has come to my attention that Coillte, a semi-State company, is importing timber from Scotland because it claims it is cheaper to do so rather than transport it across the country. We need to give serious consideration to the issue of rail freight. Has utilisation of the Phoenix Park tunnel been discussed in conjunction with the development taking place in Spencer Dock? The Phoenix Park tunnel is a very valuable asset that is greatly underutilised. While I know it is in the Taoiseach's constituency, it is critically important to consider its full utilisation to enhance services in the city of Dublin.

**The Taoiseach:** I am not aware of the rail freight issue. I will bring the Deputy's views to the attention of the Minister. It was not discussed, but I take the point he has made. Needless to say, I am familiar with the Phoenix Park tunnel. The Deputy is right in saying it has much potential. For some time it has been examined by CIE, not only regarding the development at Spencer Dock, but also in conjunction with the realignment of stations in the inner city. I was somewhat disappointed that a report from a few years ago showed that the experts were not as enthusiastic as I was about it. It has some potential. As the

Deputy knows it is used sparsely and it would require substantial refurbishment. In the overall development of inter-connectivity between Heuston and Connolly Stations it comes back into play. I understand that preliminary work was carried out and that this is still being progressed and remains a priority for the company. I have not seen any recent plans.

#### Order of Business.

**The Taoiseach:** It is proposed to take No. 26a — Budget Statement and financial motions by the Minister for Finance at the conclusion of questions to members of the Government.

It is proposed, notwithstanding anything in Standing Orders, that the Dáil shall sit later than 8.30 p.m. tonight and the motion for the General Financial Resolution shall be moved not later than 12 midnight whereupon business shall then be interrupted and the Dáil shall adjourn forthwith; following the Budget Statement of the Minister for Finance, the following arrangements shall apply in respect of the proceedings on No. 26a — the statements of the main spokespersons for the Fine Gael Party and the Labour Party shall not exceed 45 minutes in each case, the statements of the main spokespersons for the Green Party, Sinn Féin and the Independent Members of the Technical Group shall not exceed 15 minutes in each case and the statements shall be confined to the main spokespersons in each case; following the statements, the sitting shall be suspended for 30 minutes; and all divisions demanded on No. 26a shall be taken manually. Private Members' business shall be No. 68, motion re An Post (resumed), to be taken at 12 noon and to conclude after 90 minutes, if not previously concluded.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** There are three proposals to put to the House. Is the proposal for the late sitting agreed? Agreed. Is the proposal for dealing with No. 26a, Budget Statement and financial motions by the Minister for Finance, agreed? Agreed. Is the proposal for dealing with divisions demanded on No. 26a agreed? Agreed.

**Mr. Kenny:** When will the sale of alcohol Bill be published? On foot of the publication yesterday by the Tánaiste and Minister of Justice, Equality and Law Reform of the Defamation Bill 2006, has the Privacy Bill 2006, which was driven by members of Government, been dropped?

**The Taoiseach:** As stated recently, the sale of alcohol Bill is to be published early in 2007. The purpose of the Bill will be to codify the law relating to the sale and consumption of alcohol. There are over 200 heads relating to the Bill and while people are working on it, I do not believe anyone is doing so on a full-time basis. The heads have been approved but the Bill, which will be enormous because it will bring together relevant legis-

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lation introduced prior to and since the foundation of the State, must still be drafted.

Both the Privacy Bill and the Defamation Bill are due to proceed. The latter was introduced in the Seanad this morning. As the Deputy is aware from comments that have been made, the industry has been making representations to the Tánaiste regarding changes and he is prepared to engage with its representatives in that regard. The Government still intends to proceed with both Bills.

**Mr. Rabbitte:** Has the Government further refined its thinking on whether it is likely that we will have referenda or a referendum on children's rights or the protection of the child between now and the general election?

**The Taoiseach:** Not much has happened, other than the Minister of State, Deputy Brian Lenihan, updating us. It is still the Government's view that if agreement can be reached, we would like to deal with this matter before the general election.

**Mr. Rabbitte:** Is it intended to deal with both matters?

**The Taoiseach:** It is intended to deal with the children's issue.

**Mr. Rabbitte:** There are two different matters involved. One arises out of the statutory rape issue and the other relates to children's rights.

**The Taoiseach:** If we can reach agreement——

**Mr. Rabbitte:** On both.

**The Taoiseach:** Yes.

**Mr. Sargent:** Will the Minister of State at the Department of Health and Children, Deputy Tim O'Malley, be making a statement and taking questions in respect of the work he is doing, with which the Taoiseach appears satisfied?

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I call Deputy Durkan. Deputy Sargent should have asked a question on the Order of Business.

**Mr. Sargent:** My question relates to promised legislation. I ask it in the context of the health Bill, which has been promised.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** The Deputy should ask his question.

**Mr. Sargent:** If the Ceann Comhairle does not object, I will do so. The health Bill is promised for 2007. Will the Taoiseach indicate if it will be published early in the new year? Is he in a position to state exactly when it will be published? If he could do so, it would be of assistance in indi-

cating whether the Minister of State, Deputy Tim O'Malley, will be obliged to speak for a long period.

My second point relates to the British-Irish Agreement (Amendment) Bill, with which the House dealt last night. I refer to the register of persons who are considered unsafe to work with children. Will a publication date for the relevant legislation, which is urgently needed, be provided?

**The Taoiseach:** The health Bill should be published shortly. I hope we will be able to deal with that important legislation at the start of the next session. The health Bill will provide for the establishment of the health information and quality authority and the office of the chief inspector of social services on a statutory basis. If the Whips can reach agreement, we would like to take the Bill at the commencement of the next session.

We are trying to make progress on a number of matters that are affected by North-South issues. In that context, I hope we will be able to make progress on the second matter to which the Deputy referred. However, I am not in a position to provide a date.

**Mr. Durkan:** In light of the fact that the Minister for Communications, Marine and Natural Resources has returned from Hanoi and given that during his absence——

**An Ceann Comhairle:** The Deputy should ask a question. There is no provision for preliminaries.

**Mr. Durkan:** One is allowed preliminaries.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Preliminaries are not permitted under Standing Orders.

**Mr. Durkan:** The Taoiseach is a past master at preliminaries.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** We must move on.

**Mr. Durkan:** In view of the fact that during the absence of the Minister for Communications, Marine and Natural Resources it was found necessary to review price increases relating to gas and electricity, which were wrongly approved by him, will the Minister express to his colleague, the Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment, an interest in bringing before the House, as a matter of urgency, the consumer protection (national protection agency) Bill? The latter might, in future, protect consumers from price increases such as those to which I refer.

**The Taoiseach:** It is proposed to take the Bill this session.

**Mr. Durkan:** The Taoiseach must have a programme of rapid progress in mind in respect of the Bill.

**Mr. D. Ahern:** The Deputy must have been in Hanoi.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I call Deputy Stagg.

**Mr. Durkan:** The Minister for Foreign Affairs should not go there. If I were him, I would not make comments of that nature.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I remind members that an order was made unanimously by the House that we should proceed to Private Members' business at 12 noon. I would like to facilitate Deputies who wish to submit questions on the Order of Business. I will not be able to do so if Deputy Durkan continues to speak.

**Mr. Durkan:** I was being goaded by the Minister for Foreign Affairs.

**Mr. Kitt:** The Deputy is like a young fellow in sixth class.

**Mr. Stagg:** I wish to raise two issues. The first of these relates to the recent extension of long-stay charges, under the Health Act 2005, to mentally handicapped, which will leave them with only €35 per week out of their disability allowances. Will new legislation be required to enforce that change?

The second matter of interest to me is the old chestnut of the Irish abroad and television reception. Members on this side of the House would be prepared to facilitate the Government in passing the relevant Bill in one hour.

**Ms Lynch:** If it had been brought forward, the Taoiseach would have been able to see "Prime Time".

**The Taoiseach:** I will be obliged to check the position regarding the Deputy's first question on the regulations.

With regard to the second issue, if the person responsible for drafting the legislation does not let me down, I hope that we will be able to take the Bill next week.

**Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin:** Given that the Minister for Health and Children announced, out of the blue, on Question Time yesterday that tender processes will not be proceeding in respect of two of the proposed private hospital co-location sites identified in her scheme — that is, at Letterkenny General Hospital and Galway University Hospital—

**An Ceann Comhairle:** That matter does not arise.

**Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin:** It will arise if the Ceann Comhairle allows me to finish my question. Will the Taoiseach allow for a special debate in respect of this proposed scheme, particularly because there is no mandate in respect of it and

because it is a cause of great concern in the context of the network of acute hospital sites?

**An Ceann Comhairle:** That does not arise on the Order of Business. I call Deputy Crawford.

**Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin:** Will the Taoiseach accommodate a proper debate on that issue?

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Is a debate promised?

**Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin:** This was bounced on us yesterday.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Is a debate promised?

**Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin:** I seek clarification in that regard. Yesterday's announcement was made on the floor of the House.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I ask the Deputy to resume his seat. Other Deputies are entitled to ask questions on the Order of Business.

**Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin:** Is that debate going to happen?

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Is a debate promised?

**The Taoiseach:** I will raise the matter with the Whips.

**Mr. Crawford:** Approximately 12 months ago, a Bill on the advertising of alcohol at sports centres and other venues was removed from the Order Paper. The Taoiseach promised at that stage that the situation would be re-examined depending on the actions of private industry. What are his current thoughts in that regard and will the Bill return to the House?

In the light of the obvious lack of knowledge regarding what is happening in the health system, when will the Teamwork report be debated in the House? It was promised on two occasions by the Tánaiste and the Taoiseach and was supposed to be dealt with shortly.

**The Taoiseach:** That report will have to be taken next session, since there is no more time this session. We have cleared many debates, but we will not be able to take that one.

I will ask the Minister to provide an end-of-year update on how voluntary agreements with the industry on alcohol products have worked. I do not have up-to-date information in that regard. The legislation is ready, but we said that we would hold off. I will ask the Minister to report, perhaps in an answer to a parliamentary question, on how the voluntary agreements have worked over the year, after which we will be able to assess whether we should proceed with the legislation.

**Mr. Coveney:** I wish to ask the Taoiseach about the promised legislation on human trafficking.



[Mr. Coveney.]

During the summer, the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform made available draft heads of a trafficking Bill, promising that we would see the full draft legislation before year's end. It no longer looks like that will happen. When will we see that draft legislation and when will we have a chance to debate it in the House? We remain the only EU country not to have defined human trafficking in legislation and that must be remedied.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I call the Taoiseach on the legislation.

**The Taoiseach:** I understand the legislation is almost ready, the heads having been cleared in the summer when it went for drafting. The Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform lists it as its first Bill for next session. The fines Bill is to be published shortly and it is listed for early 2007.

**Mr. Gogarty:** Perhaps the Taoiseach might clarify this situation. Along with several other Deputies, I have asked in recent weeks regarding the student support Bill, which was to have been published this session. However, a reply to a parliamentary question by the Minister for Education and Science, Deputy Hanafin, stated that it would be published in the new year. Is it correct that it has now been pushed into February?

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I call the Taoiseach on the legislation.

**The Taoiseach:** This is always a problem. The definition of "this session" to which we operate is the day before the next session begins, so both answers are correct.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I call Deputy Deenihan.

**Mr. Naughten:** The Taoiseach is like our Lord, speaking in parables.

**The Taoiseach:** I did not write the definition.

**Mr. Durkan:** The Taoiseach is walking on water.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I call Deputy Deenihan without interruption. Deputy Durkan should allow his colleague to put his question.

**Mr. Durkan:** The Taoiseach tried walking on water before. It did not work.

**Mr. Deenihan:** Some time ago, I asked the Taoiseach about the obesity report, in which regard his Department has the lead role. Will he confirm to the House that initiatives have been undertaken to implement that report, which is now approximately a year and a half old, in view of the fact that approximately 300,000 young

people in the country are either obese or overweight? There are legislative recommendations in the report. Will they be enacted?

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I am sorry, but we cannot debate the issue now. I call Deputy Naughten.

**Mr. Deenihan:** Perhaps I might finish. Might we have a debate on that important report in the House?

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Is a debate promised?

**Mr. Deenihan:** Yes, the Taoiseach promised it in the House.

Second, regarding a somewhat related matter, given the fact that 2,000 people in this country die every year as a result of obesity, when will the coroners Bill be introduced?

**The Taoiseach:** It is listed for 2007. Perhaps the Deputy could table a parliamentary question but the obesity report has been sent to several Ministers. It is most relevant to the Departments of Arts, Sport and Tourism, Health and Children, and Education and Science, but it is being implemented.

**Mr. Naughten:** From 1 January 2007, teachers will be withdrawn from autistic children receiving home tuition. In that context, when will we see Bill No. 42, the education Ireland Bill? Will the Taoiseach intervene regarding the appalling proposal made by the Minister for Education and Science?

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I call the Taoiseach on the legislation.

**The Taoiseach:** It will be 2007.

**Mr. Connolly:** I would like to ask the Taoiseach about long-stay charges levied on community psychiatric patients who live in health board accommodation.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I am sorry, but that does not arise on the Order of Business.

**Mr. Connolly:** It does.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** No, it does not. The Chair is ruling that it does not. It is a question for the line Minister.

**Mr. Connolly:** I believe that it does arise on the Order of Business, since these patients are being discriminated against.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** We must move on in two minutes and I wish to call two more Deputies.

**Mr. Connolly:** These patients are being discriminated against.

Second, perhaps the Taoiseach might clarify whether seven-day, 24-hour accident and emergency services will remain in Monaghan General Hospital.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** That does not arise on the Order of Business. I call Deputy Broughan.

**Mr. Connolly:** I believe that it does arise on the Order of Business.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** The Deputy is being disorderly and I ask him to resume his seat.

**Mr. Broughan:** Is it intended to bring the Foyle and Carlingford fisheries Bill before the House next session? Second, now that we have the Minister for Communications, Marine and Natural Resources, Deputy Noel Dempsey, back from his Asian travels, is it possible to agree with the Whips a short session next week on the Commission proposals for the 2007 EU fisheries quotas?

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I call the Taoiseach on the legislation.

**Mr. Broughan:** Swingeing cutbacks are proposed.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Which legislation did the Deputy raise?

**Mr. Broughan:** It was the Foyle and Carlingford fisheries Bill. I also asked the Taoiseach regarding the fisheries proposals of the EU Commission.

**The Taoiseach:** We had hoped that it would be published and dealt with this session, although it has not yet been published.

**Ms McManus:** When will the medical practitioners Bill be published?

**The Taoiseach:** The medical practitioners Bill is almost ready and should emerge in the next few weeks. In recent weeks; I have been told that it was soon to come forward; it is practically ready.

#### Message from Seanad.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Seanad Éireann has passed the Electoral (Amendment) Bill 2006, without amendment.

#### Message from Select Committee.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** The Select Committee on Social and Family Affairs has completed its consideration of the Citizens Information Bill 2006 and has made amendments thereto.

#### Private Members' Business.

#### Postal Services: Motion (Resumed).

The following motion was moved by Deputy Durkan on Tuesday, 5 December 2006:

That Dáil Éireann,

acknowledges the:

- central role and function of the post office and postal services in the social and economic life of the country;
- commitment of the post office, collection and distribution services since the foundation of the State;
- ongoing need for the provision of a modern, efficient, reliable and competitive postal service through An Post, in keeping with the demands and requirements of the consumer and deregulation;
- potential value of the broadly based network of post offices, sub-post offices and staff; and
- need for the necessary legislative or management decisions required to facilitate the provision of modern postal, packaging and transmission service in the future;

calls on the Government to:

- address any outstanding labour relations situations within An Post which have caused unease and distrust in the workforce and clarify the circumstances whereby salary or pension payments or increases, due or anticipated, are to be met;
- provide for the computerisation, modernisation and upgrading of the entire network of post offices and sub-post offices with a view to providing a reliable, efficient and cost effective next day delivery service throughout the entire country;
- recognise the need to address the appalling low level of pay to a substantial number of postmasters who effectively have subsidised the service by providing premises and working at a rate below the minimum wage and in some cases, below the poverty line;
- recognise the existence of a public service obligation, notwithstanding deregulation;
- facilitate the development and extension of a wide range of compatible services through the post offices; and

- encourage all Departments, such as the Department of Social and Family Affairs, to use the services of An Post for payments or other financial transactions or transmissions and the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government to facilitate the provision of an accurate voters register.

Debate resumed on amendment No. 1:

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

“recognises:

- the challenges facing An Post in regard to electronic substitution, postal liberalisation and the competitive threats from private operators to both the post office and mail services;
- the substantial progress made in restoring An Post to financial stability after a series of losses amounting to almost €70 million between 2001 and 2003, inclusive, and the need, because of the low margins in the postal industry, to be vigilant against slippage into a loss-making position again;
- the putting in place of a new industrial relations framework following difficult negotiations between company management and trade unions in order to turn An Post into a vibrant customer-focused organisation and to ensure there will be no repeat of the scale of the losses experienced between 2001 and 2003;
- the statutory underpinning of the postal network, as set out in the European Communities (Postal Services) Regulations 2002 which provides for universal service obligations, USO, including nationwide postal deliveries at uniform tariffs and, in recognition of the USO, the designation of An Post as the sole operator in part of the postal market;
- the key role for the post office network, as set out in the programme for Government and in the White Paper on Rural Development building on the intrinsic strengths of the network in terms of nationwide reach, high customer footfall and strong relationship between postmasters and their customers; and
- the high degree of automation already undertaken in the post office network, with 1,000 of the offices already computerised and with auto-

mated offices undertaking over 95% of post office business;

notes:

- the payment of €20 million to An Post employees and postmasters in October which represents Sustaining Progress arrears;
- the remuneration increase of 63% paid to postmasters since the end of 2000;
- the number of extra contracts obtained for the post office network in recent years including the AIB contract, utility business payments and Garda fines;
- the work undertaken by Mr. Eamonn Ryan, at the request of the Minister for Communications, Marine and Natural Resources, to facilitate improved interaction between An Post and postmasters in relation to strategic issues facing the network;
- the commitment of the Government to the post office in terms of the arrangement with the Department of Social and Family Affairs for welfare payments and the NTMA for retail savings products; and

commends:

- the commitment of the Government to the future development of the post office network, as evidenced by Government approval to the joint venture proposal with Fortis which will harness the existing strengths of the network to develop a financial services business providing a range of banking services, thereby providing an improved income stream for postmasters”.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I call Deputy O'Connor.

**Mr. Kenny:** Tallaght will be saved now, anyway.

**Mr. O'Connor:** I am very happy that the Taoiseach, Deputy Kenny, and the other party leaders are in the House to hear me. I am most impressed.

**Mr. Durkan:** We are delighted to be here.

**Mr. O'Connor:** I will deal with Deputy Durkan in a minute. Perhaps he might let me start.

I wish to share time with Deputies Devins, McGuinness, Kelly and Michael Moynihan.

**Mr. Kenny:** None of whom is here.

**Mr. O'Connor:** This debate is very important, and I compliment my colleague, Deputy Durkan, on giving us an opportunity to discuss An Post. I am very glad to see the Minister for Communications, Marine and Natural Resources, Deputy Noel Dempsey, in the House.

I am told that I am a happy Deputy, but something that pleases me every single day is that at home, in my constituency office, and in the Houses of the Oireachtas, I open my mail, which always excites me. There is a great deal of correspondence from my constituents and greetings from various people. I also network with politicians abroad. It is important that, like the Minister, we understand the worth of the postal service. We receive a great deal of correspondence. I do not get at all excited about opening an e-mail or looking at a fax, but since I was a child, I have been happy to see post dropping through the letter box.

It is important that, like others who have spoken on this motion, we strongly support the men and women of the postal service. I have great respect for the postal workers in the Tallaght area, particularly those in the Tallaght sorting office. I am sure other Members will say the same about the service provided in their areas. The Minister, Deputy Noel Dempsey, is aware of my concerns regarding postal services because I have often articulated them to him. There have been post office closures even in my constituency, which comprises a major urban centre. I was consistently critical of the poor decision to close the post office in Tallaght village, which provided a tremendous service and a focal point for the people of Tallaght and surrounding districts. I am keen to promote Tallaght village, which is where my full-time office is located and where I spend a large part of every day.

A huge catchment area in the Greenhills-Greenpark part of my constituency, for instance, is without a post office since McHugh's shopping centre on St. James's Road was badly damaged by fire and left derelict. My constituents in this area, some of whom may wish to write to me and with whom I may wish to correspond, are obliged to go to post offices in other locations, such as Walkinstown. An Post should listen carefully to our concerns regarding Greenhills, Greenpark and other places where the need for a local post office is great.

I take the point which Deputy Moynihan-Cronin articulated yesterday that there are even more and different challenges in rural areas. It is interesting that all the other Fianna Fáil Members who have spoken on this motion are from rural constituencies. Their concerns may differ slightly from mine. It is important to emphasise that residents in major urban areas like to have postal services close by. I have pointed to some of the difficulties in my constituency but it is also important to point out that there are post offices in Springfield, Killinarden, Aylesbury, Glenview,

Kilnamanagh and Templeogue village. Some people expressed their disappointment when the post office in Templeogue village was moved across the street into the Centra centre. People become accustomed to availing of postal services in a particular environment.

I am glad the Minister is in the House to hear Members' concerns. I hope he will take account of the points made in this debate. Members are entitled to put forward their political views, even at Christmas. I have no hesitation in strongly supporting the postal service, particularly in my constituency. I am a regular visitor to the sorting office in Tallaght where the staff do a great job. Members have received regular correspondence from the Irish Postmasters Union and I understand the Minister is carefully considering their representations. I have assured the general secretary, Mr. John Kane, that I and my colleagues will continue to bring the union's concerns to the Minister's attention.

I always say that I come from a bygone Dublin era. I have never spent much time in rural areas and am comfortable being a Dublin person. We have seen changes to various semi-State institutions over the years, including Bord na Móna, the Irish Sugar Company, Aer Lingus, CIE and An Post. The latter is an institution whose activities impact all our lives on a daily basis. In light of the changes in society in recent years, including the demise or transformation of so many of these seemingly fixed and permanent institutions, it seems possible that An Post too may become a thing of the past. This should not happen.

The postal service is one in which the public has absolute confidence, and that confidence has never been misplaced. When one puts a stamp on a letter and puts it into a post box, one expects no other conclusion than that the letter will arrive at the location to which it is addressed. That trust has been earned through nine decades of service to the public by the postal service. I see postal workers in Tallaght serving the public in all weathers. Every Member can say the same of their own areas.

We can all be confident that the stamp we put on our letter represents a contract that will not be broken. It is the human element of the postal service that has inspired this confidence and respect. An Post provides a considerable range of automated services and further developments are likely in this regard. However, no technology, no matter how useful, can replace the men and women who walk the cities, towns, villages and farmlands of Ireland. It is by their efforts that the public's trust has been earned.

The postal service has continued in an unbroken line from the first day of the establishment of the State in 1922. It is one of the success stories of Irish independence. I urge all Deputies to be mindful of these facts when the move to open the service to private competition is considered. The private operators who move into the area of postal delivery will cherry-pick those

[Mr. O'Connor.]

areas of service that generate the most profit. That is the nature of business. An Post, however, is not merely a business. It is also a service and its workers are imbued with a sense of service which is not normally a feature of the private operator.

Change is part of natural development, but there are some tried and tested institutions and services we should not lightly change. An Post should not go the way of some of those seemingly permanent institutions to which I referred, not for sentimental reasons but for the sound reason that it has proven to be one of the most effective postal services in Europe. A colleague observed last night that we are entering an important new era for postal services. I noticed an advertisement recently which claimed that Christmas begins when one receives a card. For some strange reason, I received my first Christmas card in October.

**Mr. Durkan:** That must be a Tallaght phenomenon.

**Mr. O'Connor:** Funnily enough, it was not from a Tallaght person. I am always pleased to receive letters and look forward to a Christmas card from any Member who might wish to send me one.

**Mr. Durkan:** I will send one to Deputy O'Connor tomorrow.

**Mr. O'Connor:** I wish the Minister well and ask him to listen carefully to the various contributions of Members. I draw the Ceann Comhairle's attention to a group of visitors in the Gallery from the Harcourt Business School. I am sure he joins me in welcoming them.

**Dr. Devins:** I thank Deputy Durkan for tabling this Private Members' motion. It is timely for several reasons, not least of which is the fact that An Post is coming into its busiest time of the year. Like most Members, I have had regular meetings with members of the Irish Postmasters Union, who have kept us informed on a regular basis of the difficulties facing their members in maintaining a reasonable payment for the work they do. There is no doubt that many of them are finding it increasingly difficult to earn a reasonable livelihood for their work. The reasons for this are multi-factorial and need not be restated. Suffice to say that many postmasters and postmistresses are struggling to make ends meet.

There is a long history of poor industrial relations at An Post. The eventual resolution of these difficulties in late 2005 was welcome and I commend the Minister for his part in this. I was glad this led to all staff, particularly the pensioners, being paid retrospectively in October.

However, the post office network faces many problems in 2007. Much of the business done through the network may be lost, in particular

social welfare payments. This work accounts for a considerable amount of income available to An Post. Should it be lost, the future of the post office network will be in danger.

Not all post offices are the same. Many, approximately 1,000, are automated and, as such, are in a good position to face the future, be it in traditional areas of post office work or new areas such as banking. I welcome the joint venture with An Post and the Belgian bank, Fortis, which will see a wide range of banking services rolled out between March and July 2007. Approximately 400 branches, however, are not automated and are frequently located in small towns and villages. Occasionally a non-automated branch is found in a larger centre of population. Up to 97.5% of An Post's business is done through automated branches while only 2.5% is done in the 400 non-automated branches. Recently, as apart of a pilot project, ten smaller offices were automated and the resulting business is being monitored very carefully. If it shows an increase in business, moves will be instituted to make the whole network automated as soon as possible.

There is a social dimension to the business of An Post, especially when one considers the implications of not having a post office in a small village. Apart from the usual business transactions, many elderly people use the trip to the post office as a social focus for their week. I know post offices do not exist for this reason alone. In this day of making the books balance, the social dimension is often overlooked. While the network embraces change, the dedication and commitment made by postmasters and postmistresses must be recognised, in particular the value of the post office to the community it serves.

I commend the Government amendment to the House.

**Mr. Kelly:** The Government recognises the challenges facing An Post with electronic substitution, postal liberalisation and competitive threats from private operators. It also recognises the substantial progress made in restoring An Post to financial stability after a series of losses between 2001 and 2003 amounting to €70 million. With low margins in the postal industry, we need to be vigilant against another slip into a loss-making position. The putting in place of a new industrial relations framework, following difficult negotiations between management and trade unions, turned An Post into a vibrant and customer-focused organisation.

The statutory underpinning of the postal network is set out in the EU postal services regulations. These provide for a universal service obligation, including nationwide postal deliveries at uniform tariffs. In recognition of the universal service obligation, An Post has been designated the sole operator of the postal market. The key role for the post office network is also set out in the programme for Government and the White Paper on Rural Development. It is hoped to build

on the strengths of the network to ensure nationwide reach and high customer footfall and to continue the strong relationship between postmasters and their customers.

Automation of the network's office has already been undertaken with 1,000 post offices already computerised and undertaking over 95% of An Post's business. I commend the commitment of the Government to the future development of the post office network as evidenced by the Government's approval on the joint venture proposal with Fortis. This will harness the existing strengths of the network to develop a financial services business providing a range of banking services, thereby providing an improved income stream for postmasters.

The post office network is a very valuable asset. It comprises 995 automated and 404 non-automated post offices, 161 postal agencies and 2,567 post point outlets. To gauge the impact of automation on business generation, the company recently completed a pilot automation project for ten small post offices. Carrickboy post office in County Longford was one of the ten pilot projects and, according to all parties, it was a great success.

Postmasters are hardworking and give a friendly personal service. In Longford town, the post office is a hub of activity with a great buzz of business about it. The postmaster and staff are second to none and it is a pleasure to deal with them. The postmen and postwomen project a good image for the company. It is good to meet them on their rounds, especially early in the morning. They are always in good form and ready to help the customer in any way they can. Edgeworthstown, Granard, Ardagh, Carrickboy, Ballymahon, Lanesborough, Newtownforbes and Drumlish have vibrant local post offices. People should be more aware of the services available at their local post office. By supporting the business of the local post office, it will help the community's development.

The programme for Government is committed to An Post continuing to play a key role in mail delivery and as a provider of Government and financial services. It must still, however, remain competitive. The successful running of An Post is a matter for management and staff — unity is the key to success. It is crucial that the management and staff of An Post work together for the good of the company. A fair wage must be paid to its workers and we must come up with a formula where wages are good while a competitive service is provided. The issue of postmasters' remuneration must still be resolved.

Members of the public must support their local post office and find out what services are available there. Sometimes when it is too late people regret not having taken action. Business is business and it needs public support. The public should avail of local services. After travelling miles one will probably find that next door is the local post office and the friendly postmaster or

postmistress who can provide service as good as, if not better than, anybody else. I look forward to the continuation of the debate. I commend the Government and all of us who are committed to the postal service. We realise the great asset we have with so many retail outlets. Let us put our heads together and put it all to good use for the benefit of everybody.

**Mr. M. Moynihan:** I thank the Chair for this opportunity to contribute to this debate on the future of An Post and the post offices. In the modern age when telephone calls, texts and e-mails outnumber written correspondence we must be vigilant in ensuring and solidifying the position of our rural post offices. I am confident we are making every effort to ensure technology does not prevail over human relationships. The main thrust of this debate last night and today has focused on unautomated rural post offices. Ensuring we have the maximum number of post offices serving our communities across the country is a major issue. An Post has concluded a trial programme in which ten rural post offices have been automated. A decision on further automation of such post offices and the effective automation and the volume of transactions in these post offices will be made soon. It is of the utmost importance to our rural communities that their post offices are automated as a matter of urgency. I refer to recent discussions between public representatives and the community served by Lombardstown post office, which is not yet automated. Only by automating these rural post offices will we ensure their viability. We must ensure the local post office is automated and that rural communities can expect the same level of services from their post offices as urban areas.

To strengthen rural communities post offices across the country need the financial resources for automation. This is an issue not just for the Department of Communications, Marine and Natural Resources. If rural post offices are to be automated, funding must be made available from the Departments of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs and Social and Family Affairs. We have seen post offices close across the country, some of them in the Clár areas designated by the Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs as disadvantaged. While one arm of the State designates these as disadvantaged communities, another arm of the State withdraws services by the closure of the unautomated post offices. Based on the White Paper on rural development and many reports over the years, it is time for joined-up thinking on providing a wide range of services where groups such as Clár and LEADER are involved in rural communities throughout Ireland. We should ensure there is joined-up thinking on An Post.

From 2001 to 2003 An Post made large losses. Thankfully it has been returned to profit. A large number of issues can be attracted to the post office network. Last night the Minister of State at

[Mr. M. Moynihan.]

the Department of Communications, Marine and Natural Resources, Deputy Browne, mentioned statistics on the number of post offices per head of population compared to rural Britain or Europe. We have an extensive network. There is a difficulty and concern about the remuneration received by postmasters and postmistresses. There should be joined-up thinking between the Departments of Communications, Marine and Natural Resources, Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs and Social and Family Affairs. This will be an issue, perhaps in four, five or ten years time. We have seen population increases in rural communities for the first time in nearly 100 years. It would be remiss of us to neglect the post office network that has served this country so well since the foundation of the State and before that. The post offices have made a remarkable contribution and if we allow them to die out, it would be on our heads.

Issues such as AIB and bill payments should be highlighted. Some have said today that it behoves us to go and avail of post office facilities rather than doing transactions by electronic banking. In many of our rural communities the relationship between the rural post office and the local community adds to the spirit of neighbourliness and creates a sense of togetherness. The post office is a focal point in many rural communities and the services it provides cannot be underestimated. The Department is centrally involved in revitalising all our rural communities, making them self-sufficient and fostering a sense of togetherness and neighbourliness. Investment from the Government in the rural post office network would go a long way towards revitalising it. Recipients of social welfare payments are always given the choice of having payments transferred electronically to their bank accounts or paid at the post office. There is a kind of urgency in that Department to move payments from the post office that has to be stopped. We must bring the post office issue back into focus.

In 1994 the rationalisation began with designating a major post office and closing three or four smaller ones around it. That was resisted by communities across the country through organisations such as Save our Rural Post Offices. Thankfully they stood up to An Post and defended rural communities. Otherwise rural post offices would have been decimated. Looking back 40 or 50 years to the advent of the car, railway lines were taken up which we are now replacing.

**Mr. Durkan:** That is right. Hear, hear.

**Mr. M. Moynihan:** We will be judged on this issue. If we see only the short-term gain of electronic transactions and do not stand up as the Government, the Oireachtas and as communities across the country and defend the rural post offices, we will lament their passing in five or ten years time and say it is possible to have a wide

range of services in our rural post offices. We have other arms of the State, such as citizens advice bureaux. We should network these in because we have the offices in nearly every parish in the country. We should not be found wanting in ensuring the post offices are kept open. The Government and An Post must be committed to automating the remaining unautomated post offices without further delay.

**Mr. Gormley:** I wish to share time with Deputies Crowe, Breen, Healy, Connolly and Cowley. I am pleased to speak on the running down of our post office network. I have repeatedly submitted questions, motions and requests for adjournment debates on this issue over the past few months. On each occasion it was ruled out of order because the Minister is not responsible for An Post. However, on 11 May, the Minister for Social and Family Affairs told Deputy Cuffe that “the Government is committed to maintaining a viable network of post offices throughout the country”. How can the Government be committed to an objective but take no action on it and answer no questions about it? The Government is presiding over the post office network withering away.

This problem is not just a rural phenomenon. Residents in Dublin 6, in the constituency of Dublin South East, have seen three post offices close in the past few years. Terenure post office closed its doors in 2003, inconveniencing many people in the area. Earlier this year Kenilworth post office, on Harold’s Cross Road, closed due to the death of the postmaster. Rathgar post office closed when rent on the premises increased dramatically. In each case, An Post advertised for people to take on the contract for the post offices but no suitable candidates have been found. An Post is continuing the search but can local people be confident these services will be restored?

My constituents in the area must travel to Rathmines to deal with simple matters such as registering a letter or collecting social welfare payments. I do not expect all Members to be familiar with the geography of Dublin South East but it is quite a trek for elderly residents of Terenure or Rathgar. Older people are disproportionately affected by closures.

The Government seeks to portray itself as caring for older people but essential services for elderly people are being run down. My constituents regularly receive election literature from Fianna Fáil candidates emphasising issues affecting older people. My constituents are entitled to ask the candidates what the party is doing to preserve essential services that older people use. That Rathmines post office is the only port of call for so many residents has created problems. It was busy enough without having to deal with additional business. Queues and waiting times have increased. The post office is no longer open on Saturday afternoons. The number of post boxes, and the number of collections from them,

is also decreasing. How can this be anything other than a serious decline in public services?

The facts are stark and the figures released by the Irish Postmasters Union leave no doubt that the network is in decline and the Government is doing nothing to halt it. The IPU figures show how many postmasters are barely scraping by. Hundreds of members are earning less than the minimum wage and working 50 hours per week. Some 35 members earn less than €8,000 per year. Such post offices must be considered at risk of imminent closure. Terenure, Rathgar and Harold's Cross are busy urban villages with plenty of footfall and customers. If the contract for running such post offices is not attractive enough to draw suitable candidates, what hope is there that the post office network can be maintained?

The deal offered by An Post is not attractive enough and the responsibilities and risks are too onerous. Prospective post masters must find a great deal of money to secure the franchise and the return is uncertain at best. There are serious security fears, especially the so-called tiger kidnappings. These problems require imaginative solutions.

I suggest the Government stops sitting back while the network withers on the vine. If the matter is left to An Post, the outcome is clear. The major banks decided that it was in their commercial interests to reduce the number of branches. On a commercial basis, An Post will do the same. It is up to the Minister to intercede. He should stop talking the talk. It is time to introduce a number of one stop shops combined with post offices, as suggested by the Green Party.

**Mr. Crowe:** I commend the hardworking staff of An Post for the invaluable contribution to people in this State. The motion before us has mixed messages because it appears to support the deregulation policies that will destroy the postal network. My concern, shared by many, is that liberalisation and deregulation will cause new postal administrations to enter the market and cherry pick the most profitable areas. This will put more pressure on An Post's social obligation to deliver throughout the State. Postal services in rural areas are already scaled back, some areas having only two deliveries each week. The Government is allowing postal standards to drop in order to bolster its argument for increased market liberalisation.

The Fortis 50-50 joint banking operation could be the saviour of many post offices, yet we are witnessing the mass closure of post offices throughout the State. We must retain post offices in which this new service can be offered. Post offices throughout the Twenty-six counties are closing with no active Government response. Without a national strategy the local post office is in grave danger of becoming extinct. The decision of the European Court of Justice, stipulating that An Post must compete for Government contracts, fits in with the EU liberalisation

and privatisation plans but could be the fatal blow to the network. Government business accounts for 70% of post office transactions and many post offices are dependent on social welfare contracts. Over 25% of post offices have closed in the past six years and only 84 full-time post offices remain. These closures are affecting those in rural areas and the elderly most, especially those who must travel long distances to receive essential payments such as the pension.

Postal services are being scaled down in many working class areas. Staff at offices in Dublin 10 are to be reduced by half, a scenario that may be repeated across Dublin. In Cherry Orchard and Ballyfermot, the priority is commercial parcels, to the detriment of ordinary people as customers. People are receiving a second class service and business is the priority. Scaling down postal services will also affect Tallaght. In Lucan and Blanchardstown, some estates receive only one delivery per week. An Post is failing to deliver post every day due to reductions in staff and the Government refuses to adopt a progressive strategy for the network.

The liberalisation of the postal market is due to take place by 2009 and the Government claims this move is led by the EU. This is untrue because it is led by Ireland, with Commissioner McCreevy at the helm. In France, where postal workers are heavily unionised, such liberalisation would be unlikely to happen. Germany is also likely to oppose it and Ireland may be one of the few countries to agree to liberalisation. The United States, the beacon of capitalism and every Progressive Democrats dream, has refused to liberalise the postal market and is content to keep it in public ownership.

The motion calls on the Government to address labour relations in An Post. Ordinary staff are refused payments of up to €2,000 agreed under Sustaining Progress while top brass pay themselves six figure sums. This highlights many of the ongoing problems within An Post.

**Acting Chairman (Mr. Kirk):** Deputies James Breen, Healy, Connolly and Cowley will have two and a half minutes each to speak.

**Mr. J. Breen:** I find it somewhat ironic to debate a motion which calls on the Government to become proactive in the operation of An Post. Several times in the past year I have submitted written questions to the Minister for Communications, Marine and Natural Resources regarding pay and pensions within An Post only to be told by the Office of the Ceann Comhairle that the Minister has no official responsibility to Dáil Éireann in this operational An Post matter. Perhaps this motion could have been ruled out of order.

It is important to point out the role post offices still play in our communities. The closure of rural post offices has become a feature of modern Ireland, although it has not improved life in those



[Mr. J. Breen.]

areas. In County Clare, Carrigaholt, Labasheeda and Liscannor have in the past few months lost their post offices, and last Thursday the An Post office in my village of Kilnamona closed after more than 100 years of service to the community. As one local stated, apart from mass, people would meet at the post office to discuss what was happening around the parish and county.

Times change and it is important that the An Post network moves with them. I congratulate Mr. Donal Connell, recently appointed chief executive of An Post, as one of his first actions was to authorise the payment of outstanding increases due to staff and pensioners under the Sustaining Progress agreement.

The closure of rural post offices has also resulted in many pensioners having to travel long distances to their nearest post office to collect pensions. In the absence of public transport it is often necessary to hire taxis. Yet in a reply to a parliamentary question the Minister for Social and Family Affairs stated that he would not authorise a support payment to people in such circumstances. The post office network should be accessible to rural communities, otherwise we should help bring people to their post office with no burden of cost.

When this House debated payments relating to nursing home charges and the establishment of a body to make these repayments, I stated that either the Department of Social and Family Affairs or An Post should be a mechanism by which such repayments are made. I still believe this long-established and broad network is under-utilised. The banks in this country annually announce almost obscene profits and proper legislation should be enacted allowing the post office to compete effectively with the banks for the benefit of the consumer.

In the current age of computer and Internet activity, the role that the parcel delivery business plays should be utilised by An Post. The company should consider leasing some rural post offices to authorities such as the Citizens Advice Bureau for their own use.

When we put down questions in future to the Minister for Communications, Marine and Natural Resources, will we be ruled out of order by the Ceann Comhairle? Will the Minister be prepared to take such questions in future?

**Mr. Healy:** I commend the staff of An Post, who do an excellent job on a daily basis, and I support this Private Members' motion and the retention and expansion of the postal service. Some speakers have stated there is no national policy on the postal service, but I do not agree. Unfortunately, the national strategy is right wing and ideologically driven, which provides for the closure of small rural post offices and the privatisation of the service.

There are difficulties not only in rural post offices, but in bigger urban areas also. The small

rural office network should remain, be expanded and continue to be the focus of life in a local village or parish. It should be upgraded and computerised, and postmasters should be properly remunerated for their work. The network is vital rural infrastructure.

In many urban areas, An Post is trying to take post offices out of the hands of the public service. Cahir has been threatened with the closure of its post office, which thankfully was stopped, but there are now moves to put the post office into private ownership, sell the building and withdraw the public service provision. The town has probably doubled in size in the past five or six years and it will grow even further if one takes into account the planning permissions being granted and population census returns.

**Mr. Connolly:** I welcome the opportunity to speak in this debate. The local post office is an integral part of our society and the community's social fabric. It offers an ever-widening range of services to the public. Post offices are much more than simply providers of postal services. In many cases the post office also provides a village shop and newsagent. It makes a far greater contribution to local communities than is recognised and it is a social centre now that the local pub has lost that value.

I wonder if our society is slowly becoming like battery chickens cooped up at home and not allowed out. The demise of the rural pub and post office means rural Ireland is disappearing quickly under our noses. Perhaps the next attack will be on places of worship, the last location where people can meet.

Post offices attract money into the local rural economy by providing customers with money to spend in shops. If a person receives money in a local post office, it is likely that person will spend the money in that post office. If a person receives the money in a large town, it is likely the person will spend the money there. That means a further drain on small shops and post offices, and many people are suffering.

The wide range of vital services for local and business customers includes cash deposits and withdrawals, stamps, parcel post, pensions and benefits collection and bill paying. Since 2001, the number of post offices has reduced from 1,750 to 1,350, a pattern which is continuing. We see it regularly and the most recent closure in Monaghan was in Rockcorry. It upsets the community greatly. Even if a village is expanding, with new houses being built, meaning is taken from the town by eliminating this service. It is the wrong policy.

An Post proposes to introduce agencies to sell stamps, provide pensions and welfare payments and give a reduced level of service. We should consider this again as a similar scenario evolved in Great Britain. That country made the courageous decision to support its rural post offices and it has the same type of community structure.

It saw the value of keeping rural communities alive. We should take a leaf from that book and go forward in that direction.

**Dr. Cowley:** Under an EU directive, from next year the Department of Social and Family Affairs will have to send out to tender to all financial institutions for the provision of the payments services. Until now, An Post has carried out this service and there is a great fear in rural post offices about this. Such post offices state that 50% of their gross income is generated by social welfare payments, and if that is the case, the Department's actions will sound the death knell for rural post offices.

We should think about what that means. It will be an end to a whole way of life and to the fabric of rural life, as the post office, with the pub and Garda station makes up such fabric. These and other facilities provide services for people and we have seen the demise of such services over the years. It is a vicious circle because if services are taken away, the population goes away. Who wants to stay in an area where there is no post office or garda, leaving no protection from marauding criminals, where children cannot be sent to school or where there is no doctor etc.? These issues matter.

Rural postmasters have an income of between €28,000 and €30,000 and from this costs such as rent, ESB, phones, wages, security etc. must be paid. The people in Carracastle in County Mayo held on to their post office.

I say to Government that we should be positive as this is a great opportunity for it to prove it is for the people, not for profit, and that it can do things. For example, how much of the banking done by Government could be diverted in some way to rural post offices? All the financial transactions could be decentralised to rural areas. If an effort was made to do so it would make a major difference. The Department of Social and Family Affairs must open tenders to everyone. Why not give rural post offices a chance? This is a wonderful opportunity for the Government to prove it is of the people and does not want to see the demise of rural post offices. Now is its chance and it should take it.

**Mr. G. Murphy:** I wish to declare a personal interest in this topic. My family has been involved in the post office business for many years.

I will concentrate on the issue of the 350 sub-post offices which have not yet been computerised. From any rational point of view, it is not credible that the Minister who owns An Post on behalf of the Irish citizens has not instructed it to computerise these offices. The Government seems to have no problem wasting hundreds of millions of euro on computerised voting machines or on a computer system to pay health wages which did not work. However, when it comes to spending a mere €3,000 or €4,000 to allow post offices to provide basic services to people in rural

areas, the Minister refuses to use his power to direct An Post to do so.

Much confusion exists among Ministers on this matter. I understand the Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs offered that his Department would pay for the computerisation of post offices in CLAR areas. However, his Cabinet colleague refused to instruct An Post to accept this offer. Many postmasters and postmistresses offered to buy computers themselves. Community groups campaign actively to upgrade their local offices and would facilitate postmasters and postmistresses in this respect.

The chief executive of An Post states that little difference exists between computerised and non-computerised post offices. Recently, this was communicated in a letter to the post office in Lombardstown in my area which wishes to upgrade. It is incredible that the person whose job it is to promote and expand the service is so unaware of the real situation. A non-computerised office cannot provide Passport Express, mobile phone top-ups, AIB transactions or One4all gift vouchers or accept Garda fines. It takes so long to transact the bill payments which they can accept, it makes the entire process ineffective.

The response from An Post to the increasing demands to computerise the remaining post offices is to initiate a trial programme of automation in ten selected post offices. One of these is Schull in west Cork. This is a thriving tourist village during the summer months but inexplicably An Post needs a trial to justify computerisation. Aside from the needs of the locals, hundreds of people stay in holiday homes and thousands of tourists visit the village on a yearly basis.

An Post tells us that even though the trials have been completed no information will be available until March. This is astonishing considering An Post has had in place for years an accurate system to evaluate on a day-to-day basis the business done by each post office. In other areas in my constituency, such as Meelin, Dromahane, Tour, Tullylease and Freemount, full post office services have ceased. I already mentioned Lombardstown, as did Deputy Michael Moynihan, where the local community has mounted a massive campaign to computerise its post office. This issue is critical to this area and others like it.

An Post pays a pittance to postmasters and postmistresses at this level, in some cases far less than €10,000 per annum. From this postmasters and postmistresses must pay themselves, provide premises and pay for heating, lighting, rates and insurance. Many of them receive well below the minimum wage and are below the poverty line. This motion gives every Deputy in the House the opportunity to vote to ensure all post offices are computerised, postmasters and postmistresses in rural post offices are paid a decent wage and postal services such as letter delivery are maintained and expanded.

[Mr. G. Murphy.]

The public, postmasters and their union are led around in circles. The facts are simple. If the House votes in favour of this motion the Minister will have no option but to instruct An Post to computerise remaining post offices and enter into immediate negotiations with the postmasters union to ensure a reasonable decent wage is paid to the postmasters and postmistresses who run these offices. Computerisation will go a long way towards solving this problem as computerised offices will increase business and post offices are paid per transaction.

I emphasise this motion covers a large range of issues which must be dealt with to ensure An Post makes small post offices viable. By passing this motion, this House can ensure that clearly and once and for all the Minister gets the message that this small expenditure is necessary to ensure the survival of rural communities. I ask Government backbenchers to consider this when they cast their votes.

**Mr. Durkan:** Hear, hear.

**Mr. Hayes:** I welcome the opportunity to speak on this important issue. I commend Deputy Durkan for putting down this motion and bringing before the House an extremely important matter.

Local post offices are a vital component of the fabric of communities in rural Ireland. Traditionally, the local Garda station, the corner shop, the parish church, the primary school and in bigger towns the secondary school and the post office were the five focal points of a community. All these elements are now under attack. On this Government's watch Garda stations have closed down, particularly in rural areas, and corner shops are being wiped out by big supermarkets and the stealth taxes imposed by the Government. Churches witness falling congregations and schools are under enormous pressure as rising numbers of pupils are not met with increased resources from the Government.

**Mr. Durkan:** Hear, hear.

**Mr. Hayes:** The post office is facing an uncertain future. A local post office is important for all people. Above all, it is crucial for the elderly. The post office is important for human interaction for elderly people who are often isolated and lonely. Proprietors of post offices, like proprietors of corner shops, played and, luckily in some places, continue to play an important role in keeping an eye on older people and people living alone. They notice if an elderly person does not show up to receive his or her pension. This is invaluable and extremely worthwhile.

Ireland's post office network plays a central role and function in the social and economic life of the country and has done so since the foundation of the State. It is vital that An Post is in a

position to provide a modern, efficient, reliable and competitive postal service. It is time for the Government to become proactive on preserving the future of our network of post offices. In this context, the Government must address any outstanding labour relations issues within An Post.

The Government must recognise the need to address the appalling low level of pay to a substantial number of postmasters. This issue has been ongoing for a long time and must be addressed. The Government has turned a blind eye to it. The Government must also recognise the existence of a public service obligation and the role the post office plays in the community, notwithstanding deregulation, and facilitate the development and extension of a wide range of compatible services through the post office network.

The Government must encourage all Departments, such as the Department of Social and Family Affairs, to use the services of An Post for payments or other financial transactions or transmissions and the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government to facilitate the provision of an accurate electoral register.

**Mr. Durkan:** Hear, hear.

**Mr. Hayes:** It is time to stop ignoring the perils which communities, especially those in rural Ireland, face. The Government is punch drunk on the amount of money coming to the Exchequer, but it must focus on the future and ask what will be its legacy to rural Ireland. It seems the legacy of the Government will be the closure of Garda stations, overcrowded schools, the closure of local shops, thanks in no small part to stealth taxes, and, above all, the closure of our post offices. This must not be allowed to happen.

**Ms Enright:** I welcome this motion and thank my colleague, Deputy Durkan, for tabling it. It was quite interesting to listen to some speakers from the Government side effectively support the motion. We will wait and see if they put their money where their mouths are when it comes to 1.30 p.m. and they get the opportunity to vote on it.

The motion clearly recognises the central role and function of the post office network and its services to the social and economic life of this country. That applies especially, but not exclusively, to rural Ireland. It is something which practically all speakers acknowledged in their contributions, which shows how true and accurate the statement is in the motion. When it comes to action in respect of this issue, however, the reality is very different. In the relatively short period I have been in this House — four and a half years — several post offices in my constituency have closed. They have closed in the Pike of Rushall, The Heath and Ballyfin in County Laois and in

Ballinagar, Rahan, Cadamstown and Fortel in County Offaly. Another post office in Shannon Harbour, which was a converted post office, has since closed. That is the reality for these towns and villages.

When one looks at the fact that 70% of social welfare payments are processed by post offices and that it is mainly elderly people who call in to collect those payments, one can see that post offices perform an extremely important social function. Aside from that social function, if people do not have a post office in their own village or rural area, they are forced to go to the next town, but how do they get to there? The rural transport scheme is not as effective as it should be and does not serve all the areas it should, particularly where post offices have closed. If a person orders a taxi, he or she must pay for it to come to his or her home, to take him or her into the town and then to bring him or her home. A person could spend €20 or €30 of his or her pension on the process of collecting it. That is the reality of life in rural Ireland.

It is very easy for An Post to use the excuse that it cannot get staff to work in post offices. I have heard this excuse time and again. There is a reason An Post cannot get staff. I would not work for the amount of money being offered and neither would An Post and it is disgraceful that it expects other people to work for that amount of money. The reality is that these people are working for below the minimum wage. I attended a meeting in Thurles last January or February with post office staff, postmasters from around the midlands and that part of Tipperary, and from listening to them the position was clear, but it was more fascinating to listen to the speeches made by all the politicians there from all sides of the House who agreed 100% with what they said. It is nearly one year later, but nothing has changed in respect of them. If private sector companies did not pay their staff the minimum wage, they would be prosecuted, and rightly so.

**Mr. Durkan:** Hear, hear.

**Ms Enright:** An Post should not get away with that. I know the situation is different because contracts are involved, but the reality is that at the end of the week staff are not getting the minimum wage. That is wrong and should be against the law, no matter how it is concocted. These people also subsidise An Post by providing premises, and that should be borne in mind.

In respect of computerisation, it is difficult to believe that at the end of 2006 all post offices do not have access to proper computer hardware and software. People would not believe that the situation is so ridiculous. Deputy Gerard Murphy mentioned mobile phone top-ups. This country has one of the highest ratios of mobile phones per head of population. Topping up a mobile phone is a basic service that should be readily available in towns and villages, especially for the benefit

of vulnerable people. It is one example of many services that could be offered by post offices which would make the post office network more viable in the long term.

I ask Members to support this motion. In particular, I ask the Government to support the retention of the network of rural post offices in particular. With Garda stations, it is another area of rural life that is being steadily eroded. It is not simply a soft argument to say that post offices are part of the social fabric. It is the reality because the post office is one of the only points of communication for many people in rural Ireland. It is the last meeting place that exists in some very small villages and we have a social responsibility to these people to keep this network up and running.

**Mr. Kehoe:** I thank Deputy Durkan for tabling this very important motion on the vital role of rural post offices. It is terrible that the Minister, Deputy Noel Dempsey, put the Minister of State, Deputy Browne, who is my constituency colleague, in the firing line because I know he is very much in favour of rural post offices.

**Mr. Browne:** The Minister did not put me in any firing line. As Deputy Kehoe is aware, I make my own decisions.

**Mr. Kehoe:** When a post office is due to be closed in any part of the country, every backbencher visits that area and tells the local people that they are behind them and that they want to see the post office kept open, but when they have the opportunity to press the right button, they do the opposite.

**Mr. Browne:** I can tell the Deputy that post offices are not closing in Wexford.

**Mr. Kehoe:** I will come to that. Every Minister and Government backbencher says one thing in his her constituency while saying the opposite in Dublin. This Government is brilliant at speaking out of both sides of its mouth. It is a master at doing that.

Deputy Enright spoke about our social responsibility. Members on both sides of the House have a social responsibility to protect rural communities and rural Ireland. In protecting Ireland, we must take into account the vital role of the post office, which is very important in all aspects of a community. It is a vitally important meeting place for elderly people once a week. I know that is not the only aspect to keeping the local post office open because there are many other aspects.

Over a long number of years, there has been a great tradition of families keeping rural post offices open and keeping the fabric of the rural community ticking over. It is very sad to see post offices closing. I will give one example. We all talk about protecting rural villages across the

[Mr. Kehoe.]

country. A post office opened in a village in Wexford, of which the Minister of State might be aware. This post office was downgraded to a sub-post office where it was not possible to carry out much business and then it closed down completely. An Post has introduced a little green box where people can put their letters, with the post being collected at 10.30 a.m. Over the past four or five years, a REPS planner, an architecture firm, an accountancy firm and an engineering company have located in the vicinity of that local village. In one sense, we are building up the local villages, but the most important part of the fabric of such villages is the rural post office, which the Government is closing.

People are being encouraged to move their businesses out of towns to rural areas, but we are not giving them much encouragement to set up their businesses in small villages. It is great to see all these people, entrepreneurs coming to smaller villages and communities across the country and establishing their businesses there.

It is ironic to see that the Government has a great opportunity to make social welfare payments in local post offices. The Government has an obligation but it will turn back on it. I assure the House that people will not get social welfare payments in any post office in a few years if this Government has anything to do with it because it wants to take out the rural communities and rural post offices. The Government, the Minister and the Minister of State have a great opportunity to contact the Minister for Social and Family Affairs to ensure that payments are made through post offices. I have no doubt that people on social welfare payments would be glad to get them through the local post office to keep it going.

In respect of computerisation and automation of rural post offices, I was involved in trying to get a post office automated. The process took two or three years and the post office had to go through a considerable amount of red tape. The post office received no help from the opposite side of the House.

*(Interruptions).*

**Acting Chairman:** Deputy Kehoe, without interruption.

**Mr. Kehoe:** The postmaster said to me he was fed up going to the Government Members in the constituency and that he may go to the Opposition Members. I said that if the Government could not do anything, I might not be able to either. However, we got it done anyway.

**Mr. Durkan:** Hear, hear.

**Mr. Browne:** He came back to me afterwards.

**Mr. Kehoe:** I am delighted to be able to say the post office is safe.

**Mr. Browne:** Of course it is. No post office was closed in my time.

**Mr. Kehoe:** Imagine what I would be able to do for the local post offices if I were on the other side of the House. After the next general election, I have no doubt we will be on that side of the House, Deputy Durkan will be Minister for Communications, Marine and Natural Resources and every post office in rural Ireland will be safe and sound.

**Mr. Neville:** Hear, hear.

**Minister of State at the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government (Mr. B. O'Keeffe):** The Minister, Deputy Noel Dempsey, regrets he cannot address the House this afternoon.

Following from yesterday's interesting debate, it is clear we are all agreed on the importance of the postal service and the post office network. A vibrant, efficient postal service is an important aspect of any successful economy and it is vital therefore that An Post continues to return to a secure financial footing and prepares to meet all the challenges ahead. The Government is pleased to note from yesterday's proceedings that all sides of the House support An Post and its staff in their day-to-day business and their endeavours to support, develop and sustain the postal service and the post office network.

The Government recognises the critical importance of having a nationwide, reliable and efficient postal service and, as set out clearly in the programme for Government, it and the board of An Post remain committed to the objective of ensuring a viable and sustainable nationwide post office network.

We recognise a key role for An Post in the years to come, both in terms of the delivery of mail and as a quality service provider of government and financial services. Recent developments on the An Post financial services venture in association with the Belgian bank, Fortis, will go a long way towards helping An Post deliver on this objective. Much work has been put into the initiative and credit must go to all involved in the process. On that note, I join my colleagues, the Minister of State, Deputy Browne, and Deputy O'Flynn, in urging the Irish Postmasters Union, IPU, to re-examine the position it has recently taken on the joint venture and to consider the long-term benefits such a deal could afford to its members, the postmasters, An Post and post office customers across the country. A successful roll-out of the joint venture would undoubtedly be good for business and would thereby help prepare An Post and its agents for full market opening. An Post has an extensive retail network and a trusted brand name, which it must utilise completely to compete effectively in a liberalised market.

Liberalisation is the biggest challenge facing An Post. The company is wisely preparing for full market opening and competition from 2009. The Government remains confident that once the initial challenges have been overcome, full competition in the postal market will ultimately be good for both An Post and Irish consumers. It is, however, imperative that the company restructures itself effectively and that management and trade unions in An Post work together to transform the company into an efficient and modern service provider by implementing the agreed restructuring programme.

This is not the time for complacency. By embracing the necessary changes in a positive manner, management and staff in An Post will help to move the company in the direction it needs to go if it is to maintain current contracts and compete for further business. The existing contract with the Department of Social and Family Affairs regarding welfare payments, for example, is very important to the company, but given recent developments in Europe, it is likely that, in future, this contract will have to be put out to tender and that An Post will face stiff competition in its effort to retain it.

The development of the postal market requires the availability of competitive, high quality products. The current level of market opening has introduced new players with offerings that meet consumer needs and further market opening will provide further opportunities for new and existing market players. The development of further competition, allied with a modernised and customer-focused An Post, will provide the basis for the further development of the postal sector.

There was some discussion yesterday regarding quality of service standards in terms of mail deliveries, and while I accept that the situation is not yet wholly satisfactory, An Post is working closely with ComReg to resolve the issues that arise. This will be of particular importance in the context of liberalisation.

The Government continues to support An Post. Given the urban-rural divide, the provision of high quality, competitively priced postal services, while ensuring the protection of universal service in a liberalised market, will be of critical importance. We therefore intend to maintain the postal services on a five-day week basis. It is fair to say we all recognise the importance of the postal sector to the country as a whole and to individual towns and villages. The Government will continue to support An Post and help it to become a successful, efficient and dynamic organisation, operating successfully and profitably in a changing environment.

**Mr. Neville:** I wish to share time with Deputy Durkan.

**Acting Chairman:** Is that agreed? Agreed.

**Mr. Neville:** I welcome the opportunity to contribute to this debate and I congratulate Deputy Durkan on tabling the motion. Post offices are very important to rural society, not only because they provide services but also because they comprise a social arm of the State in the delivery of those services to many sections of society.

I ask that the outstanding labour relations difficulties concerning salaries and pension payments, which have led to so much distress and distrust among An Post's workforce, be addressed by way of the Government generating a sense of urgency and acting as a catalyst to solve the problem.

It is a disgrace that assistance has not been given for the computerisation, modernisation and upgrading of the entire network of post offices and sub-post offices. In this day and age, even the smallest businesses are computerised. An Post's services should be computerised to ensure efficiency.

The low pay received by a substantial number of postmasters, who are effectively subsidising the service by providing premises and working for less than the minimum wage and who are sometimes below the poverty line, must be addressed. The United Kingdom has recognised the importance of the post office network and the postmasters therefore receive a minimum payment of £9,000. This should be a ballpark figure on the basis of which the policy to ensure the continuation of the network in Ireland is developed.

I agree with the Minister of State that deregulation will be one of the greatest threats to the post office network but there are three years to prepare for it. The development and extension of a wide range of compatible services through the post offices should be achieved to ensure that, when deregulation occurs, An Post will be able to submit a tender and continue to be an arm of the Department of Social and Family Affairs through the payment of social welfare payments. Research should be undertaken on the use other Departments could make of the post office to ensure it has a place.

We congratulate Deputy Durkan on tabling this motion and reiterate that the Government has a duty to stop the decline of rural Ireland. One way to do so is to ensure the continuation of post offices and halt the stealthy closure of post offices, as in my area. Nobody will take over when the postmaster retires because it is not worthwhile to do so.

**Mr. Durkan:** I thank the speakers, on both sides of the House, who contributed to this debate. A total of 25 speakers contributed over the three hours, all of whom supported the content of the motion. All raised the issues affecting the post office network throughout the country and were *ad idem* with the concept as set out in the motion. The only discordant note came from the Government amendment which is in the usual fashion a case of little heads stuck firmly in the ground and derrières in the air.

[Mr. Durkan.]

I was most disappointed by the speech of the Minister of State at the Department of Communications, Marine and Natural Resources, Deputy Browne, last night. He repeated a history lesson but we all know the history; we could write it at this stage. He failed to say what the Government intends to propose now as we enter a new era of deregulation, one which has not proved happy for the Government. When transposed into Irish law, the EU regulations have had a negative effect on many aspects of our life. The European model to which the Government is wedded has some benefits and many demerits. That is what speakers addressed over the past two days.

The Minister of State also failed to recognise the competition in the marketplace and the degree to which the viability of An Post will depend on the network in place. There are no capital costs involved, apart from those required to keep the service going. The critical point that came through the contributions was the necessity to upgrade and automate all the post offices and stop fiddling around.

It does not take an economist to tell the Government that if it wants to run a fast, effective nationwide service, it should find out who has the best network to provide it. No other organisation has a network like An Post that can provide an effective nationwide service and has plenty of experience of doing so. Over recent years we have discussed this topic in the House and addressed meetings in front of the House when postal workers and postmasters were not getting a hearing. We were all at one as to what should be done for the future but this has not happened. The prevarication in the meantime is the most serious problem affecting the future of the postal services.

Various people have talked about the viability of the sector. I worry that it is intended to close more post offices, as colleagues on both sides of the House have said. If that happens, the effectiveness and viability of the service will be weakened because it will not be possible for it to compete. The Government must take policy by the scruff of the neck and recognise that with the Minister for Communications, Marine and Natural Resources, who has ultimate responsibility, it must say this is what we want to happen.

Speakers have referred to electronic competition and the changing era in which we live. An Post can change too. A variety of services can be tagged on to the post office system with minimal effort. It can become an attractive and profitable service. I commend the work undertaken so far by the chief executive and the review, but it is not fast enough. An Post knows that and it requires support, as do the postmasters.

It is timely to recognise how much we rely on the postal service as we come into the festive period. We could greatly extend the services that could be tagged on in the festive periods throughout the year. The initial vision for An Post when

it became a semi-State body was that it would develop into other areas and provide other services compatible with the existing services. Somewhere along the way that faded because there was no commitment.

What is the vision now? We know what it must be — to provide a competitive, efficient, reliable next day delivery service throughout the country. That is the nature of competition. An Post can do that only with the support of the Government. Then it will be alive and well in 50 years' time and providing services not heretofore envisaged. It is high time that we recognised that mission statement and supported and pursued it. The Minister is the only person who can do it.

We have become very conscious of the need to comply with regulation and deregulation, and have seen numerous examples of it going wrong because the Government slavishly followed everything that was handed down to it. The Government was in a position to negotiate these regulations through the Council of Ministers before they became law through the Commission. We have seen the demise of the fishing industry, as a result of Government inaction over recent years. We have seen too the beginning of the demise of the agricultural and food producing sector. Anybody who is around in 50 years' time will look back and ask why that was done. Other EU states watch their own interests much better than we do.

There are serious signs of the Government's neglect in this area. We are not fighting our corner. There are signs of the demise of the telecommunications sector. From having been at the leading edge of the telecommunications industry throughout Europe, we are now back markers, in last or second last place. This is an appalling performance at a time when the country's coffers are overflowing with money. We will see further examples of that later today.

The manufacturing sector has disappeared through high costs and stealth taxes to which my colleagues referred. This has culminated in over 34,000 jobs being relocated to other destinations, yet we hold up our hands and say we are better off here because we have a high wage economy.

**Mr. B. O'Keeffe:** We have net immigration.

**Mr. Durkan:** The Government has not learned the lessons of the 1980s when we priced ourselves out of the market. This is not the first time this Government has gone on that course.

**Mr. B. O'Keeffe:** We have full employment.

**Mr. Neville:** The Government has become too arrogant.

**Mr. Durkan:** The Government has virtually closed down the health sector. Services for which patients clamour daily are no longer available. When we ask about that we are told "nobody

knows". The services required daily in the education sector are not delivered despite the great wealth available to the Government. It has failed to tackle crime which has become popular and profitable and grows more so every day.

**Mr. Neville:** People rob post offices.

**Mr. Durkan:** The Government has brought traffic to a halt, yet it has more money than it ever had to play with previously. In spite of having all that money, the members of the Govern-

ment parties must ask themselves whether they intend to support the postal service in the future. If not, they should say so. If they do, the Members on that side of the House who supported our motion should vote with us. In so doing, it will be a recognition that somebody on that side has a conscience and recognises the needs of the service.

**Deputies:** Hear, hear.

Amendment put.

The Dáil divided: Tá, 79; Níl, 63.

Tá

Ahern, Dermot.  
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.  
Cooper-Flynn, Beverley.  
Coughlan, Mary.  
Cregan, John.  
Cullen, Martin.  
Curran, John.  
de Valera, Síle.  
Dempsey, Noel.  
Dempsey, Tony.  
Dennehy, John.  
Devins, Jimmy.  
Ellis, John.  
Fahey, Frank.  
Finneran, Michael.  
Fitzpatrick, Dermot.  
Fleming, Seán.  
Gallagher, Pat The Cope.  
Glennon, Jim.  
Grealish, Noel.  
Hanafin, Mary.  
Harney, Mary.  
Haughey, Seán.  
Hoctor, Máire.  
Jacob, Joe.  
Keaveney, Cecilia.  
Kelleher, Billy.

Kelly, Peter.  
Killeen, Tony.  
Kirk, Seamus.  
Kitt, Tom.  
Lenihan, Brian.  
Lenihan, Conor.  
McDaid, James.  
McDowell, Michael.  
McGuinness, John.  
Martin, Micheál.  
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'Keefe, Batt.  
O'Keefe, Ned.  
O'Malley, Fiona.  
O'Malley, Tim.  
Parlon, Tom.  
Power, Peter.  
Power, Seán.  
Roche, Dick.  
Sexton, Mae.  
Smith, Brendan.  
Smith, Michael.  
Treacy, Noel.  
Wallace, Mary.  
Walsh, Joe.  
Wilkinson, Ollie.  
Woods, Michael.  
Wright, G.V.

Níl

Allen, Bernard.  
Boyle, Dan.  
Breen, James.  
Breen, Pat.  
Broughan, Thomas P.  
Burton, Joan.  
Connaughton, Paul.  
Connolly, Paudge.  
Coveney, Simon.  
Cowley, Jerry.  
Crawford, Seymour.  
Crowe, Seán.  
Cuffe, Ciarán.  
Deasy, John.  
Durkan, Bernard J.  
English, Damien.

Enright, Olwyn.  
Fox, Mildred.  
Gilmore, Eamon.  
Gogarty, Paul.  
Gormley, John.  
Gregory, Tony.  
Harkin, Marian.  
Hayes, Tom.  
Healy, Seamus.  
Healy-Rae, Jackie.  
Higgins, Joe.  
Higgins, Michael D.  
Hogan, Phil.  
Howlin, Brendan.  
Kehoe, Paul.  
Kenny, Enda.



## Níl—continued

Lynch, Kathleen.  
 McEntee, Shane.  
 McGinley, Dinny.  
 McGrath, Finian.  
 McGrath, Paul.  
 McHugh, Paddy.  
 McManus, Liz.  
 Mitchell, Olivia.  
 Morgan, Arthur.  
 Moynihan-Cronin, Breeda.  
 Murphy, Catherine.  
 Murphy, Gerard.  
 Naughten, Denis.  
 Ó Caoláin, Caoimhghín.  
 Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.

O'Dowd, Fergus.  
 O'Shea, Brian.  
 O'Sullivan, Jan.  
 Pattison, Seamus.  
 Penrose, Willie.  
 Perry, John.  
 Rabbitte, Pat.  
 Ryan, Eamon.  
 Sargent, Trevor.  
 Sherlock, Joe.  
 Shortall, Róisín.  
 Stagg, Emmet.  
 Stanton, David.  
 Timmins, Billy.  
 Upton, Mary.  
 Wall, Jack.

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: Tá, 80; Níl, 67.

## Tá

Ahern, Dermot.  
 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.  
 Cooper-Flynn, Beverley.  
 Coughlan, Mary.  
 Cregan, John.  
 Cullen, Martin.  
 Curran, John.  
 Davern, Noel.  
 de Valera, Síle.  
 Dempsey, Noel.  
 Dempsey, Tony.  
 Dennehy, John.  
 Devins, Jimmy.  
 Ellis, John.  
 Fahey, Frank.  
 Finneran, Michael.  
 Fitzpatrick, Dermot.  
 Fleming, Seán.  
 Gallagher, Pat The Cope.  
 Glennon, Jim.  
 Grealish, Noel.  
 Hanafin, Mary.  
 Harney, Mary.  
 Haughey, Seán.  
 Hoctor, Máire.  
 Jacob, Joe.  
 Keaveney, Cecilia.

Kelleher, Billy.  
 Kelly, Peter.  
 Killeen, Tony.  
 Kirk, Seamus.  
 Kitt, Tom.  
 Lenihan, Brian.  
 Lenihan, Conor.  
 McDaid, James.  
 McDowell, Michael.  
 McGuinness, John.  
 Martin, Micheál.  
 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'Keefe, Batt.  
 O'Keefe, Ned.  
 O'Malley, Fiona.  
 O'Malley, Tim.  
 Parlon, Tom.  
 Power, Peter.  
 Power, Seán.  
 Roche, Dick.  
 Sexton, Mae.  
 Smith, Brendan.  
 Smith, Michael.  
 Treacy, Noel.  
 Wallace, Mary.  
 Walsh, Joe.  
 Wilkinson, Ollie.  
 Woods, Michael.  
 Wright, G.V.

## Níl

Allen, Bernard.  
 Boyle, Dan.  
 Breen, James.

Breen, Pat.  
 Broughan, Thomas P.  
 Burton, Joan.

Níl—*continued*

Connaughton, Paul.  
 Connolly, Paudge.  
 Coveney, Simon.  
 Cowley, Jerry.  
 Crawford, Seymour.  
 Crowe, Seán.  
 Cuffe, Ciarán.  
 Deasy, John.  
 Deenihan, Jimmy.  
 Durkan, Bernard J.  
 English, Damien.  
 Enright, Olwyn.  
 Fox, Mildred.  
 Gilmore, Eamon.  
 Gogarty, Paul.  
 Gormley, John.  
 Gregory, Tony.  
 Harkin, Marian.  
 Hayes, Tom.  
 Healy, Seamus.  
 Healy-Rae, Jackie.  
 Higgins, Joe.  
 Higgins, Michael D.  
 Hogan, Phil.  
 Howlin, Brendan.  
 Kehoe, Paul.  
 Kenny, Enda.  
 Lynch, Kathleen.  
 McCormack, Pádraic.  
 McEntee, Shane.  
 McGinley, Dinny.

McGrath, Finian.  
 McGrath, Paul.  
 McHugh, Paddy.  
 McManus, Liz.  
 Mitchell, Olivia.  
 Morgan, Arthur.  
 Moynihan-Cronin, Breeda.  
 Murphy, Catherine.  
 Murphy, Gerard.  
 Naughten, Denis.  
 Neville, Dan.  
 Ó Caoláin, Caoimhghín.  
 Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.  
 O'Dowd, Fergus.  
 O'Keefe, Jim.  
 O'Shea, Brian.  
 O'Sullivan, Jan.  
 Pattison, Seamus.  
 Penrose, Willie.  
 Perry, John.  
 Rabbitte, Pat.  
 Ryan, Eamon.  
 Sargent, Trevor.  
 Sherlock, Joe.  
 Shortall, Róisín.  
 Stagg, Emmet.  
 Stanton, David.  
 Timmins, Billy.  
 Upton, Mary.  
 Wall, Jack.

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

Question declared carried.

*Sitting suspended at 1.50 p.m. and resumed at 2.30 p.m.*

### Ceisteanna — Questions (Resumed).

#### Priority Questions.

#### Traffic Management.

29. **Ms O. Mitchell** asked the Minister for Transport the role in the management of traffic he envisages for the proposed Dublin transport authority, particularly in the locations most affected by the development of projects under Transport 21; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41998/06]

**Minister for Transport (Mr. Cullen):** The report of the Dublin transport authority establishment team made a number of recommendations in respect of traffic management. The team concluded that there needed to be an integrated policy approach to traffic management across the greater Dublin area, based on international best practice. It recommended that the Dublin transport authority be obliged to prepare a strategic traffic management plan for the greater Dublin area. The Dublin transport authority should also be responsible for co-ordinating the traffic management arrangements during the construction phase of Transport 21.

While traffic management functions should continue to be discharged by local authorities, in exercising their functions they should be obliged to comply with the strategic traffic management plan of the authority. However, the report also recommended that the Dublin transport authority should be given power to decide to perform certain traffic management functions itself or through a third party where it considered this to be more effective. It further proposed that the authority should be empowered to issue policy guidelines and mandatory directions to local authorities in respect of their traffic management functions.

I share the views of the establishment team on the need for an integrated approach to traffic management in the greater Dublin area. I am also of the view that the range of powers for a Dublin transport authority in respect of traffic management proposed by the team would deliver such an integrated approach. These powers would also enable the authority to ensure the effective management of any disruption to traffic caused by construction works during the delivery of key infrastructure projects under Transport 21. The drafting of legislation to give effect to these recommendations is at an advanced stage in the Office of the Parliamentary Counsel.

**Ms O. Mitchell:** I agree with the Minister that the Dublin transport authority should have a key role in traffic management. However, we do not have a Dublin transport authority and we have traffic chaos. I tabled this question in the context

[Ms O. Mitchell.]

of the gridlock we experienced two weeks ago on the N11. That sort of problem will arise on an increasingly regular basis because of the growth in traffic and because many of the public transport measures will not give benefit for many years. The key to survival in coming years is traffic management. We need to invest in it in a major way and give it considerably more prominence and consideration than we have done in the past.

The M50 will be under construction for the next five years regardless of how efficiently it is done. It will get worse. Already 5,000 to 6,000 cars have been displaced away from it on a daily basis and are now using local roads, which adds further to congestion. The big dig for the metro and Luas lines is about to commence. All these projects will happen in the context of a city that needs to keep functioning. The only way for this to happen is through immediate short-term measures. While it would be great to have a strategic plan, what short-term measures does the Minister have in mind? Will he give consideration to the suggestion I made here of having a special traffic management officer corps within the Garda reserve? I ask him to discuss the matter with the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform. Despite the large numbers we are told are in the traffic corps, in reality at any given time only a small finite number is on duty in Dublin and even that number is a drain on Garda resources. It is not a fraction of the number required to keep Dublin going. For example no additional gardaí were available for deployment on the M50 when the work started, which cannot be allowed to continue. As the Minister probably realises, there were 100 accidents in the first month, every one of which resulted in a traffic jam. It will get worse and needs to be addressed. While I realise it is not entirely an issue within the transport portfolio, it is an issue that needs to be considered.

**Mr. Cullen:** The Deputy raises an issue that is very much part of a modern developing economy. I agree the way Ireland has developed has resulted in this becoming a very significant issue. The NRA has managed its contracts — for example the Naas dual carriageway — with very strict penalties. It compelled the contractors to keep two lanes open in both directions, which worked very well. The issue on the N11 was one of those unexpected sudden issues that occurred. We would all agree that it could have been handled better. I am struck by what the team has done in traffic management. The Deputy has referred to the two key issues. The development of a specific on-street traffic corps on the beat as opposed to in vehicle is a significant traffic management feature in major cities similar to Dublin. This week I saw figures showing that we have almost 2.2 million vehicles on our roads. The growth is continuing apace. We need very significant con-

trol centres capable of monitoring and controlling the entire area, to reflect traffic flows, to change traffic signals, to assist public transport and a range of other issues. This is a further reason for having the Dublin transport authority, which can introduce the required technology.

There is no simple solution. In some respects Operation Freeflow has worked well in some areas and in other areas it has not delivered the sorts of results we would like. The disjointed way in which traffic management has been handled in the capital city is not satisfactory. Ceding authority to the DTA will give a tremendous impetus in that it will have an overview. Working in conjunction with the local authorities to implement some of the different policy areas will clearly bring benefit. It is not a question of resolving this. From what I have seen as best practice in a very short space of time, it is a complex issue requiring interaction between physical presence of gardaí or others at many of the junctions, the technology that is involved and having a strategic plan in place.

30. **Ms Shortall** asked the Minister for Transport the strategy for the management of heavy traffic volumes on the M50 and particularly on the West-Link toll bridge after the opening of the Dublin Port tunnel. [41994/06]

**Mr. Cullen:** The planning, design and implementation of national roads improvement projects, including the Dublin Port tunnel and the M50, is a matter for the National Roads Authority and the local authorities concerned.

Traffic management in general is a matter for the appropriate local authority notwithstanding what I have said about what will happen in future. In the case of the Dublin Port tunnel, that authority is Dublin City Council. The relevant local authorities have entered into an arrangement with Dublin City Council for the co-ordination of the management of the junctions and the associated traffic signals along the M50. Dublin City Council is the lead authority on behalf of the other authorities.

I remind the House of the benefits of the Dublin Port tunnel, the largest civil engineering project ever undertaken in Ireland and one of which we should be proud. It will provide access to and from Dublin Port for almost 2 million truck journeys each year to the motorway network, instead of passing through city centre streets and residential areas. This will have obvious benefits for the business and haulage sectors with the dramatic reduction in journey times from the M50 to and from Dublin Port — it will soon be a journey of six minutes. It will also provide much needed improvement to the environment of the city centre and will facilitate the introduction of traffic calming measures in residential areas. The improvement of public transport will also be facilitated through the introduction of additional quality bus corridors along the

quays, which will come into being when the port tunnel opens.

In respect of the traffic impact of the tunnel on the M50, I understand from the NRA that of the 6,300 heavy goods vehicles of three or more axles that will use the Dublin Port tunnel each day, it is expected that approximately 1,500 HGVs of five axles or more will be obliged to use the West Link section of the M50 when the HGV management strategy is introduced by Dublin City Council. Most of these, however, will use the section at off-peak times because ferries come into Dublin Port early in the morning, which is good news. To deal with the increased traffic, additional lanes have been added to the motorway north of the tunnel. This will aid truck movements towards or away from the M50. The manoeuvring required will be no different to that required at any of the existing M50 interchanges.

In the longer term, the current phase 1 of the M50 upgrade works will be completed in mid-2008 and barrier-free tolling at the West Link will be in place by the third quarter of 2008. These measures will greatly improve traffic flow on the M50 in a period of less than two years. Further benefits will ensue, with an improved level of service to motorists when the full upgrade of the M50 is completed in 2010.

The NRA, local authorities and the Garda are co-operating very closely to ensure everything possible is done to mitigate the impact of the upgrade work on traffic flows on the M50. The authorities and the Garda are in regular contact and the situation is kept under constant review. With regard to the current upgrade works, both South Dublin County Council and the contractor have dedicated personnel working full-time on traffic management. This was the situation at Naas, where it worked extremely well.

I am satisfied that no effort is being spared by those responsible for traffic management and law enforcement to alleviate the problems on the M50 in so far as that is possible. The inclusion of the M50 in the Operation Freeflow launched on Monday, 27 November 2006 will also assist with management of the traffic.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** We must have silence in the Gallery. When the Business of the House is being discussed there must be silence.

**Mr. Cullen:** Specifically in respect of the Dublin Port tunnel, my Department has been keeping in touch with all stakeholders, including Dublin City Council and the NRA, to ensure a co-ordinated strategy, which takes account of the management of HGVs in Dublin city and the traffic impact on the M50, is developed for the opening of the tunnel. The development and implementation of the HGV management strategy is a matter for Dublin City Council. I understand this will be introduced on 19 February 2007. This will allow for a bedding in period of a number of weeks, which is normal.

My Department's formal role is to put in place the necessary regulations relating to traffic and road signage to support the HGV management strategy. The drafting of these regulations is closely co-ordinated with Dublin City Council and I expect to sign them shortly.

**Ms Shortall:** The Minister's reply appears to indicate that he does not have a strategy to deal with the hugely increased traffic volumes that are going to arise on the M50, specifically on the West Link section, when the port tunnel opens. It is all very well for Deputy Cullen to state the city council is responsible for this and that the NRA is responsible for that. He is the Minister for Transport and he is charged with responsibility for ensuring a strategy is put in place to deal with traffic in the greater Dublin area.

The situation on the M50, particularly the West Link section, is intolerable. From the middle of February, a huge number of additional vehicles will be disgorged from the port tunnel onto the M50. It seems there is no strategy in place to deal with this eventuality. We will move from a situation that is intolerable to one that could prove potentially impossible by next February. The Minister has not outlined any action he proposes to take to deal with that matter.

The Minister recently announced the Government's intention to buy out NTR. Whatever about the pros and cons of doing so, will the Minister consider including in the negotiations with NTR the possibility of the Government obtaining control of the West Link toll bridge, not years from now but from an early date? If this is done, the Minister and his agents will be in a position to manage the situation that will arise at the West Link when the additional trucks to which I refer spill out of the port tunnel and onto the M50. If the Minister was given power in this regard, he could decide to lift the barriers at certain times when the situation becomes completely intolerable or he could, for example, vary the toll to ensure better usage of the West Link and the M50. Assuming responsibility for the West Link would give the Minister scope to manage a difficult traffic situation. In addition to the extra traffic volumes that will arise, we must remember that the M50 will be a construction site for the next four to five years.

The Minister and his Department have known for the past ten years that the port tunnel would eventually be completed and that it would disgorge the heavy trucks to which I refer. I contest the figure of 1,500 the Minister provided in respect of the latter. In reply to a parliamentary question I tabled recently, the Minister referred to 2,200 trucks of five axles or more. We must also remember that other, lighter trucks will also be using the port tunnel to get to the M50. The Minister has been aware of this for the past ten years and he should have made preparations in respect of it. The upgrading works should have been completed in advance and barrier-free tol-

[Ms Shortall.]

ling should be in place. Regrettably, this has not been done. In light of that, will the Minister consider seeking to gain early control over what is happening at the West Link in order that some kind of sanity might be brought to bear in respect of the situation that is likely to arise from next February when the port tunnel opens.

**Mr. Cullen:** The Deputy raised a number of points. It is amazing that I am continually obliged to come before the House to listen to discussion of this project, which involves putting in place the largest, single item of infrastructure in Europe at a cost of €750 million, by experts who know nothing about it and who have not seen it function. I reject the notion the port tunnel will somehow not make a substantial contribution in respect of traffic management in Dublin. There is no doubt that it will do so.

**Ms Shortall:** It will make a negative contribution to the position at the West Link.

**Mr. Cullen:** One of the major impacts of the Dublin Port tunnel, to which the Deputies opposite refuse to refer, is the immediate benefit it will have for Dublin's streets and for its people and those who visit the city and do business here on a daily basis.

**Ms Shortall:** I asked about the West Link, not the port tunnel. The Minister should answer the question I asked.

**Mr. Cullen:** I outlined earlier the number of vehicles to which the HGV strategy will refer and which will use the port tunnel. I also outlined the fact that most of the additional vehicles that are expected to appear on the M50 will use the road at off-peak times. This will help to balance the flow.

One would prefer if the M50 had been completed before the opening of the port tunnel.

**Ms Shortall:** Why was that not done?

**Mr. Cullen:** When the Deputy's party was in power it had no interest in public transport—

**Ms Shortall:** No preparations were made for it. The Government has had nine years to do so. It knew the port tunnel would be completed and did nothing.

**Mr. Cullen:** —road development, health, education or any other matter of which one cares to think. I can only go by the Deputy's party's record and her particular interest in the development of public transport and road development.

Immediate benefits will result from the opening of the port tunnel.

**Ms Shortall:** The Minister should tell that to the people on the M50.

**Mr. Cassidy:** The Deputy should allow the Minister to reply.

**Mr. Cullen:** The maximum benefits from the port tunnel and all of the surrounding road infrastructure will be fully realised when the various upgrades are completed.

**Ms Shortall:** What will happen in the meantime?

**Mr. Cullen:** I look forward to an outcome similar to that achieved in respect of the Naas dual carriageway which, when expanded to three lanes, transformed travel in and out of the city. The development of the Naas dual carriageway was completed with two lanes of traffic flowing in each direction. The position relating to the M50 is the same.

On the Deputy's final point in respect of the NRA, she is correct in that discussions have taken place between the NRA and NTR regarding a range of issues relating to the M50 toll bridge, the toll plaza and the space on either side. I am driven by one outcome, namely, to dramatically improve the lot of drivers using the M50. That will be to the forefront in the context of whatever deal we strike.

#### National Development Plan.

31. **Ms Harkin** asked the Minister for Transport the steps he will take to address the transport infrastructure deficit in the Border, midlands and western region in view of the transport underspend in the national development plan in the BMW region. [41616/06]

**Mr. Cullen:** Very considerable road investment is being made under the provisions of Transport 21 in the Border, midlands and western region, far surpassing previous levels of investment in national roads in the area. Spending in the region for the years 2000 to 2005 amounted to €1.581 billion. The most recent forecast for the final out-turn figure for national roads investment in the region for the period from 2000 to 2006 is €2012.531 million, which is €534.96 million less than the amount originally envisaged.

At the start of the ESIOP, a relatively small number of major road projects in the BMW region had progressed through the planning, design and public procurement processes. The NRA provided grant assistance towards accelerating that work. As a result, there was an intensification of planning and design activity on major roads projects, resulting in a sharp upturn in the number of projects arriving at the construction stage, and a corresponding increase in the level of spending on national roads in the region since the beginning of 2004.

Construction work on several projects will continue after 2006. There is no question of an underspend or a loss of funding in respect of national roads in the BMW region. The position

is that, at an early point after 2006, the total level of investment originally envisaged for the seven-year period from the start of 2000 to the end of 2006 will not only be reached but surpassed.

Of particular note in the BMW region is the development of the complete N6 route between Athlone and Galway to high-quality dual carriageway standard — effectively motorway standard, which I will designate it as in time. The 56 km Ballinasloe to Galway section, which will start construction next year, will be one of the largest schemes ever undertaken in Ireland. In addition, the Athlone to Ballinasloe scheme will commence construction the following year, 2008. When completed in 2010, the two schemes will effectively provide a motorway-quality east-west route linking Galway to Athlone and onwards to Dublin.

In tandem with the work on the N6 route, work is also ongoing to provide modern north-south linkages along the western seaboard. In particular, the key linkage between Limerick and Galway is well advanced. I look forward to opening the N18 section of the Ennis bypass this month, several months ahead of schedule. North of the Ennis bypass, the statutory documentation — compulsory purchase order and environmental impact statement — for the next two schemes, Gort to Crusheen and Oranmore to Gort, was published in 2006 and currently await approval from An Bord Pleanála.

Those two schemes will provide a total of approximately 50 km of high-quality dual carriageway. They will connect directly with the N6 Galway to Ballinasloe project, which is starting construction next year. In addition, to the south of Ennis, the Limerick tunnel scheme, connecting the N18 to the southern ring road around Limerick, is now under construction and will be completed in 2010. Those schemes, when completed, will provide, in conjunction with the Ennis bypass and the other completed schemes on the route, a high-quality and high-capacity dual carriageway connecting Limerick with Galway.

Investment in the above schemes represents close to €2 billion. In addition, many other schemes are being advanced throughout the region including the N55 Cavan bypass, the N15 from Ballyshannon to Bundoran, the N4 Edgeworthstown bypass, the N52 Mullingar bypass, and the N2 Monaghan bypass, which opened in 2006.

Other BMW schemes currently under construction include the N6 Kinnegad to Kilbeggan and Kilbeggan to Athlone schemes, with an estimated combined cost of over €500 million. Further schemes under construction in the BMW region include the N4 from Dromod to Rooskey; the N2 Castleblayney bypass; the N5 Charlestown bypass; the N52 from Mullingar to Belvedere; and the N56 from Mountaintop to Illistrim. Numerous other schemes are at varying stages of the planning process, including projects on the N5, N14, N15 and N26 routes.

I would also like to mention the western rail corridor.

*Additional information not given on the floor of the House.*

The exact road type to be constructed along any route is a function of predicted traffic levels. The NRA has yet to make a final determination of the road types to develop along various routes. However, it is already clear that significant sections of the Atlantic corridor will be developed to dual carriageway standard.

In addition to those road investments, I announced in September last the phased reopening of the western rail corridor from Ennis to Claremorris and the upgrade, for commuter services, of the Athenry to Galway line. Completion of the project will provide a rail link between the cities of Limerick and Galway, with an onward connection to Claremorris on the Dublin-Westport line. That new line will also facilitate the provision of inter-regional services in the BMW region.

**Ms Harkin:** I thank the Minister for his answer. He listed several projects, but the issue I wish to highlight is the underspend on national roads under the NDP. Figures from his Department to June 2006 indicate that spending is €700 million behind in the BMW region. His most recent figure was approximately €600 million. At that point, the south and east of the State had an overspend of €1.1 billion. That follows an underspend in the last NDP, which covered the period up to 2000. Some 7% or 9% of funding had been supposed to go to Clare, Connacht and Donegal, and the Western Development Commission confirmed that it had fallen to 4%.

We have therefore seen an underspend up to 2000 and a continuation of that trend up to 2006. I understand the money will be ring-fenced and spent. Of course it will be spent, but we will be playing catch-up while the south and east power ahead. They are already well ahead and we will be playing catch-up in 2007 and 2008, when those moneys should already have been spent. Despite the list of projects that the Minister had, which I accept are in place, we are still far behind, and the infrastructural gap will not be closed.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** The Deputy should put a question. This is Question Time.

**Ms Harkin:** The Minister spoke of the western rail corridor. How can he justify half-finishing it to Claremorris by 2014, which is only one year behind completion of the metro? I accept that the latter is needed, and I am delighted to see it coming on stream, but it has not even been costed. The Minister costed the western rail corridor and will half-finish it to Claremorris by 2014. How can he justify that situation?

When I tabled my question to the Minister, half of it was rejected. A note came back stating that

[Ms Harkin.]

the Minister has no official responsibility to the Dáil regarding dual carriageways north of a line from Dublin to Galway, or completion dates for the Atlantic road corridor. I was astounded when I read it. Has the Minister abdicated his responsibility to the NRA? Who is the person responsible? If I want an answer, I need to know where the buck stops and whom I can ask if, according to the Ceann Comhairle, the Minister is not responsible. If the Minister does not accept responsibility for building roads, why is he there when they are opened?

**Mr. Cullen:** Why is it that every other colleague in the Dáil, from whatever party, seems to wish to join me in the photographs? It is hard to say that I do not accept responsibility. I seem to have been given it for almost every problem in the country, so we can knock that rumour on the head. I do not want to go through what may be an embarrassment for the Deputy, having read out an extraordinary long list of developments.

**Ms Harkin:** The Minister should be embarrassed at the underspend.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Please allow the Minister to speak without interruption.

**Mr. Cullen:** Frankly, it would take more than what the Deputy has said to embarrass me.

**Ms Harkin:** Perhaps because the Minister does not care.

**Mr. Cassidy:** I welcome the Deputy back.

**Ms Harkin:** I thank Deputy Cassidy.

**Mr. Cullen:** I am pleased and thankful that people in the west have acknowledged that since I entered office as a Minister who understood the needs of the regions, I have substantially rebalanced investment in the roads programme.

**Mr. Cassidy:** Hear, hear.

**Mr. Cullen:** It is evident from what I have said in the House today that in the past two years, investment in the BMW region has been extraordinarily substantial. The Deputy is right that it is somewhat behind. My job is not only to ensure that it is achieved. I would have thought she would have been pleased that I told her I intend to surpass what it was originally planned to spend in the western region.

**Ms Harkin:** We are playing catch-up.

**Mr. Cullen:** I am not sure how many Ministers of Transport have stood in the House to answer questions on the western rail corridor. However, I secured Government approval to reinstate it, and the money to do so.

**Mr. Cassidy:** Hear, hear.

**Mr. Cullen:** That is widely acknowledged in the west. The Deputy belatedly acknowledged this point. It is very important that those in the west and everywhere else understand that the investment we make in our capital city benefits everyone in the country, not only those who live in Dublin or on its periphery. There is business interaction with Dublin and the ability to transfer goods and services around the country and build up tourism in the west and east, and throughout the country. We all have a vested interest in our capital city being one of the most thriving and respected economically dynamic capitals in Europe today.

### Rail Network.

32. **Ms O. Mitchell** asked the Minister for Transport if he is satisfied that public expenditure on rail upgrades, improvements and infrastructure since 2002 is delivering the maximum value for money; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41999/06]

**Mr. Cullen:** I am satisfied that the investment of recent years in upgrading and expanding the rail network represents good value for money. The rail network has been revitalised and modernised and we now have a safer network with increased capacity, providing more services and carrying more passengers than ever. The benefits to the travelling public are evident in the increased numbers using the network on both commuter and intercity services.

Passenger numbers on the Iarnród Éireann network have grown from 35.37 million in 2002 to a projected 42.3 million in 2006. I was recently happy to see at an international conference that Ireland's rail network was referred to as the fastest-growing in Europe. The two Luas lines are an unprecedented success and have exceeded all projections for carrying passengers. An estimated 26 million passenger journeys were made in 2006 and a surplus was generated on the operation of the lines.

All major capital investments in railway upgrades and improvements and in rolling stock are subject to rigorous appraisal procedures, ensuring the need for each project and the options for delivering it are established within the objective of maximising value for money in accordance with Department of Finance guidelines. Major rail projects are being delivered on time and within budget.

Progress on projects is monitored through regular reporting by, and meetings with, the implementing agencies and through technical and financial audits of a selection of projects by independent consultants. I have also established a Transport 21 monitoring group, chaired by my Department and comprising representatives of relevant Departments, to oversee the monitoring

arrangements. The chief executive officers of the implementing State agencies assist this group in its work.

I am satisfied the arrangements in place for the appraisal, approval and monitoring of projects are sufficiently robust to ensure value for money is secured.

**Ms O. Mitchell:** The Minister claims the heavy rail system is being revitalised and modernised. I doubt if those rail passengers who were stuck outside Mullingar for two hours last Sunday would agree. Nor would those who are obliged to stand regularly on the same Sligo service at least as far as Carrick-on-Shannon and sometimes as far as Sligo.

One of my main concerns in tabling this question is the operational difficulties that have arisen in regard to the new Cork trains. Their introduction was promised many times in recent years but when they were finally put in service, they broke down one after the other. I do not know the reason for this because the Minister will not answer questions about it in the House. The public has a right to know what the problem is because taxpayers have made a major contribution to their purchase. We were also promised an early service on the Cork line but there is no sign of that happening.

The breakdowns on the service are so regular that CIE was obliged to post an apology on its website. Some of these breakdowns last for hours, with people being moved from one train to another without being given any information. In one instance, passengers were moved successively onto four different trains, none of which would start. It is absolutely outrageous that such major investment has taken place but we are given no explanation for the operational difficulties.

The Government also undertook to refurbish 76 DART carriages and a contract for this purpose was signed in 2004. A problem became evident in 2005, however, and only four of them have been refurbished to date. The Minister told me in response to a parliamentary question that this delay has incurred no financial loss for the taxpayer. There is no doubt taxpayers are losing out, however, because the extra capacity that was promised has not been delivered. Passengers are paying high fares to stand in trains which are not running at either the capacity or frequency that was promised.

What is the problem with the new Cork trains and why is the early service that was promised several years ago not in place?

**Mr. Cullen:** If the Deputy had tabled a question on this particular issue, I would have been able to provide a more detailed answer.

**Ms O. Mitchell:** The Minister should have all the necessary information on what is the largest ever investment in rail services.

**Mr. Cullen:** I will provide the Deputy with the information if she requests it.

The best way to assess the public's attitude to the railway system is simply to look at passenger numbers. The figures are through the roof, with more than 42.3 million passenger journeys in 2006.

**Ms O. Mitchell:** The rail service is not even competitive with the airlines.

**Mr. Cullen:** All the new rail carriages that were promised on the Cork route have been commissioned, some of which are currently being tested. I am not aware of any major issues in this regard. These are state-of-the-art trains which offer first-class facilities.

An early service will be in operation from Cork to Dublin.

**Ms O. Mitchell:** When?

**Mr. Cullen:** I understand it will be from 1 January.

**Ms O. Mitchell:** That will not happen.

**Mr. Cullen:** Nobody has suggested to me it will be otherwise. The latest information I have indicates the service will be in place from 1 January.

**Ms O. Mitchell:** The Minister should not attempt to do what the Minister, Deputy O'Malley, did. It is necessary to ask a question to receive information.

**Mr. Cullen:** The Deputy is correct that the rolling stock on other routes is outdated. In terms of the quality of the carriages, I agree it is not what one would want in a modern rail service. That is why 157 new carriages will be introduced next year on all intercity connection routes from Galway, Limerick, Sligo, Waterford, Rosslare, Westport and so on.

**Ms O. Mitchell:** Will those trains run without problems?

**Mr. Cullen:** The Government agrees this is what the public deserves. When these new carriages are put into operation next year, we will see a major transformation of the intercity rail network.

**Ms O. Mitchell:** Will the Minister come back to the House with information on why the new Cork trains are breaking down so often and why the early service that was promised is not in place?

**Mr. Cullen:** I will.

### Public Transport.

33. **Ms Shortall** asked the Minister for Transport his views on the application by CIE for a 9%



[Ms Shortall.]

increase in fares for 2007; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41996/06]

**Mr. Cullen:** CIE has applied for an average increase in 2007 of 9% in Iarnród Éireann and Bus Éireann fares and a 10% increase in Bus Átha Cliath fares. CIE has based its application on a projected 6% increase in costs in 2007, plus a 3% to 4% increase to meet historical fuel cost increases over recent years which CIE contends have not been adequately dealt with in previous fare increases. CIE's application is under consideration in my Department and I intend to announce a decision in the matter shortly.

**Ms Shortall:** I asked the Minister for his views on CIE's application for fare increases. The reason for the annual request for exorbitant fare increases is that the public funding it receives is completely inadequate. Does the Minister accept the level of subvention he is providing to the three transport companies which make up CIE is inadequate to allow them provide the type of service the public expects?

The latest figures indicate that out of 16 major European cities, Dublin is bottom of the list with a subvention rate of 26%. This compares poorly with, for example, Stockholm at 54%, Paris at 58%, Milan at 63%, Brussels at 67% and Luxemburg at 78%. We all marvel at the wonderful public transport services in the foreign cities we visit and imagine how wonderful it would be if it were the same in Dublin. The reason that is not the case is the inadequate funding; the Government is trying to provide a public transport system on the cheap. It simply cannot be done with a subvention rate of 26%.

What is the Minister's view on public transport subvention? Has he any intention of moving closer to the European average, for example, of some 50%? In regard to CIE's application for fare increases, does he accept that to sanction such increases at this point would amount to an additional tax on public transport users? These are the people who take the environmentally friendly and sustainable option. For this reason, increases should be ruled out and the Minister must secure a commitment from the Minister for Finance that adequate funding will be provided for public transport.

**Mr. Cullen:** I do not accept the Deputy's contention. The total subvention from the Exchequer in the period 2000-06 is more than €1.76 billion, an increase of more than 60%. The CIE companies will have grown from €190 million in 2000 to more than €306 million in 2007.

Perhaps we might look at the other side of the coin and consider whether we are more efficient than other states in our delivery of public transport and that we do not need the same level of subvention as is required in other cities. Could it

not be that we do things well when it comes to the provision of public transport?

**Ms Shortall:** How can the Minister be so out of step with reality?

**Ms O. Mitchell:** He must be joking.

**Mr. Cullen:** Is it ever within the ambit of the Labour Party to admit that anything works well in this country?

**Ms Shortall:** An efficient public transport system cannot be operated on the cheap.

**Mr. Cullen:** I am proud of what the CIE companies do. The Labour Party view on this is entirely different to mine. We all agree, however, that there is an onus on the companies to ensure value for money for taxpayers and to produce efficiencies in a modern competitive environment. We must acknowledge that they have been working to achieve that.

My view on the application from CIE is that the increases sought are excessive. I am seeking further information to back up the request for such significant increases, an average of some 9.5% across the companies. If we maintain public transport in Dublin city at a good level, more people will be encouraged to use it.

The most successful light rail system in Europe is Luas. There is no comparison in any other country. Light rail projects in other countries have only achieved high-peak capacity whereas Luas has defied expectations in that it also has off-peak capacity. This year it is running a surplus with no subvention required. That is unique in Europe. Rather than criticising our public sector companies that deliver public transport, we should acknowledge the successes they have brought about.

**Mr. Cassidy:** Hear, hear.

**Ms O. Mitchell:** The Luas is not a public sector company.

**Mr. J. Brady:** What does Deputy Shortall have to say to that?

**Ms Shortall:** How can the Minister say Luas does not have a subvention? Luas has been given considerable road priority and expensive road space in the Dublin area for free. As Dublin Bus has pointed out, if its buses were given anything like the same priority as Luas, it would have a wonderful service. Dublin Bus is losing €60 million because of traffic congestion and the absence of adequate bus priority measures. Its entire subvention is being eaten up by the cost of congestion.

Does the Minister accept that the fundamental problem with public transport is that its subventions are inadequate? Is he prepared to move closer to the European model where, on average,

public transport subvention averages at 50%? He cannot maintain it can be done cheaply without the level of funding provided everywhere else. The best models in Brussels, Paris and every other European city provide good public transport, have a real alternative to using the car and keep traffic moving in the city. We cannot do that because we have inadequate public transport.

**Mr. Cullen:** I do not accept that public transport is badly subvented.

**Ms Shortall:** The figure stands at 26%.

**Mr. Cullen:** The rail network is expanding. The Labour Party believes everyone will stop using their cars if there are more buses, but that is simply not the case. Alternative modes of transport attract people to public transport and, as much as it galls the Deputy, Luas proves the point.

**Ms Shortall:** It is not about alternative modes, it is about adequate public transport.

**Mr. Cullen:** More than 60% of Luas users, approximately 16 million people in passenger journey terms, stopped using their cars.

**Mr. Stagg:** They came off the buses and that is why the buses were moved elsewhere.

**Mr. Cullen:** They did not. It was the remaining 40% that came off the buses. The Labour Party does not support light rail.

**Mr. Stagg:** It was the Labour Party that proposed the light rail project in the first place. It was the Minister who butchered it.

**Ms Shortall:** The Minister should stop distorting the facts.

**Mr. Cullen:** The Labour Party constantly criticises public transport policy but Deputy Shortall has not put forward one alternative mode of transport for Dublin city.

**Ms Shortall:** Why is the Minister distorting the facts? Why does he not answer for the fact that he has not provided adequate public transport?

**Mr. Cullen:** I reject the Deputy shouting me down.

**Ms Shortall:** Will he provide adequate funding?

**Mr. Cullen:** I listened to the Deputy and she should at least listen to my response.

**Ms Shortall:** The Minister should stop distorting the facts and answer for his own stewardship.

**Mr. Cullen:** I respected the Deputy's time when she was speaking and I ask that she shows me the same respect when I am responding to her.

**Mr. Cassidy:** Hear, hear.

**Ms Shortall:** Where are the extra buses the Minister promised?

**Mr. O'Flynn:** Cork city has 30 extra buses.

**Mr. Cullen:** The problem is the Deputy does not like the answers and she does not like the success we are bringing to the country.

**Mr. Cassidy:** Hear, hear.

**Ms Shortall:** The Minister should say that to people waiting for buses this evening.

### Other Questions.

#### Rail Network.

34. **Mr. Stagg** asked the Minister for Transport the reason for the delay in signing the railway order for the Kildare route project. [41644/06]

108. **Mr. Kenny** asked the Minister for Transport the reason for his failure to sign the Kildare rail order; when this will happen; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41766/06]

**Mr. Cullen:** I propose to take Questions Nos. 34 and 108 together.

I signed the railway order for the Kildare route project on 5 December 2006. I announced my decision to grant the railway order for the Kildare route project on 13 August 2006 in line with the recommendations of the inspector to the public inquiry into the project. The drafting of the order, however, has taken longer than anticipated to complete due to the need to take formal legal advice on several issues. This has now been done and both the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government and I have signed the order.

I understand Iarnród Éireann has commenced enabling works and is proceeding with detailed design and procurement with a view to commencing the main works early next year. The project involves doubling the number of tracks to four, with two dedicated lines for commuter services and two dedicated lines for intercity and regional services. This will allow for more frequent running of commuter, regional and Intercity trains which compete for busy limited slots into Heuston Station. It will double peak service frequency from Hazelhatch to Dublin, serving all stations. It will also double peak service frequency between Dublin and Sallins, Newbridge and Kildare, and will continue to serve outer commuter towns, including Portlaoise, Athlone and Carlow. Overall the project will facilitate an increase in capacity on the line from approximately 11,000 to more than 36,000 passengers per day in each direction.

**Mr. Stagg:** I welcome the fact that the Minister has finally signed the railway order for the Kildare route project. For the benefit of the gallery of Members behind the Minister, this project was to be completed by 2006 as part of the 2000-06 development plan. That deadline was announced before the last election, which makes me nervous. After the 2002 budget, the money for this project was pulled and frozen for two years. Will the Minister explain that this is not another election gimmick? On the eve of the next election, the Minister informs the House he has signed the railway order again. How many elections will we have to wait for before the Kildare-Hazelhatch to Heuston rail tracks are doubled?

**Mr. Cullen:** I am delighted Deputy Stagg welcomes the impact the four-tracking of the railway line will have for his constituents. The railway order was applied for by CIE in October 2005 and the public inquiry ran from 24 January to February. The inspector's report was received in May and subsequently published and I announced the decision to grant the order in August. The enabling works and physical construction of the route have begun.

This is a key part of Transport 21 integration where the Dublin station interconnector will come into its own. The interconnector will allow electrified rail systems to run from north and south of Dublin. This will allow seamless running from the Kildare line from Heuston through to St. Stephen's Green and on to the new Docklands station. The four-tracking is a crucial part of bringing that capacity to reality.

**Mr. Stagg:** Has provision been made for park-and-ride facilities so that the housing estates in the towns served by the line will not be full of commuter cars? How much money has been assigned for each year of the project? What is the completion date for it?

**Mr. Cullen:** I do not have the figures with me but I am happy to forward them to the Deputy later. The enabling works have started and it is hoped to have the project completed in three years. Park-and-ride facilities will be made available with this project. I confirmed today that I made €5 million available last year for park-and-ride facilities in Dublin, but not one euro was drawn down by any of the local authorities, which is greatly regretted by me and everybody in Dublin.

**Ms O. Mitchell:** That is why we need a Dublin Transport Authority.

**Mr. Cullen:** I urge local authorities and their members, particularly those from the parties opposite, to be more active in this regard.

**Mr. Cassidy:** Absolutely.

**Mr. Stagg:** It is the county managers appointed by Fianna Fáil who are in control. The Minister should stop coddling us.

**Mr. Cullen:** It is difficult when the Minister of the day makes available a lot of money and the local authorities do not want it.

**Mr. Stagg:** The Minister will not back them either.

**Mr. Cullen:** I, therefore, find some of the questions disingenuous.

**Ms O. Mitchell:** Will the Minister give the licences for the buses then?

**Mr. Stagg:** Will the Minister send me the information he does not have?

**Mr. S. Power:** That would not be much.

**Ms O. Mitchell:** Since the delay to the Kildare project was caused by the lack of staff in the Attorney General's office to draft the rail order, will the Minister outline the measures he has taken to ensure staff is available to avoid delays to other rail projects that have to go to the Attorney General's office for redrafting?

**Mr. Cullen:** I am not aware that this was the problem. There were some legal issues around this order that had to be resolved.

**Ms O. Mitchell:** It was the Minister's answer to a parliamentary question of mine.

**Mr. Cullen:** Deputy Olivia Mitchell is correct that there is great pressure on the Attorney General's office and the legal system to deliver all that this great Government is implementing around the country. We try to keep up with all the needs.

**Ms O. Mitchell:** Will the Minister outline the measures he has taken to ensure there will be staff?

**Mr. Cullen:** The measures are a matter for the Attorney General and his staff.

**Ms O. Mitchell:** Is this joined-up government?

**Ms Enright:** Clearly not.

**Mr. Cullen:** No. The Deputy and her colleagues are unable to understand that the four-tracking project in Kildare has started. It is, therefore, spurious to argue about it.

**Ms C. Murphy:** I welcome the fact that the order has been signed and the enabling works are under way. There is already a car parking problem at Sallins and Hazelhatch stations. The car parking is insufficient and the overflows are out on the road. Is it possible to consider front-load-

ing the car parking arrangements? The land take will happen anyway. Rather than have it as the last part of the project, would it be possible to make it one of the early parts of the project? It would make the current services more attractive to people. There is a serious problem.

**Mr. Cullen:** As the Deputy knows, I have visited the areas along the route, including Hazelhatch. There is no consensus locally about the park-and-ride facilities. I am not expected to make a diktat from here. I urge that the local authorities and local communities agree where the park-and-ride facilities should be. If they do that, we can build it.

**Mr. Cassidy:** Hear, hear.

**Mr. Cullen:** The local authorities must do the job they are mandated to do in their local areas and not pretend it is my decision. I have funding, which I am willing to provide if the local authorities will make decisions instead of coming here and disingenuously passing the buck about projects the Government is willing to fund.

**Mr. Cassidy:** Hear, hear.

### Road Safety.

35. **Ms Lynch** asked the Minister for Transport if he has received the 2005 road collision fact book; and when he will lay it before the Houses of the Oireachtas. [41629/06]

**Mr. Cullen:** Statistics relating to road accidents are based on information provided by the Garda Síochána. They are published by the National Roads Authority, NRA, in its annual road accident facts reports. The most recent report, entitled Road Collision Facts Ireland 2004, relates to 2004 and is available in the Oireachtas Library and on the NRA website. The 2004 report refers in particular to the various contributory factors to collisions where such data is available. In that context the report in respect of 2004 notes that driver error accounted for 88% of all contributory factors in respect of all collisions where such were identified. Pedestrian error was the next most listed factor at 8% with road factors accounting for 2% of all those listed. The remaining factors listed related to vehicle and environmental factors.

The annual road collision reports provide a significant degree of knowledge that supports and informs the deployment of road safety measures, which are pursued within the planning framework of the multi-annual road safety strategies. Responsibilities for the collection of structured information on road safety, including the publication of the annual road collision facts report, now lies with the newly established Road Safety Authority. The statistics relating to 2005 are being analysed and authenticated in preparation for publication. At the recent launch of the Road

Safety Authority's Christmas campaign a report was published by Dr. Declan Bedford providing a factual analysis of the influence of alcohol as a cause of road accidents. All who were there could see that the position on deaths and injuries from drinking and driving is stark. I expect to receive the 2005 report from the Road Safety Authority towards the end of January 2007 and I will lay it before the Houses as soon as possible thereafter.

**Ms Shortall:** Does the Minister accept that the delay of over 12 months is not acceptable if we are to evaluate the causes of road accidents adequately? It is incredible that while we are heading into 2007 we are still discussing 2004 figures. Those figures should be compiled and published on a quarterly basis. Why is there such a delay in producing the 2005 figures? I would like to ask the Minister about the extent of the data collected. Does he accept that the categories of data are inadequate? We have no information on the driving status of people involved in road collisions. It stands to reason that a person's driving experience and whether he or she has a full or provisional licence is important information we should have. However, those figures are not collected and compiled.

We have no information on the nationality of drivers. Anecdotal information indicates a disproportionate representation of non-national drivers among our road deaths and serious injuries. There is no information on the standard of vehicles, whether they have passed the NCT or their age. Will the Minister ensure those details are provided on a faster and more regular basis and that the categories of data collected are extended to inform future policy?

**Mr. Cullen:** I agree that we need real-time evaluation. It would be better if that were the case. I am happy to say it is the Road Safety Authority's intention to introduce that. Unfortunately, it is picking up on how it was done in the past and wants to get the 2005 report out of the way. The RSA has been given full responsibility for the data collection. The report it commissioned from Dr. Bedford is extraordinary and provides for the first time the hard facts, rather than anecdotal evidence, and his analysis of much case history on the impact of alcohol abuse on deaths and injuries on our roads. The Road Safety Authority will do what the Deputy has suggested.

I was recently struck by how road accidents are reported in other jurisdictions. In another city recently I was struck by a news report at 8 a.m. which clearly stated that a person had been killed at midnight, only eight hours previously. I wonder what was the legal basis for that. The report was that a drunk driver who was at twice the legal alcohol limit killed a person at midnight. We do not have that kind of reporting and if we could find the legal base for it, that would put into the public domain the facts, without trying to apportion blame, on the causes of accidents. If an

[Mr. Cullen.]

abuse of substances or the law is directly responsible for a person being killed or injured on our roads that should be stated on the news in this country.

**Mr. Naughten:** The Minister should go to Australia.

**Ms O. Mitchell:** Last October there was a serious accident in which five young people were killed. On 20 October the Minister sought and received from the Road Safety Authority 21 recommendations that would make our roads safer, particularly for young drivers. Have any of those recommendations been acted on? What is their current status? Has a decision been made on any of them?

**Mr. Cullen:** People believe my receipt of the letter from the RSA was a consequence of that horrendous accident. This was not the case. I received a letter listing a number of factors that contribute. My opinion was positive and I suggested the Road Safety Authority do research to justify in legal terms why such an issue was introduced and the evidence of proportionality. I am positively disposed to the suggestions of the authority. I am waiting for the Road Safety Authority to revert to me with fundamental information and it was happy with this response. I met the board subsequently and was pleased to learn that it is pursuing this matter. The new road safety strategy due early next year will consider a number of these issues.

**Ms O. Mitchell:** Will the Minister share those measures with us? Will everything happen in secret?

**Mr. Cullen:** Of course I will share it. I reverted to the Road Safety Authority with substantial requirements that have been accepted. The matter will become public.

**Ms O. Mitchell:** Why is it a secret?

**Mr. Cullen:** It is not a secret. Most of the recommendations have been articulated by Deputy Mitchell and I in public over the past year.

**Ms O. Mitchell:** The Minister set up an expert body to provide advice. What is that advice?

**Mr. Cullen:** The body must provide technical reasons for some of these issues. We cannot haphazardly—

**Ms O. Mitchell:** The Minister is waffling.

**Mr. Cullen:** I am not. I am explaining the position.

**Mr. Hayes:** In light of widespread concern about young drivers, accidents late at night and the possibility of drug use, is it possible to test for drugs?

**Mr. Cullen:** This is a serious issue. The Deputy refers to roadside testing. If a garda is suspicious and believes a person to be under the influence of any substance, the person can be arrested, brought to a Garda station and tested for drugs. This can be done under Irish law at present.

Between seven and ten roadside testing systems have been examined and all of them have failed. The Medical Bureau of Road Safety is involved in the process. A number of systems are being tested and as soon as one is available, it will be used in this country. Much drug abuse appears to involve prescribed drugs rather than illegal drugs.

**Mr. Cassidy:** I welcome the 60 recommendations—

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** This is Question Time. The Deputy must ask a question.

**Mr. Cassidy:** The Joint Committee on Enterprise and Small Business made 60 recommendations and over half of them were accepted by the Minister.

**Ms Shortall:** What does that mean?

**Mr. Cassidy:** Is it possible that black box technology can be used in all Government vehicles to show a lead? This is a recommendation made and I understand he is considering it.

**Mr. Cullen:** I thank the Deputy for the recommendations. The issues raised, some of which have been implemented, are being considered by the Road Safety Authority. I hope they will be embraced in the forthcoming strategy.

#### **Taxi Regulations.**

36. **Mr. Costello** asked the Minister for Transport, further to Parliamentary Question No. 463 of 21 November 2006, if he has received a proposal from the Commission for Taxi Regulation in relation to a subsidy to encourage the greater availability of wheelchair accessible taxis; the estimated cost to the Exchequer of such a subsidy; the amount of funding provided in the Estimates 2007 for such a subsidy; and his decision in relation to its introduction and financing. [41625/06]

106. **Mr. McEntee** asked the Minister for Transport if he has received a proposal from the Taxi Regulator to provide a subsidy to wheelchair accessible taxis; his views on such a proposal; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41771/06]

**Mr. Cullen:** I propose to answer Questions Nos. 36 and 106 together.

I have received no proposals to date from the Commission for Taxi Regulation regarding the provision of a subsidy to encourage greater availability of wheelchair accessible taxis. However, I expect to receive proposals from the commission shortly and when the proposals are received, they will be considered by my Department.

**Ms Shortall:** The lack of availability of wheelchair accessible taxis is a matter of serious concern to people with impaired mobility. Some 21% of the taxi fleet was wheelchair accessible before deregulation; the figure is now 9%. People with disabilities complain about the difficulty in getting an accessible taxi to provide a service. Those with taxis that are wheelchair accessible can make more money by serving the able-bodied community and taking larger groups. The Taxi Regulator made a proposal to the Minister for Finance. The costs involved require some subsidy or a rebate of VRT or VAT. The Minister for Finance refused this scheme despite the money available. He is preparing a scheme that will apply to the Department of Transport. What is the Minister's view on the economic viability of running wheelchair dedicated taxis? Does the Minister accept the service is not viable without subsidy? Is he prepared to give positive consideration to such a subsidy?

**Mr. Cullen:** I have not yet received proposals from the Taxi Regulator.

**Ms Shortall:** Does the Minister accept the principle?

**Mr. Cullen:** I do not wish to pre-empt the proposals. This Government, more than any other, has shown support for access and disability across all Departments, including the Department of Transport in public transport, buses and trains. The taxi sector is a significant contributor to public transport and I hope we can increase the number of accessible vehicles available.

**Ms Shortall:** I asked if the Minister accepted that there is a serious problem for people with disabilities who wish to access a taxi service. Does he accept that some form of subsidy is required to make the service viable?

**Mr. Cullen:** I will wait for the Taxi Regulator's assessment. I will not pre-empt the proposals or guess what they will contain.

#### **Road Network.**

37. **Mr. Howlin** asked the Minister for Transport the steps he is taking to ensure that the taxpayer receives value for money in relation to the construction and acquisition costs for major roads and public transport projects. [41663/06]

**Mr. Cullen:** I am satisfied that the investment that has taken place over recent years in upgrading our road and public transport infrastructure represents good value for money. The position as regards national roads is that, as Minister for Transport, I have overall responsibility for policy and funding of the national roads programme. In accordance with the Roads Act 1993, the implementation of the projects that make up the programme, including measures to ensure that these projects are delivered on time and in budget, are a matter for the National Roads Authority in conjunction with the relevant local authorities concerned.

My Department's main focus in monitoring the progress of the national roads programme is to ensure that it meets the overall policy priorities and targets set down in Transport 21. In addition, my Department has a role in ensuring that appropriate arrangements are in place for project management and cost estimation and control so that the programme can be delivered in accordance with best practice value for money principles. This is achieved through a number of different methods ranging from day-to-day liaison with the authority, the submission of regular formal progress reports to my Department and regular meetings of senior officials of the NRA and my Department.

In addition it should be noted that the NRA must also comply with the Department of Finance's value-for-money framework. In recent years, at the behest of my Department, a greater emphasis has been placed on the NRA on improving their cost estimation and control measures. So far this year, 12 of the 14 projects already completed have come in on time and within budget, and a number of projects were delivered comfortably ahead of the original schedules. These include the N15 Ballyshannon to Bundoran bypass, three months ahead of schedule; the N2 Ashbourne bypass, four months ahead of schedule; the N8 Rathcormac to Fermoy bypass, eight months ahead of schedule; and the N25 Kinsale road interchange, six months ahead of schedule.

**Mr. Hayes:** I have a few roads that need upgrading.

**Mr. Durkan:** Traffic is at a standstill.

**Mr. Cullen:** Indeed, the project from Kinnegad to Tyrellspass was completed 12 months ahead of schedule. All major capital investments in public transport are subject to rigorous appraisal procedures ensuring the need for each project and the options for delivering it are established with the objective for maximising value for money. Major rail projects are now being delivered on time and within budget.

**Mr. Cassidy:** Hear, hear.

**Mr. Cullen:** Progress on projects is monitored through regular reporting by and meetings with the implementing agencies and through technical and financial audits of a selection of projects by independent consultants.

**Mr. J. O’Keeffe:** What will the Minister’s next trick be?

**Mr. Cassidy:** The Deputy would be welcome back.

**Mr. Cullen:** One of the key functions of the monitoring group, established to look after Transport 21, is to monitor the implementation of projects provided for in that programme, with particular reference to compliance with the Department of Finance’s capital appraisal guidelines and the value-for-money indicators. It will also review ongoing programme progress using information supplied by Endorse, an audit regime for the Transport 21 framework, and submit an annual report of progress to Government on the implementation of Transport 21.

I am very satisfied the arrangements in place for appraisal deliver value for money on all these projects.

**Deputies:** Hear, hear.

**Ms Shortall:** How can the Minister state he is satisfied when the NRA last week pointed out that the cost of land acquisition amounts to approximately 23% of the cost of road building projects, which is completely unsustainable whether relating to road building, transport or housing? It is simply unacceptable that big land-owners and property speculators are making a killing at the expense of the taxpayer.

**Mr. Cassidy:** That is not what the IFA stated.

**Ms Shortall:** This has been pointed out to the Minister and his Government colleagues for many years. In 2003, the Labour Party introduced a Bill to provide for the Government to compulsorily purchase land at use value. The Government voted it down, but the All-Party Committee on the Constitution recommended that it legislate for something similar. In spite of this issue arising time and again, with cost overruns on public transport projects, road building and house prices, the Government has refused to take action.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Does the Deputy have a question?

**Ms Shortall:** Is it not the problem that Fianna Fáil and the Progressive Democrats are not prepared to face down property speculators, and are instead giving in to their pressure?

**An Ceann Comhairle:** The Deputy should ask a question.

**Ms Shortall:** The Government is giving into those vested interests and the taxpayer is paying the price.

**Mr. Cullen:** The Labour Party is the most anti-farming and anti-rural party in the House. The Government will certainly not go down the road of what the Labour Party prescribes. It is typical of the Labour Party to be disingenuous on the facts presented to the House.

**Mr. Stagg:** Answer the question.

**Mr. J. O’Keeffe:** This is the light entertainment before the budget.

**Mr. S. Ryan:** This is rubbish.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** The Minister, without interruption.

**Mr. Ring:** The Minister does not like it.

**Mr. D. Ahern:** Was the Deputy not in with Labour?

**Mr. Cullen:** In spite of what the Deputy has said, the cost of producing every kilometre of new road in this country is half the cost of that in the United Kingdom.

**Deputies:** Hear, hear.

**Mr. Cullen:** We are delivering superb value for money and we share the wealth of this country with everybody, unlike the Labour Party.

*Written Answers follow Adjournment Debate.*

## Financial Resolutions 2006.

### Budget Statement 2006.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Before calling on the Minister for Finance, I remind Members that the budget documents being circulated remain confidential until the Minister has announced them.

**Ms O. Mitchell:** They are already in the *Evening Herald*.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** They should not be taken or sent by any means, including electronic means, from the House before the conclusion of his statement.

**Minister for Finance (Mr. Cowen):** As I present my third budget to this House, I am delighted to report that Ireland’s economy is strong.

#### *Introduction*

Growth is running at 5%, its ideal, sustainable level, and more than 2 million people are at work. We are making unprecedented investment in our

infrastructure and this will enhance our competitiveness and improve our quality of life for years to come.

Our public services are being expanded, improved and reformed, and more doctors, teachers, nurses and gardaí are employed than ever before. At the same time, the public finances have never been in better shape. The success we enjoy now has been brought about by the hard work of our people, responding to the policies of this Government. The purpose of this budget is to use that success as a platform on which we will continue to build a fairer and stronger Ireland.

#### *Economic Context*

In 2007, our country will extend its record of outstanding economic progress. The economy will grow by 5.25%; we estimate that 72,000 new jobs will be created next year, representing a 3.5% increase in the numbers at work; unemployment will remain low at 4.4%, among the lowest in the EU; and inflation, as measured on the harmonised EU basis, will moderate from 2.7% on average in 2006, to 2.6% in 2007.

Of course these projections are subject to some degree of risk from international factors. These include a possible sharper than expected downturn in the US economy; a slower growth rate than is currently forecast in Europe; further ECB interest rate increases; and the ever present unpredictability of oil prices and exchange rates. There are also domestic risks of losing competitiveness and from unbalanced economic growth. This budget addresses those risks by taking a long-term, sustainable approach to our economic management.

The Government's primary economic aim has been to create more jobs and facilitate more business being done. The additional revenues generated by such a strong economy enable us to sustain ongoing improvements in our public services year in, year out. The success of our policies is best highlighted by the hundreds of thousands of new jobs created, and the changes to our tax policies which have rewarded work and allowed people take home a greater share of their pay. We have also been able to provide for the less well-off in ways which no Government has ever achieved before. We have built up the productive capacity of the country by investing in capital spending; thereby helping us to compete better in the long term also.

At the same time that we have been doing all this, we have more than halved the national debt burden, an example of responsible Government at work. Our strategy has been remarkably successful by any measure and is the firm foundation on which we can build in the future.

The year 2006 has been an exceptional year for the public finances. It is true that although tax revenues are well ahead, some of the buoyancy is due to one-off windfall gains. Against this backdrop, we must firstly ensure any increase in spending is used efficiently and effectively. We

must continue to insist on value for money in public spending and we must be careful not to inject so much spending that we create additional inflationary pressures, and in so doing reduce the impact of additional expenditure.

I am not proposing that because we have extra resources we should spend it all now. That would be irresponsible and short-sighted. Responsible Government involves finding the balance between meeting immediate priorities and making provision for future uncertainties. Of the additional resources at my disposal this year, I am returning some to the taxpayer and committing some to additional support in the social welfare and health areas, in care of the elderly and in improving services for the disabled. I am also using some of the additional revenue to run a very substantial budget surplus. In the event of a global slowdown, we will be able to use some of this flexibility generated during the good times to protect jobs and public services at home.

For these reasons, I will provide for the following fiscal targets in 2007: a projected general Government surplus of 1.2%; an increase in gross current spending of 11.5%; an increase in capital spending of 13%; and a gross debt to GDP ratio of under 25%, one of the lowest in Europe.

Balancing responsibility with ambition has brought us to our present position of economic strength and this Government is determined to maintain that approach. It is the only means of prolonging and extending the best period of sustained economic growth in our country's history.

#### *Rewarding Work*

##### *Income Tax*

Regarding rewarding work, as I stated, Ireland's economic success is driven by the hard work and collective efforts of the people. There is no doubt in my mind that our national economic potential has been boosted through a transformation of our tax system generally and our income tax system in particular which has dramatically increased the rewards of work.

During our ten years in office so far, we have made our income tax system fundamentally fairer by introducing tax credits, widening tax bands and cutting tax rates. We lifted hundreds of thousands of people out of the tax net. We introduced and increased the minimum wage and ensured that people on it do not pay income tax. We cut the income tax burden on average earners by more than half. We removed the average wage from the higher tax rate. We reached our target of 80% paying an effective tax rate of no more than 20%.

We abolished many property-based and other tax relief schemes and introduced restrictions on the reliefs available to high earners as part of our continuing tax reform measures. We will continue to assess the role time-limited tax relief schemes can play in supporting public policy objectives. In short, this Government has achieved a fairer, more progressive and more rewarding income tax



[Mr. Cowen.]

system. Thanks to the strength of our economic performance, we can now go further.

I wish to announce the following income tax changes to the House. Today, I am increasing the personal tax credit by €130 to €1,760 each year for single people and by €260 to €3,520 for married couples. I am increasing the employee tax credit by €270 to €1,760 per year. The entry point at which people will start paying income tax is being increased to €17,600 per year—

**Deputies:** Hear, hear.

**Mr. Cowen:**—equivalent to more than €8.65 per hour. The employee PRSI entry point is also being increased to that level. These measures will remove around 88,000 from the tax net altogether. Once again, in 2007 we will meet our commitment to keep those on the minimum wage completely out of the tax net.

**Deputies:** Hear, hear.

**Mr. Cowen:** This means that almost two out of every five earners, or 846,000 persons, will be outside the tax net in 2007 compared to one third, or 677,000 persons, in 2004 and one quarter, or 380,000 persons, when we took office in 1997. This is a highly significant development.

**Deputies:** Hear, hear.

**Mr. Cowen:** The cost of these measures is €501 million in 2007 and €657 million in a full year.

The 20% standard income tax band will be widened by €2,000 per year to €34,000 single and €43,000 married one earner couples. The projected average industrial wage for 2007 is just over €33,000. Again, we have ensured that workers on such earnings will not be liable to pay tax at the higher tax rate. This measure will cost €268 million in 2007 and €365 million in a full year. These increases in credits and bands mean that 80% of income earners will continue to pay an effective tax rate of no more than 20%.

**Deputies:** Hear, hear.

**Mr. Cowen:** I am also increasing the threshold for the payments of the health levy from €440 per week to €480 per week, or just under €25,000 per year. This means that all workers earning €480 or less per week will be exempt from the health levy.

The income tax exemption limits for senior citizens aged 65 and over are being raised from €17,000 and €34,000 to €19,000 and €38,000 per year respectively for single and married persons, removing a further 9,000 from the tax net. This means our senior citizens will be exempt from income tax if they earn less than €19,000 single or €38,000 married per year.

I propose to increase a number of other tax credits which affect certain people because of their particular circumstances. Widowed persons

currently receive an additional tax credit of €500 per year. I am increasing it by 10% to €550 in 2007. A special tax credit is also given to widowed parents in each of the five years following the year of bereavement. I believe that widowed parents deserve greater support during these difficult years and I am increasing the credit by €650 in each of the five years after the year of bereavement. The increased tax credit will range from €1,750 in year five to €3,750 in year one.

A special tax credit is also given to people who care for an incapacitated child. In 2007, I am doubling this tax credit from €1,500 to €3,000 each year.

**Deputies:** Hear, hear.

**Mr. Cowen:** The blind person's tax credit will go up by €260 single and €520 married to €1,760 single and €3,520 married per year, respectively. Alongside the income tax age exemption limits, those aged 65 and over receive an extra tax credit. This extra tax credit will increase by 10% to €275 single and €550 married per year. These measures relating to exemptions and special credits will cost more than €88 million in a full year.

With regard to tax rates, when we came into office, we made a commitment to the Irish people to reduce the marginal rate of income tax from the then 48% to 42%. We delivered on that. We also said we would reduce the top rate further to 40% if economic circumstances permitted. We believe that the economic circumstances are sufficiently buoyant now to enable me to reduce the top rate of tax from 42% to 41% today.

**Deputies:** Hear, hear.

**Mr. Cowen:** This rate cut will cost a net €125 million in 2007 and a net €186 million in a full year. If this Government is returned to office, and is honoured with a further term, then on the basis of our current economic strength being maintained, it is our shared intention to complete the commitment to cut the top income tax rate to 40% in next year's budget.

**Deputies:** Hear, hear.

**Mr. Cowen:** I propose to increase the health levy from 2% to 2.5% on income exceeding €1,925 per week or just over €100,000 per year. This extra money will help fund services such as long-term care initiatives for the elderly. We need to act now to secure such funds and I believe it is only right that those best able to afford it make an increased contribution. This will raise €34 million in a full year.

Taken together, these changes will reward work and increase disposable income. They will help workers, most obviously those on low and middle incomes, and will, I believe, be welcomed by all. The full year cost of all these income tax measures is estimated at just over €1.25 billion.

### *Helping Taxpayers Claim*

It is not just a matter of providing additional tax reliefs for the ordinary taxpayer. The taxpayer must also be helped by making it as easy as possible to access tax reliefs. We already made strides in this regard by giving mortgage interest relief and medical insurance relief at source via the banks, building societies and health insurers. However, there are other areas where getting access to reliefs can be improved, especially in the area of various expenses reliefs. Accordingly, the Revenue Commissioners will put in place measures specifically to help the taxpayer, in addition to the major publicity campaigns already undertaken to make taxpayers more aware of their entitlements.

In 2007, all age-related tax credits will, where possible, be credited automatically to the taxpayer, where a verified date of birth can be established through Revenue and social welfare records. Credit institutions will be enabled to operate DIRT-free accounts for those aged 65 and over and for those who are permanently incapacitated where their income falls below the relevant income tax limits. At the moment, both categories of depositor have to reclaim the DIRT paid in such cases.

In 2007, Revenue will also implement a system to credit tax relief on trade union subscriptions automatically, based on trade union membership lists, and will be engaging with the unions to make the necessary arrangements in respect of their members.

For 2008, Revenue plans to move, where possible, to automatic repayments in respect of certain hospital and other expenses that qualify for tax relief. Tax relief due on medical insurance paid by employers that has been subject to benefit-in-kind taxation will be automatically included in the employee tax credit. I have asked Revenue to progress work on applying similar procedures in due course to nursing home and other medical expenses that qualify for tax relief.

Revenue will explain the details of these simplification measures later this week. The Government is determined to make it easier for ordinary taxpayers to claim and receive their rightful entitlements.

### *Promoting Enterprise and Innovation*

Ireland has become one of the world's most enterprising economies to the benefit of all. More jobs, better opportunities, improving prospects and greater tax resources have been the results so far. I want to see that development continuing so that the people of this country can face with confidence an increasingly competitive global marketplace. I want to see the State encouraging Irish businesses to work smarter, to pursue excellence and to invest in innovation and creativity for the future.

The budget measures I am announcing today will encourage enterprise, incentivise innovation

and promote competitiveness in Irish industry. They will help position our businesses for long-term success.

### *Supporting growing businesses*

In the past ten years, we have refocused the business expansion scheme and the seed capital scheme to ensure that they channel funds to help transform and modernise our small business sector and improve our national competitiveness. These schemes are due to expire on 31 December and have been specifically reviewed at my request. Hundreds of small businesses using these schemes were consulted and asked for data and for their views on the schemes. Many of these firms using BES are ordinary small to medium-sized manufacturing companies in every part of the country. They make a vital contribution to job creation and to maintaining our competitiveness.

On foot of this review and the suggestions of groups such as the Small Business Forum, I am announcing an extension of these schemes for a further seven years and I am raising the ceiling per company on total BES investment from €1 million to €2 million. The annual limit on BES investment per investor, which has not been increased since 1984, is being raised from €31,750 to €150,000.

**Deputies:** Hear, hear.

**Mr. Cowen:** In the case of the seed capital scheme, the annual investor limit is being increased to €100,000. I am increasing these limits in order to bring vital risk capital to the small business sector. As these schemes are approved State aids, their continuation and the changes proposed will require the approval of the European Commission. The full year cost of these measures is estimated at just over €25 million.

With a view to fostering new companies and entrepreneurs, during the course of this year, I approved a proposal for a new round of seed and venture capital funding announced by my colleague, the Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment, Deputy Martin. This will involve a €175 million State investment through Enterprise Ireland over a period of ten years.

It is often pointed out that much of the dynamism of an economy comes from small firms and there is a real need for small companies to make use of innovation and modern technology to maintain competitiveness. To help bring that about, the Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment has announced a provision of €5 million in 2007 for innovation vouchers, knowledge acquisition grants and ICT audits, all of which were recommended by the Small Business Forum.

### *Helping small businesses*

Small businesses are a major source of employment and growth in this country. Small businesses

[Mr. Cowen.]

are big business. There are approximately 250,000 small businesses in Ireland today, employing almost 800,000 people, or 40% of the workforce. Recognising their important contribution and their development potential, I am pleased to announce the following package of measures aimed at reducing the administrative burden on this important sector. Small companies whose corporation tax liability is currently less than €50,000 can pay preliminary tax based on their previous year's final tax liability. This removes the need for small businesses to forecast their projected full-year performance prior to the end of their accounting year. To alleviate further the burden on small business, I am increasing the small company liability threshold from €50,000 to €150,000.

**Deputies:** Hear, hear.

**Mr. Cowen:** Over 97% of Irish companies will have the benefit of this simpler and more straightforward system. It will help them to get on with their business without putting the State's cash flow at risk. I am also introducing measures proposed by Revenue whereby new start-up companies will not have to pay preliminary tax in respect of their first accounting period. In addition, I have asked Revenue to explore further opportunities to reduce the tax compliance burden on all firms, large and small.

The annual VAT cash accounting threshold for small firms is being raised from €635,000 to €1 million from 1 March 2007 to simplify administration and reduce working capital requirements. This allows smaller firms to pay VAT on receipt of payment rather than at the time a sale is made. The small business VAT registration turnover thresholds are being increased from €27,500 per year for services and €55,000 per year for goods to €35,000 and €70,000, respectively, from 1 March 2007. This measure could take up to 8,000 businesses out of the VAT system and will considerably reduce their administrative burden. The frequency of VAT payments for smaller firms is being reduced from six VAT returns to three each year in some cases and to two each year in other cases. This will provide a cash flow boost to firms and significantly reduce compliance costs. The transaction threshold which triggers the requirement for a tax clearance certificate is being increased from the current €6,500 to €10,000.

The details of all these measures are contained in the Summary of Budget Measures. The full year cost of these measures is €53 million, with an additional once-off cash flow cost in 2007 of €124 million. This will reduce the regulatory burden and enhance the competitiveness of companies whose well-being is critical to our continued success.

#### *R&D tax credit*

I am also enhancing the existing research and development tax credit for firms so as to promote research and development spending in our manufacturing sector. Details are in the Summary of Budget Measures. We must act now to promote as many jobs as possible in the productive sector throughout the State. Investment in research and development is a key factor in retaining our manufacturing base. The special research and development tax credit seeks to encourage this and the changes I am making will further incentivise firms to engage in research and development. These improvements will cost €70 million in a full year and will complement Government spending on science, technology and innovation, which will increase from €800 million in 2006 to €900 million in 2007.

#### *Conferences*

In recent years, hotel and tourism bodies have made a strong case to introduce a VAT measure specifically for conferences, which will allow deductibility of accommodation expenses on a ring-fenced basis to be competitive in this sector. I am now bringing in such a measure which should greatly help that sector to promote growth in the important conference business and benefit the entire country. This is in recognition of the importance of tourism, one of the country's largest indigenous industries. Details of the scheme will be set out in the Finance Bill.

#### *Sporting bodies*

Sport plays a major role in all aspects of Irish life, commercial and social. In recognition of this, there are specific income tax and capital gains tax exemptions in the tax code for sporting bodies. I propose to include in the Finance Bill 2007 a similar exemption from stamp duty where such sporting bodies purchase land for the purpose of promoting sports.

#### *Protecting the Environment*

##### *Environmental measures*

The environment is a concern for us all, but this concern is not addressed merely by announcing policies. It is a matter of practical measures, targets and actions that have a real effect. It is also a matter of achieving a balanced impact on society. Our economic success in recent years has brought with it environmental pressures through increased consumption levels, waste and energy demands. However, we have been working to minimise the impact of these measures and enhance the quality of our environment.

The recent Stern review in the UK highlighted that climate change is one of the most pressing global economic and environmental challenges we face. Ireland supports the international effort to address this challenge and is playing its part in the co-ordinated global response. We will meet

our Kyoto target, mainly through reductions in greenhouse gas emissions in our economy, but also through contributing to the cost of projects to reduce emissions elsewhere in the world.

The Government has indicated its intention to purchase up to 18 million tonnes of carbon allowances in respect of the Kyoto commitment period from 2008 to 2012. I provided an initial €20 million in last year's budget and just recently the Dáil approved the investment of this money in emission-reduction projects in the emerging economies in eastern Europe.

**Mr. Boyle:** Producing a Kazakhstan.

**Mr. Cowen:** A further €270 million will be provided to fund a programme of purchases up to 2013 and this will be reflected in the Government's medium-term investment programme to be set out in the forthcoming national development plan.

**Mr. Gormley:** The Minister is buying his way out of it.

**A Deputy:** The Deputy should have some manners.

**Mr. Cowen:** This provision will be kept under review. The purchase of carbon allowances is just one part of the overall strategy. We will shortly complete an updated version of the national climate change strategy.

**Mr. Gormley:** What strategy?

**Mr. Cowen:** In more general terms, on the environment we have made progress on many fronts, including enhancing public transport facilities under Transport 21; setting an ambitious target of 30% electricity generation from renewable sources; making rapid improvements in drinking water quality; significantly increasing high-quality waste water treatment capacity resulting in 90% compliance with EU standards this year from 25% in 2000 — as a result, pollutant loads to our waters have been reduced by 45,000 metric tonnes per year; increasing municipal waste recycling rates from 9% in 1998 to over 34%, which figure is increasing; introducing a major excise relief scheme for bio-fuels, costing in excess of €200 million over five years—

**Mr. Stagg:** Is the Minister doing anything about radon gas, which is killing 300 people per year?

**Mr. D. Ahern:** The Deputy never did anything about it.

**Mr. Cowen:** —and the nitrates action programme will resolve the problem of water pollution from the overuse of phosphates and

nitrites and will also reduce our greenhouse gas emissions.

**Mr. Stagg:** Radon gas kills 300 people per year in Ireland.

**Mr. Cowen:** We have allocated €328 million in 2007 for the rural environment protection scheme. This includes provision for a new REPS 4 scheme, which will go to Brussels shortly for approval as part of Ireland's rural development programme for the period 2007 to 2013. The new scheme will include additional biodiversity elements and new supplementary measures designed to deliver further benefits to water quality and the wider environment. Here again, we have the opportunity to translate our concern for the environment into practical action, in partnership with farmers.

I am allocating an additional €10 million to the local government fund in 2007 in order to alleviate the pressure on certain local authorities most affected by the additional operational costs associated with new water services infrastructure.

We depend on cleaner technologies to minimise our environmental footprint. Furthermore, eco-industries are big business. They employ more than 2 million people in the European Union and comprise one of the fastest-growing sectors in the Union. Environmental protection and economic progress can go hand in hand.

**Mr. Cuffe:** The Minister is singing his song.

**Mr. Cowen:** I would like to mention a number of measures in the fiscal area which I am bringing forward.

#### *Environmental taxation*

In the case of vehicle registration tax, I intend to change the current rating system to relate it more closely to environmental policy objectives, in this case reducing carbon dioxide emissions. I intend that there should be some reward in the VRT system for choosing lower-emission vehicles, and that those choosing higher-emission vehicles should pay more.

**Mr. Cuffe:** What about the Lexus?

**Mr. Cowen:** For that reason, I am setting out a range of options in the budget booklet for making such a move. My Department will carry out a public consultation process on these proposals before coming back to Government. Any changes will have effect from a target date of 1 January 2008.

At the same time, my colleague, the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government will consult on his proposals for a complementary rebalancing of annual motor taxation. This would provide a further incentive through the motor tax system for the motoring

[Mr. Cowen.]

public to drive cleaner cars and would impose some additional cost in respect of cars with higher carbon dioxide emission levels. This would apply to vehicles registered on or after 1 January 2008. Underpinning both of these initiatives will be a new mandatory labelling system for cars based on CO<sub>2</sub> emission levels.

**Deputies:** Hear, hear.

**Mr. Cowen:** Linking consumption taxes to environmental goals requires us to discuss the details of such moves thoroughly with stakeholders if we want to get it right.

#### *Energy*

In my last budget, I announced an excise relief scheme for bio-fuels in the energy area. The relief is worth more than €200 million over five years. This initiative helps reduce our dependence on conventional fossil fuels, lowers CO<sub>2</sub> emissions and stimulates new activity in the agriculture sector. In addition, the Government has also introduced grant schemes for new energy technologies at both the domestic and the commercial levels amounting to €65 million in the period 2006 to 2010. Building on the renewable energy package I introduced last year, I am making a number of further changes today.

The greener homes scheme has had a very positive response from the public. The scheme provides grants for the installation of new energy technologies such as bio-mass burners, heat pumps and solar panels. There have been about 10,000 applications so far. I am increasing the planned spend in this area by €20 million between now and the end of 2009.

**Deputies:** Hear, hear.

**Mr. Cowen:** In the commercial area, we introduced a bio-heat scheme for grant-aiding, for example, wood pellet burners. I am extending this scheme to cover the installation of other technologies such as solar panels. I am also extending it to buildings in the non-commercial sector such as community centres, and sports facilities so that they will also be able to avail of the grants. The planned additional spending for the next year is €4 million, partly funded by a reallocation of resources within the Department of Communications, Marine and Natural Resources.

Better energy efficiency and demand management and initiatives pay significant dividends for business as well as households. I am providing additional funding to Sustainable Energy Ireland of €3 million in 2007 to develop pilot programmes to support small and medium enterprises in assessing their energy usage and measures to enhance energy efficiency. Impacts of the pilot scheme will be reviewed during 2007.

On renewable energy, a scheme of tax relief is in place in the form of a deduction from a com-

pany's profits for corporate investment in renewable energy products in the solar, wind, hydro or biomass technology categories. This scheme was due to end this year. I propose to continue this corporation tax incentive for investment in renewable energy projects for a further five years, subject to EU approval.

#### *Agriculture — energy crops*

I am conscious that we are trying to establish a national bio-fuels supply chain, almost from scratch, and it is appropriate that we offer assistance at the various stages from crop establishment onwards.

The Minister for Agriculture and Food will shortly announce, subject to any necessary EU approval, grant aid for the production of energy crops in three stages from establishment to harvesting. First, establishment grants will be introduced for willow and miscanthus where costs of establishment are very high and there is a wait of several years before harvesting can begin.

Second, there will be a national top-up of €80 per hectare, in addition to the existing EU premium of €45 per hectare. Finally, there will be grant aid for the purchase of the expensive, specialised harvesting machinery needed. The cost of these three measures will rise to €6 million in 2009.

#### *Excise on kerosene and LPG*

As I announced in last year's Budget Statement, I am abolishing the excise on Kerosene and LPG used for home heating from 1 January 2007.

**Deputies:** Hear, hear.

**Mr. Cowen:** This will reduce the incentive to source these fuels in Northern Ireland where no excise is applied. This measure will cost €24 million in a full year.

#### *Supporting Farming and Rural Economy*

A competitive farming sector is the key to developing a sustainable rural community. It is important that as farmers are increasingly freed from the constraints of production quota and price supports, they be given the necessary assistance to enable them to invest and innovate and by so doing to be in a better position to compete in an increasingly globalised market for farming produce. It is also important that such assistance is prioritised to young farmers and to those farmers who have risen to the challenges posed by changes arising from the reform of the Common Agricultural Policy and the World Trade Organisation negotiations.

The package of rural development measures recently agreed with the farming organisations as part of Towards 2016 has been widely welcomed. It means that Government support for farming will more than double in the next rural development period compared to the present one.

This is a time of great change in farming. New schemes of aid for restructuring in the food pro-

cessing sector, while not directly involving farmers, provide an essential underpinning to adapting our agriculture and food sector to the new realities in EU and world farming.

Increases of 15% in forestry premiums and 17% in REPS payments, as well as substantial support for on-farm investment to help meet the requirements of the nitrates directive, reflect our growing concerns about the environment and our awareness of the important role that farmers now play in protecting our environment.

**Mr. Crawford:** Fourteen years.

**Mr. Cowen:** In line with the changes announced in my previous two budgets and arising from the conclusion of the latest social partnership agreement, Towards 2016, I am renewing and extending a series of farm tax reliefs in the areas of income tax and capital taxes, at a cost of €14 million in a full year. The two farm stock reliefs are being renewed. The general stock relief allows 25% of any increase in stock values in a year to be allowed as a trading expense. For young trained farmers, the relief is set at 100%. The stamp duty relief for farm consolidation, where two farmers exchange land, will now apply where only one farmer meets the consolidation criteria.

**Deputies:** Hear, hear.

**Mr. Cowen:** The tax exemption for long-term leases of farmland is being increased to €20,000 per annum for leases of ten years or more in duration. An exemption from capital gains tax applies to disposals of farmland outside the immediate family on retirement. The present threshold for the exemption is €500,000 and this is being increased to €750,000 from 1 January 2007. In addition, where farmland that has been owned and worked by a farmer for over ten years is leased for fewer than five years, and is subsequently disposed of to the person leasing the land, the present retirement relief will also apply.

The last three changes are aimed in particular at encouraging the transfer of farm assets to younger and more progressive farmers. The various measures are detailed in the summary of budget measures and some will require EU state-aid approval before they are implemented.

In addition, the farmers' flat rate of VAT is being increased from 4.8% to 5.2% with effect from 1 January 2007, at a full year cost of €16 million. This flat rate is designed to recoup non-VAT registered farmers for the VAT they pay on their inputs. This increase reflects a number of changes in the method of calculating this refund rate following consultations with the farming bodies.

**Mr. Crawford:** It is a Government in crisis.

**Mr. Cowen:** These consultations are ongoing.

### *Supporting those in Need*

When it comes to supporting those in need one of the measures of a true republic is the strength of its support for those on low incomes. Throughout its term in office, the Government has ensured that the less well-off have shared in Ireland's growing prosperity and 2007 will see further, significant progress. Today, I am pleased to announce the biggest package of support for those on low incomes in the history of the State.

### *Helping those on low incomes*

The Government does not see economic growth as an end in itself. Rather, sustainable economic growth is the only way to generate the resources required to meet society's needs. The Government is determined to ensure the fruits of that growth are used to assist those who need support. Already, of course, enormous efforts have been made by the Government in this regard and we are fully intent on continuing the progress made. I am therefore providing for a social welfare package which will cost over €1.4 billion in a full year. This will leave total social welfare expenditure in 2007 at €15.3 billion—

**Mr. F. McGrath:** We can call the Minister for Social and Family Affairs Comrade Seamus.

**Mr. Cowen:** —substantially more than allocated for 2006.

### *Old Age Pensions*

I want to recognise the contribution made by our pensioners. These are the people whose work built up this country at a time when conditions were much tougher.

**Mr. Stagg:** Before the Government made them sell their houses to pay for nursing homes.

**Mr. Cowen:** In the good times we enjoy, we owe it to them to make their lives a little more comfortable. We had a headline commitment to raise the old age pension to at least €200 per week during our term of office. I wish to confirm today, that by raising the contributory old age pension by €16 per week and the non-contributory pension by €18 per week, we have fulfilled this commitment. The new rates will be €209.30 per week for the contributory old age pension and €200 per week—

**Mr. Durkan:** What about the stealth tax?

*(Interruptions).*

**Mr. Cowen:** —for the non-contributory old age pension.

### *Lowest social welfare rates*

In the Sustaining Progress Partnership Agreement, we also undertook to increase significantly the lowest rates of social welfare. In my first budget, I increased the lowest rate by €14 a week

[Mr. Cowen.]

and, in my second budget, the increase was €17. In today's budget I am happy to announce an increase of €20, bringing the lowest adult rate to €185.80 a week.

**Mr. F. McGrath:** Just above the poverty line.

**Mr. Cowen:** These rate changes are all significantly higher than inflation and show that the Government has met its commitments in the programme for Government and the social partnership agreements. The total cost of all the increases in the social welfare rates that I have just announced is €973 million in a full year.

*Other social welfare measures*

In addition to providing for these very substantial general increases, the Government is introducing a wide range of other social welfare improvements, the full details of which will be announced by the Minister for Social and Family Affairs.

To recognise the role of carers in our society in helping the old and infirm within their own homes, I have agreed to pay a half rate carer's allowance to certain recipients of other social welfare payments.

**Mr. Hayes:** Not before time.

**Mr. Cowen:** I am also increasing the annual respite care grant by €300 to €1,500. We are increasing the back to school clothing and footwear allowance to €180 and €285. We are increasing the free fuel allowance to €18 per week and increasing the income threshold for eligibility to €100 per week. This means we will have doubled this allowance in the past two years.

**Mr. Durkan:** No wonder, given the price increases.

**Mr. Cowen:** For people of working age, the reckonable earnings threshold for maternity benefit will be increased to €350, and we are improving the position of qualified adults of pension age. These are mainly women who, because of their commitment to home-making, may not have a record of social insurance contribution. Accordingly, I am raising the rate for the qualified adult payment to €173 per week.

*Services for persons with a disability/ national disability strategy*

The Government's national disability strategy is a comprehensive and wide-ranging approach to improve the quality of life for disabled persons and to underpin their participation in society. The strategy, backed by considerable levels of investment, also promotes greater co-operation between Departments in the planning and delivery of services for the disabled.

Today's budget acknowledges and reinforces this valuable work. I have already announced tax

measures to assist certain disabled persons and their families. In 2006, we allocated €3.3 billion for disability-specific services across Departments. In the 2007 Estimates, I announced an increase of 10% on the current year. Most of this money is already allocated to the health sector.

Today, I am providing a further €100 million for health-related disability and mental health services. This continues and expands the Government's €900 million multi-annual investment programme which I announced in budget 2005. This extra €100 million will provide additional residential, respite and day places, and other service improvements. The funding will also support the introduction of Part 2 of the Disability Act, which provides for assessments of need and service statements for people with disabilities. These important provisions will start for children under five years with effect from 1 June next. The funding will also support the continued implementation of the plan for mental health services, A Vision for Change.

*Special Olympics Ireland*

I am announcing a number of grants for organisations working for the benefit of communities throughout Ireland, including the disabled. The package includes a once-off grant of €2 million for Special Olympics Ireland. Details of the other grants are set out in the summary of budget measures.

*Care services for older persons*

The Government is investing to improve the level and quality of services for older people. Last year, I allocated €150 million for service improvements in this area. Today I am announcing an additional €255 million in full year terms to augment that enhanced spend next year. The measures include 2,000 more home care packages, providing a total of over 5,000 packages, further increases in home help hours, and an increase in the number of day and respite places. There will also be improvements in palliative care. The Government is also funding an increase in the number of residential care places.

There will be significant improvements to the nursing home subvention scheme to improve the basic level of support provided and to tackle anomalies in the scheme. Details of these various measures will be announced by the Minister for Health and Children. The Government's care policy will continue to focus on helping older people to stay in their own homes for as long as possible. For those who can no longer live at home, we will progressively improve long-stay residential services.

**Mr. Stagg:** They have to sell their houses to get that.

**Mr. Cowen:** The number of elderly citizens is increasing and we must prepare for this. The Government has already given considerable

thought to how people needing long-term residential care should be supported. The Minister for Health and Children will be announcing plans in the very near future which will build on the measures I have announced today.

**Mr. Stagg:** We passed that Bill here yesterday.

**Mr. Cowen:** These improvements will be part financed by a 25% increase in the charge for private beds in public teaching hospitals.

**Mr. Howlin:** What about the VHI?

**Mr. Cowen:** This increase is in line with Government policy since 1999, that the full economic costs of private beds should be charged and will raise €50 million in a full year. As I stated earlier, the proceeds of the 0.5% increase in the health levy on earnings over €100,000 will also contribute to the cost of these service improvements in the care of our elderly.

#### *Social inclusion/primary care*

Furthermore, in the health area, I am allocating funds for the further development of primary care teams, where health professionals work together to provide an integrated service for the community. Where these have already been established, they are making a real difference in terms of the availability of quality, around the clock services. There will also be a range of measures to improve the health and personal social services available to certain marginalised groups in our society. The Minister for Health and Children will announce the detailed initiatives, which will cost €40 million in full year terms.

On top of the €14.6 billion already allocated for next year, the extra funding I am providing today will bring overall spending in the Department of Health and Children to almost €15 billion next year. This is an unequivocal demonstration of the Government's commitment to improving the health status of our population. Equally, however, the Government, on behalf of the taxpayer, will be insistent that full value for money be received for this unprecedented level of investment and we will be seeking positive co-operation from all sides in achieving our health reform programme.

#### *Indirect taxes on tobacco*

Smoking is one of the biggest contributors to ill health in our country. Consequently, I am raising from midnight tonight the excise duty on cigarettes by 50 cent per packet of 20—

**Mr. Gogarty:** It is a drop in the ocean.

**Mr. Cowen:** —inclusive of VAT and by corresponding amounts on other tobacco products. This increase serves to underline the desire of us all to curtail the consumption of tobacco, particularly among young people where price sensitivit-

ies are greatest. It will raise €112 million in a full year.

I believe we should plan for further increases in tobacco excises for a period ahead so as to keep the level of tax increasing in real terms. I am discussing such a formula with the Minister for Health and Children. These steps are being taken as a health promotion measure and it would be helpful if in that spirit the social partners were to agree to discount some or all of the effect of such price increases in fixing on the relevant inflation benchmark.

**Deputies:** Hear, hear.

**Mr. Cowen:** Ireland has led the world by successfully introducing the workplace ban on smoking and it is important to build on this. The Minister for Health and Children will announce measures in the near future to restrict the sale of cigarette pack sizes containing less than 20 cigarettes.

#### *Helping Young Families*

I am acutely aware of the pressures on young families today. Families are the core of our society. Our policies must offer them firm support as they build homes and bring up children.

**Mr. Allen:** Why did the Minister not get rid of stamp duty?

**Mr. Martin:** Wait, Bernard.

**Mr. Cowen:** In 2007, I want to see additional support going to those who have bought, or are trying to buy, a home for the first time.

#### *Assisting first-time home buyers*

In the current market situation, any stamp duty cuts would, more likely than not, be incorporated into the sale price and so end up in the pocket of the seller.

*(Interruptions).*

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

**Mr. Cowen:** This will not help first-time buyers to purchase new homes. Our firm aim is to help the first-time buyer—

**Mr. Kehoe:** Where is the tail that wags the dog now?

**Mr. Cowen:** —directly and substantially, not only those who are in the market now, but also those who are already paying their first mortgages.

**Deputies:** Hear, hear.

**Mr. Cowen:** The best way to do this is by way of mortgage interest relief. The Government



[Mr. Cowen.]

therefore proposes to double the ceiling on mortgage interest relief for first-time buyers from €4,000 per year for single people and €8,000 per year for married or widowed people to €8,000 and €16,000, respectively.

**Deputies:** Hear, hear.

**Mr. Stagg:** That applause is for the Tánaiste and Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform.

**Mr. Cowen:** This increased support will be available to all those currently in receipt of first-time buyer's relief who are in the first seven years of their mortgage. About 125,000 first-time buyers will benefit directly as a result of this measure, at a cost of €60 million in a full year.

**Mr. Durkan:** It is limited enough.

**Mr. Cowen:** As a result of this initiative for first-time buyers, a couple with a joint mortgage of up to €379,000 over 33 years, at an interest rate of 4.25%, will be able to claim interest relief on the full amount of the interest on their loan. Such a couple will now gain up to €1,600 extra per year, or €133 per month, in mortgage interest relief directly credited against their mortgage bill.

**Deputies:** Hear, hear.

**Mr. Cowen:** Single people will gain up to €800 per year, or over €66 each month. This will help existing first-time buyers who are already in their first home, as well as potential first-time buyers, without acting to inflate house prices further.

**Deputies:** Hear, hear.

**Mr. Cowen:** I am also raising the ceiling on interest relief for non-first-time buyers from €2,540 for single people and €5,080 for married people to €3,000 and €6,000, respectively. In addition, I propose to increase the rent relief for those living in private rented accommodation by more than the rate of inflation to assist those facing increased rental costs. The total cost of all these measures together is €74 million in a full year.

**Mr. Hayes:** What about people on a €200,000 mortgage?

**Mr. Parlon:** Come on, Tom.

**Mr. Durkan:** What about rack-renting landlords?

*Child care and child income support*

**Mr. Cowen:** In recent years, the Government has channelled considerable resources into child income support and child care generally. This is highlighted by the fact that the monthly rate of

child benefit for the first two children, which in 1997 was €38 per child, now stands at €150, or nearly four times higher. Today, I am announcing a further increase in child benefit of €10 per month for all children.

**Mr. Durkan:** The sum of €10 per month.

**Deputies:** Hear, hear.

**Mr. Cowen:** While this increase will benefit all children, I want to see additional support being given to those most in need. That is why I have agreed with the Minister for Social and Family Affairs to increase the back to school clothing and footwear allowance payments and to replace the existing three rates of child dependant allowance by a new standard rate of €22 per child per week. This is targeted at all families with children who depend on social welfare for support. The total cost of the child related increases will be almost €244 million in a full year.

**Deputies:** Hear, hear.

**Mr. Cowen:** In last year's budget, I announced a major new Government child care strategy. Since then, investment in child care facilities has intensified. The EU co-funded equal opportunities child care programme has exceeded all targets and has generated over 56,500 child care places to date. More than 32,000 new places have been created and a further 24,500 places have been supported with grant aid allocations amounting to almost €500 million over the past six years.

There has also been a strong response to the new five-year national child care investment programme which I announced as part of the strategy last year and which is funded exclusively by the Exchequer. To date, over 900 capital grant applications, amounting to more than €170 million, have been received.

As part of the Government's strategy to increase the supply of child care, I introduced an income tax exemption last year for income of up to €10,000 per year from childminding where individuals mind up to three children, who are not their own, in the minder's own home.

**Mr. Stanton:** It failed.

**Mr. Cowen:** In response to recent representations received from the childminding sector and indications from the Office of the Minister for Children that the uptake of the scheme may be slow, I have decided to increase the exemption limit in 2007 from €10,000 to €15,000 per year.

**Deputies:** Hear, hear.

**Mr. Stanton:** It is not enough.

**Mr. Roche:** What did the Deputy's party give?

**Mr. Cowen:** In line with the strategy I announced last year, I am increasing the length of paid maternity leave by a further four weeks.

**Deputies:** Hear, hear.

**Mr. Cowen:** This brings the total amount of paid maternity leave to 26 weeks. Unpaid leave is also being increased by four weeks, to 16 weeks. With the changes in maternity benefit I announced earlier, these changes will help to ease the burden on working families.

Another key element of the child care strategy was the introduction of the early child care supplement of €250 per quarter for all children under six years. This benefits more than 280,000 families. This year, I have provided an additional €100 million to cover the full-year cost of the payment, bringing the funding for this payment to almost €400 million in 2007. I am also allocating €1 million per year on an ongoing basis to support young parents through the teen parent support programme.

The early child care supplement, together with increased child benefit payments, means that families with two children aged under six years will receive direct, tax free payments of €5,780 in 2007.

**Deputies:** Hear, hear.

**Mr. Cowen:** These payments are designed to assist parents in the choices they make for the care of their children in the early years. When we came to office, a family in similar circumstances received direct payments from the Exchequer of €914 in a full year.

**Mr. D. Ahern:** Shame on them.

**Mr. Stanton:** There is nothing in it, nothing at all.

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

**Mr. Cowen:** This increase is clear evidence of the Government's support for young families.

#### *Public Services*

##### *Spending on services*

When account is taken of expenditure additions I am providing for today, gross current expenditure in 2007 will be €48.5 billion or 11.5% over the projected 2006 outturn.

**Mr. Sherlock:** Is there an increase in the level of eligibility for medical cards?

*(Interruptions).*

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

**Mr. Cowen:** Since we came into office, those adjustments have been made automatically.

The composition of this amount reflects the priority attached by the Government to social welfare, health and education. These three areas comprise 77% of the 2007 current expenditure provision. The allocation for social welfare is €15.3 billion, for health it is €14.3 billion and for education it is €7.9 billion.

We make no apology for attaching priority to these areas. The cumulative investment we have made has brought real improvements in the well-being of so many of our citizens. When account is taken of the social welfare increases I am announcing today we will have provided increases since 2002 of 42% in social insurance pensions, 56% in the lowest social welfare rate and 36% in child benefit at a time when the rate of inflation in the same period was 17%.

**Deputies:** Hear, hear.

#### *Investing for the future*

**Mr. Cowen:** We are making provision for a gross capital spend of €7.6 billion next year, an increase of 13% over 2006. This will enable further roll-out of our ambitious investment programme currently running at about twice the European average. The medium-term investment envelope will be presented in the National Development Plan 2007-2013, to be published next month.

The national development plan will set out the strategic direction for investment in this country for the next seven years. It will be founded on a commitment to social justice and economic development that is both environmentally sustainable and internationally competitive. The best way of meeting the key social challenges ahead is by putting the individual citizen at the centre of our concerns where the common good must come first, above and beyond strong organisational interests.

**Deputies:** Hear, hear.

**Mr. Cowen:** It is only by adopting such an approach that the social partners can realise for our society the vision that is clearly set out in the Towards 2016 agreement.

**The Taoiseach:** Hear, hear.

**Mr. Cowen:** We must also maintain a sound budgetary position that supports stable economic growth and be able to meet future expenditure needs even in times of lower economic growth.

#### *Conclusion*

I am satisfied that, in present economic circumstances, this budget is fiscally sustainable, economically appropriate and socially responsible.

**Deputies:** Hear, hear.

**Mr. Cowen:** It meets the needs of the economy and underpins growth for the years ahead.

**Deputies:** Hear, hear.

**Mr. Cowen:** It supports pensioners, the disabled and those in need.

**Deputies:** Hear, hear.

**Mr. Cowen:** It helps young families and first-time buyers.

**Deputies:** Hear, hear.

**Mr. Cowen:** It promotes enterprise and innovation and enhances our competitiveness and it rewards work by reducing the tax burden for all.

**Deputies:** Hear, hear.

**Mr. Cowen:** It advances the environmental agenda and encourages farming initiatives.

*(Interruptions).*

**An Ceann Comhairle:** The Minister to continue without interruption, please.

**Mr. Cowen:** We are trying to let some air out of the windbag.

It positions our country for the future. It is a major step forward in the building of a fairer and stronger Ireland. I commend the budget to the House.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Ciúnas.

**Mr. Bruton:** I think it is three years since I heard such whooping from the benches opposite. Then it was about decentralisation.

**Deputies:** Remember that.

**Mr. Bruton:** For each of the 53 towns there was a similar litany of whoops and what happened? Within a few months the cheers had turned to tears——

**Mr. Connaughton:** That is right.

**Mr. Bruton:**——and the people gave their verdict in the European elections of 2004. They will give their verdict on today's cheers in a few months time.

In many ways these are the best of times, but they are the worst of times too. It is a tale of two Irelands. It is the worst of times for many people for whom the Government should have cared. So many people have been left behind in the onward march by the Government. It has created an Ireland of private wealth and public waiting — waiting for health, waiting for care, waiting for transport.

This is the Government's tenth year in power. During the past five years, it has raised and spent

€258,000 million. The Minister wants us to focus on the last 1% of that which he is spending today. He does not want us to look back at the other 99% and how it was spent. The Irish voter does not have such a short memory. What people are asking is why a Government that has made so many promises and that has had so much money has still let down so many who depended on it.

**Mr. Connaughton:** Hear, hear.

**Mr. Bruton:** We were promised an end to waiting lists in our hospitals. Instead, there are hundreds on trolleys and thousands on waiting lists.

**A Deputy:** It was 34 according to Deputy Kenny today.

**Mr. Bruton:** The reality is that there are 20,000 on waiting lists for treatment and how many more thousands are waiting to see a consultant for the first time?

**Deputies:** Hear, hear.

**Mr. Connaughton:** Thousands.

**Mr. Bruton:** We were promised zero tolerance but instead criminal gangs have got the upper hand in this society. They are a prey on our young people. They are confident in the knowledge that their chances of being caught are low and diminishing.

**Mr. Durkan:** Hear, hear.

**Mr. Bruton:** We were promised that our children would be in classes of under 20 pupils. What is the reality? Instead, our weakest pupils are struggling to learn and are falling further behind as the Comptroller and Auditor General recently showed us.

**Mr. Treacy:** Not true.

**Mr. Bruton:** A childhood blighted and, perhaps, a whole life blighted. We were promised a metro by 2007 and a modern transport system for our capital city. Instead, we have day long congestion on the M50 and a bus service that has not seen a single new bus in five years.

**Mr. J. O'Keeffe:** We have a great Minister in Deputy Cullen.

**Mr. Bruton:** We were promised affordable homes in sustainable communities. Instead, we have had the inept policies that have abandoned first-time buyers to hopeless lotteries for the so-called affordable homes that have barely arrived and long commutes from distant green field sites where no facilities exist. This is the legacy of ten years. These are not the problems of success; they are the problems of failure of vision, of courage,

to plan, to reform and to manage. That will be the epitaph on this Government's tomb.

The budget produces some balm to conceal the symptoms of the problems that it has passed up the opportunity to do anything serious about for ten years. As far as the Government is concerned, this is as good as it gets. It claims that it alone has the competence to manage this economy. It suffers from a well-known delusion of believing its own rhetoric. It has come to believe that what it says is right because it has forgotten what it takes to succeed in a small open economy such as ours, what it is to be alert and quick to move to spot opportunities. We have a private sector that is alert and quick to move and spot opportunities but a Government that is sluggish, slow, flabby and unable to keep up and reform and unable to deliver to those who need it most.

In many ways, this budget is a fitting end to a Government that has become totally absorbed in its celebrity appearances and its focus group research. Make-up teams show it how to look, wordsmiths tell it what to say, choreographers tell it how to get a good photo shoot but as the spinners become more professional, the Government has grown more out of touch. It no longer sees the real problems that people suffer as it is whisked through sanitised corridors instead of seeing the reality that people have to deal with day to day. It stays in its own comfort zone treading water, refusing to reform, refusing to lead, or to be subject to any scrutiny or evaluation.

In ancient Rome the emperors knew that when people were discontent, they had to provide a distraction. They laid on bread and circuses. It was designed to distract, to produce a flashy appearance while the reality was so different. That is what we have in today's budget — an attempt to produce a flashy appearance that is so different from the reality.

When the hype surrounding the budget has faded away, the reality for many of the people we were elected to serve will not have changed — the family on €342 per week with two children, who is deemed too wealthy to get a medical card; the young single worker on 80% of the average wage who has to pay tax at the top rate, the same as the multimillionaire; the elderly infirm person who, on €430 per week and in need of nursing home care, is told he or she is too wealthy to get support with such care that is likely to cost €1,000 per week; and the pensioner on €260 per week who is told he or she is too wealthy to get the fuel allowance. That is what will be left after the budget is complete. That is the reality for many. That is the big gulf between appearances and the reality.

Nowhere have we come to see the gulf between reality and appearances more clearly than in the area of taxation. For three years in a row, the Minister said he would reduce the tax burden. Each year when the figures were counted, he collected more than he said and more than people's

income. This Government has seen the tax burden rise to the highest level ever.

**Mr. McDowell:** That is what growth does.

**Mr. Bruton:** It has brought tax to 38% as a proportion of national income. It is higher than it was in the early 1990s when the Tánaiste's party was formed. That party has assisted in increasing tax on ordinary people.

**A Deputy:** Listen to the focus groups.

**Mr. Kenny:** Call in the Minister of State, Deputy Tim O'Malley.

**Mr. Bruton:** This Government has several firsts on its record. This Government is the first ever to make more people pay at the top rate of tax than at the standard rate. This is the first Government to raise more in VAT than in income tax, because it relies on people who are on low incomes to pay tax. Through its tax policies, it is the first to put an average home beyond the reach of ordinary families. Every family must now pay €27,000 in tax. The lion's share of the 55% increase in just four years came from those families on modest incomes. When these families go to a shop they pay a 20% tax rate. When they buy a house, if they can afford it, they pay a 33% tax rate. When they go to the pub they pay a 50% tax rate. When they buy a car they pay a 65% tax rate and when they fill it with petrol they pay 130% in tax. These are the people who have been the backbone of the country, paying to keep the Government's spending machine rolling. They have been let down because the money they gave has not been used to deliver the improvements we ought to have seen. Every single category of tax has increased as a proportion of family income. In just four years it has increased by 7 percentage points from 31% of income. Now €39 of every €100 of family income goes in tax.

What of the commitment that only one in five was to pay at the 42% rate? Today's budget attempts to conceal what has happened here. The Taoiseach's spinners have a new dispensation to try to conceal what the Government has not delivered. When the figures are stripped out, they show that next year 31.5% of people will pay at the top rate of tax. The Government will have reneged on commitments to 255,000 taxpayers who were to pay not at 42% or at 41%, but at 20%. The Government kept its promises to bankers, developers and the wealthy who wanted tax shelters. However, it did not deliver for the ordinary taxpayers and reneged on its promises to them.

**Mr. Ring:** They looked after their own.

**Mr. Durkan:** The Tánaiste will need to go up that pole again.

**Mr. Kenny:** The Government does not know what an ordinary family is.

**Mr. Bruton:** The Tánaiste and his Progressive Democrats Party have made much play of tax and their belief on tax. Only one Government in the past four has reduced the proportion of income spent on tax. I will give Members a clue: it did not contain the Progressive Democrats or Fianna Fáil. The one Government that reduced the tax burden comprised Fine Gael, Labour and the Democratic Left.

**Mr. McDowell:** Unemployment was at 10%.

*(Interruptions).*

**Mr. Bruton:** That is the reality and the Tánaiste needs to learn to get used to it.

**A Deputy:** Check it out Michael.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Allow Deputy Bruton to speak without interruption.

**Mr. Bruton:** The last time we heard from the Tánaiste, did the property market not stagnate?

**Mr. Kenny:** He would not answer last Wednesday anyway.

**Mr. McDowell:** Where is the Democratic Left now?

**Mr. Bruton:** What of personal taxation? The Government is supposed to have presented something fair to ordinary families who pay tax. Where is the reform in today's package? The reform, such as it is, is a sum total on personal credits of €2.50 per week. What happened to home carers? They get nothing out of the proposed PAYE increase. Home carers who stay at home and look after families get the same tax relief as they got five years ago. In that time those who went out to work have seen an increase of more than €900 in their allowances under the PAYE code, but the home carer has been denied that benefit. What sort of policy for families is that? Not only are they caught on individualisation with a penalty that could cost up to €5,000, but year after year the Government has tightened the screw on the family with one spouse staying at home. They are now losing €950 on those credits that the Government has denied them. That is the reality of the Government's family policy.

**A Deputy:** Check it out Michael.

**Mr. Bruton:** Last year we were told there would be a five-year plan for child care. The five-year plan only lasted for one year. Having searched high and low all I can find for child care is €2.30 per week on child benefit. How is that to cope with the growing cost of child care? It now costs a family €18,000 in pre-tax income to look

after just one child. How is a family with two or three children to cope? The sum total of the five-year plan was one year and a payment of €1,000. It is a very disappointing return for families struggling to get by. They have already had to cope with huge increases in mortgage repayments and energy prices, and today the Minister announced another turn of the screw, a 25% increase in hospital charges which will see the VHI charge, which has already increased by 25% in 15 months, increase again. Ordinary families struggling to get by will need to bear all these burdens. I do not know where the spinners were when those changes were being delivered for those who form the backbone of the country.

The Minister has proposed to increase tax relief for mortgages from €4,000 for a single person to €8,000, if he or she is a first-time buyer and just for the first seven years. While I welcome the change, it needs to be put into context. The extra €15 per week will be wiped out tomorrow. Tomorrow interest rates will increase and it will cost the same person on an average mortgage €15 per week. It will not even last one day. This increase must be set against the Government's record. In the past five years what has the Government done for first-time buyers? It abolished the €3,800 grant. It put an additional 1% VAT on the new house price, costing €3,000. It increased the development charge that people buying new houses must pay by an average of €5,000. In the past few years the Government has placed an additional €12,000 burden on first-time house buyers. This €15 per week given back now is a very small compensation.

What of stamp duty? The stamp duty regime was to be reformed — the Tánaiste told us the Government did not need this money. It was too wealthy and was *flathúlach*. It could get rid of this money. Sadly something went wrong with the Tánaiste's great plan and the cash cow is still there. The reality is the Government's housing policy has collapsed, a grim reality facing most people struggling to buy a house. The Central Bank recently informed us that half of all families cannot afford to buy a house. This does not come from the Opposition, but from the Central Bank. This has happened because of the collapse of the Government's strategy. We were to have social housing. At the end of five years the Government has delivered exactly 4% of the social houses it promised. We were to have affordable housing. It has delivered less than 40% of the affordable houses it promised. There is a shortfall of 9,000 houses per year which should be occupied by families. Each year for the past five years the Government has failed to deliver for people on low income needing housing. No one on the Government side is taking responsibility and hanging his or her head in shame. It has not delivered on that fundamental promise.

**Mr. Durkan:** It does not care.

**Mr. Bruton:** The Government's policies have not been inspired by the needs of young families, but by the needs of developers who have dominated the Government's thinking on housing development with the cheapest option of sprawling relentlessly out to far-flung towns and villages becoming the norm where young families cannot get child care, transport or facilities. That is the reality of the Government's housing policy and €15 per week in respect of mortgage payments will not alter it.

*5 o'clock* This is the last in a series of budgets that have followed a remarkable pattern. They began in 2001 when the Government launched its first pre-election spending spree. The budget before us comes from the same stable. The Government is increasing spending at a rate 50% faster than the growth of national income. Taxes are rising as a result. This year, the Government is continuing the trend by budgeting to increase spending by 11.5%. To put this in perspective, an ordinary worker will be lucky to obtain an increase of 4%. The surplus has been cut back at a time when the economy is experiencing pressure on the prices front and when SSIA's are coming on stream. Spending is increasing far faster than national income and tax revenues and this is posing a threat. Many commentators warned the Government about inflation before the budget was put together and I believe they will now be of the opinion that we are on dangerous ground.

The Government has doubled its dependence on the construction sector to support its revenue. A total of 25% of every tax euro spent by the Government comes from the construction sector. We are not in a strong position; we are, in fact, in a vulnerable position.

The real question is whether the Government has done enough to build the capability of the economy to withstand the real pressures under which it is about to come. Those pressures do not merely revolve around the possible slowdown in the housing market; they relate to the relentless march of competition that is coming our way. Our competitiveness has declined in each of the past five years. In the same period, our share of export markets and the level of manufacturing employment have fallen. Some 50% of the jobs that existed in IDA Ireland and Enterprise Ireland industries five years ago have disappeared.

We are facing serious challenges and the issue of competence on the part of the Government is important. I agree with Ministers who state that we cannot take economic management for granted. Nor can we take for granted the way the Government manages important frameworks used within the economy. I ask people watching these proceedings and asking where lies competence to consider how the Government has managed critical frameworks that are important to the long-term prosperity of the country.

Has the planning system been efficiently managed or have we repeated the worst excesses of

urban sprawl seen in the United States in its darkest times? Any fair-minded person examining our planning system would state that we have repeated the dreadful mistakes made in the US. We are using resources ineffectively and making our families suffer. We do not have a proper planning system.

Is our regulatory system efficient? The regulators have increased prices in respect of energy and utilities across the board and faster than has been the case in any other country in Europe. Our utilities are 50% less efficient than those in Europe, but the regulators are increasing the prices that businesses and consumers are obliged to pay. Is that competent management on the part of the Government?

Is the management of our infrastructural investment competent? The OECD states that Ireland has fallen to 28th in respect of port infrastructure, 26th in respect of traffic infrastructure, 26th in respect of energy infrastructure and 25th in respect of broadband infrastructure. In short, the Government is bottom of the class when it comes to planning and delivering infrastructures to meet the country's needs. Is that competence?

Is the Government delivering the public service reform required to make the public sector efficient and quick to deal with consumers' needs or has it been sluggish and obtained poor outcomes for taxpayers' money? Again, any fair-minded person would say that the Government, particularly in the context of the way in which it dealt with benchmarking, has not displayed competence in critical areas. Ireland will not be successful and maintain its prosperity unless it has a government that recognises the threats facing it and makes plans in respect of them.

We have been presented with Estimates and spending budgets amounting to €64 billion. However, not a shred of evaluation will have been carried out in respect of the programmes to which this money relates. Multi-millions of euro will be committed to projects without any costings or evaluations being carried out. We are being asked to perform an act of faith in respect of the judgment of the Minister for Transport, Deputy Cullen, in respect of transport and the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government, Deputy Roche, on planning, and we are to hope that the Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment, Deputy Martin, will read his briefs on this occasion.

**Mr. J. O'Keeffe:** Some hope.

**Mr. Bruton:** The public will not accept it. That is not the way in which multi-millions in public moneys should be spent. The legacy of the Government will revolve around opportunities presented and not seized.

I welcome some of the measures relating to health. These are the product of a health policy that does not treat seriously the needs of older people and that has allowed the grass grow under

[Mr. Bruton.]

our feet in respect of the huge challenges we face in dealing with those needs. Although the changes relating to home-care and nursing home packages are welcome, they will merely deal with the symptoms of a system that is not able to cope rather than changing that system. Home-care packages are already almost exclusively available to people who are, as the euphemism has it, “blocking beds” in our hospitals. Such packages are not available to people who need support in order to remain independent. It is only when the system breaks down and these people become ill, present at an accident and emergency department and are transferred to a hospital bed that the possibility of a home-care package being offered arises. I welcome that additional packages are being provided. However, this is not a serious policy designed to deal with the issue of care.

I also welcome the enhanced nursing home subvention. Let us not forget, however, that the Government regards an old person on €420 per week as too wealthy to receive even one cent in nursing home subvention. That is not equity. The people to whom I refer will occupy beds in nursing homes — side by side with those who will pay €120 for their beds — and will be obliged to pay €1,000 for the privilege and, perhaps, sell their homes. That is not caring equally for the children of this nation. It seems that when people grow old, they do not receive equity of treatment.

People will welcome the €16 and €18 increases per week in pension payments. However, let us be blunt and honest. Increases in VHI and doctors’ fees will account for approximately €4 of these increases, as will the increases in energy prices. In addition, the tax take will account for another €3 of the remainder. There will not be much left for old people to spend on luxuries.

The Minister has introduced a small increase in the free fuel allowance to acknowledge the huge burdens with which families must cope. Let us not forget, however, that only one in seven of all social welfare recipients qualify for the allowance and that only 7% of contributory pensioners are entitled to it. In the aftermath of the budget, many older people will experience little change in their circumstances.

This was billed as a green budget. I have sought in vain for evidence of a serious effort to green the budget. It was St. Augustine who said “O Lord make me virtuous, but not yet”. That is what happening here.

**Mr. Treacy:** The Lord would have a difficult time doing that in the Deputy’s case.

**Mr. Bruton:** The Government is tricking around with the idea of changing VRT and adjusting it to reward those who purchase lower-emission vehicles. However, it cannot quite make the commitment in that regard and is intent on awaiting the findings of a few more consultation groups or the compilation of further reports. The

Government is putting off until tomorrow the decision it is not prepared to make today. It does not want to rock the boat or worry any voters.

I wish to bring Members’ attention to the fact that something is being provided for in the small print. We are being asked to provide funding in respect of a €270 million fine for failing to meet our Kyoto commitments. Why are we failing to meet those commitments? First, we allowed 500,000 houses to be built without insisting that they be constructed to the highest standard. We have locked the planning system into the worst form of urban sprawl that is causing families hardship in terms of paying for transport. The environment is being damaged by the carbon emissions to which this give rise.

Ireland made commitments regarding the introduction of renewables in respect of which it has not delivered. We are bottom of the renewables league because we failed to make the crucial investment of installing an interconnector so that we might introduce more renewables into the electricity grid on a viable basis. The Government was not serious about greening the tax code, for which opportunities exist.

We should relate vehicle registration tax, VRT, to CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. We should also consider housing development charges to relate them to the intensity of a house’s energy use. We should examine the stamp-duty code to ensure that when houses change hands, the highest environmental standards are applied. We should remove artificial quotas for bio-fuels so that people might at least develop the product. We should make blending compulsory to provide opportunities to use bio-fuels instead of oil-based products.

If the Minister were serious about greening the tax code, he might do many things. However, it was a suitable spin to put out in the knowledge that green voters were expressing concern and that a soft vote existed. We need action on this serious business. Irish emissions are costing €6,000 million every year in environmental damage to the world, some €700 million over the Kyoto limits. It is against that record that we should be judged. We must take a lead in the area, and the Government is not willing to do so, only being willing to follow.

**Mr. Durkan:** Is the Tánaiste leaving?

**Ms Burton:** Is the Tánaiste afraid to hear the Labour Party?

**Mr. Bruton:** This is the last year in which the Government will have an opportunity to introduce budgets.

**Mr. Allen:** What about stamp duty?

**Mr. Durkan:** Telegraph poles.

**Mr. Bruton:** A bitter taste has been left for many, since the Government has not confronted

reform. We have had neither a serious expenditure review process nor Estimates based on measurable performance targets. We have had Estimates with no programme evaluation. Multi-million euro projects are committed to without any scrutiny.

Those are not the arcane concerns of someone with a sharp pencil and a calculator, as the Tánaiste described me. Things might be better if those on the Government benches had a sharp pencil and used it in some other creative way. That way, we might have achieved value for money. All the Government's big announcements and ambitions, such as decentralisation, e-voting, zero tolerance and zero waiting lists, have failed for one reason — it has failed to recognise that reform is not about courting the flash bulbs or finding the best soundbite to impress a focus group. Rather it is about long hours, planning, persuading, evaluating options, testing performance, responding to shortcomings, trying again, changing work practices, and taking responsibility for failures. It is about hard work, making decisions and relentless commitment to implementation.

That is what has been so lacking from the Government, whose thinking has been dominated by the celebrity appearance rather than the serious job of reform. The greatest threat to this country's economic progress is the arrogant swagger of a Government that thinks itself invincible and irreplaceable. It is so intoxicated with its own rhetoric that it fails to recognise the serious challenges approaching. So much tax revenue over so many years represents a wasted opportunity. There have been too many dud and pet projects and white elephants. There have been too few competent Ministers driven by reform or a desire to deliver front-line services. The fear is that the Ministers' political epitaph at the end of this year will be that they were a bunch of wasters.

**Ms Burton:** When I saw the Fianna Fáil Deputies jumping up and down there — Deputy Tim O'Malley was a notable exception — I wondered if the Taoiseach had borrowed some of the meters used by the American on "The Week in Politics" to measure how well the Minister, Deputy Cowen, was doing. Perhaps the person who received the highest rating might have a chance at a junior Ministry. The Taoiseach wishes to allocate one before Christmas.

Today's show is all to do with floating voters and how they turn the dial. The Minister is like King Croesus, his pockets bulging with the people's money, earned through hard work. The budget's measure is how fair he has been in distributing the people's own money among them. Fair is fair, and when I heard him commit himself to significant improvements in old-age pensions, I recognised that they were well deserved, since it was the pensioners who made this country what it is today. They need the extra money to meet our very high and inflationary cost of living, not

least the cost of heat, gas and electricity, not to mention the VAT of 21% that they pay on almost everything.

A dependent pensioner, usually the married woman, is worth a great deal less than her husband in pension terms. The husband will receive €209 per week, on which I congratulate the Minister, but the dependent woman is worth only €173 a week. I thought that the Minister might have reformed that, and I am sorry that he has not taken the chance offered by the vast sums of money flying around to address the issue. I welcome the increase in the fuel allowance of €4 to the princely sum of €18 a week. It is approximately the cost of a bag of coal and half a packet of fire-lighters but welcome for all that.

I want to mention something about a group more or less forgotten in today's budget but whom Deputy Bruton mentioned earlier. The position of a married, one-income family, usually where the mother, but nowadays increasingly the father, remains at home to look after the children, has worsened considerably under the Government. It was one of former Deputy McCreevy's policy changes when Minister for Finance to individualise the tax regime. More than 75,000 such households now pay tax at a marginal rate of 41% because of the Government's individualisation.

For the most part, they are families with children where one parent has opted to stay at home to take care of children or other family members. The economist Jim O'Leary wrote a very thoughtful piece on the subject in *The Irish Times* last week. They have lost out and would need an increase of almost €11,700 before today or €13,700 afterwards to return to the relative position they occupied in 2000, before former Deputy McCreevy acted to their disadvantage. That is how far back they have fallen. It is important, as we celebrate the gains for the high rollers from the cut in the top rate, that we think of the single-income families who did not share to the same extent in the largesse the Minister offered today. It is worth pointing that out.

When I heard the Minister speak of prudence, I thought of John Lennon's son Julian, who said that his father's favourite Beatles song had been the one with the chorus "Dear Prudence" —

**Mr. Cowen:** "Won't you come out to play?"

**Ms Burton:** I see that the Minister knows it.

**Mr. Cowen:** He was not as good a singer as his father.

**Ms Burton:** It seems that she did not want to play, and so the Minister's flirtation with Ms Prudence has proven rather shortlived. He decided that he had an election to win, and so prudence was left on the shelf. When I hear Fianna Fáil Ministers assure us that they will be prudent in an election year, I inject a dose of scepticism. In my bones, I know the opposite to be true. One



[Ms Burton.]

cannot get a leopard to change its spots; when Fianna Fáil sees an election around the corner, its first instinct is to buy it.

**Mr. Durkan:** That is a temptation.

**Ms Burton:** This budget is not as crude as that for the election year of 2002, but when the sums are done, one sees that it is not that far out. This is the fifth budget from the Government since the last general election, and we are entitled to consider its overall record and not simply the measures announced today. The plain truth is that the tax justice agenda was stalled for the first three budgets since the last election. There was no reduction in tax rates in four successive budgets, only increases in VAT that were paid for the most part by families on modest and lower incomes. It is curious that this period of zero reductions in tax rates coincided with the arrival of the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform, Deputy McDowell, as a full member of Cabinet. It is an amazing legacy for somebody who talks endlessly about tax cuts that he failed to secure a single one in four years.

Instead of tax cuts in those four years, most working taxpayers had to pay more. The standard rate band was frozen in value for two years and more workers than ever — almost a third, or 666,000 — paid tax at the higher marginal rate. This amounted to an effective tax increase for such persons. Today's reductions are no more than delayed compensation for the punitive measures imposed in three budgets, as well as the unjust and unfair increase in the VAT rate, which has still not been rescinded.

**Mr. Durkan:** That is correct.

**Ms Burton:** I thank the Minister for today's reductions but he should not expect people to cheer too much. He built up the reserves to pay for these cuts by a vicious regime of hidden increases, stealth taxes and charges in the last four years.

**Deputies:** Hear, hear.

**Ms Burton:** Many of the 52% of taxpayers who pay for private health insurance are on modest incomes. For these ordinary, hard-working and hard-pressed families, the increase in the cost of private beds in public hospitals will mean another round of insurance increases.

It says much about this Government that it cuts the top rate of income tax but not the lower one, and that it pays for this reduction by reducing the scope of other tax reductions. We have always argued that a wider standard rate band and additional tax credits are the best way to achieve tax justice. I am aware the Minister shares this view because he has said so on several occasions, as has the Taoiseach. I am sure Mr. Seamus

Mallon will forgive me for using his famous phrase in a different context. What we have today is tax reform for slow learners. On the way, serious injustice was done to people who were forced to pay tax at 42%, as well as PRSI, on modest overtime payments, bonuses or wage increases.

This is a typical Fianna Fáil-Progressive Democrats budget, one that benefits the wealthy few rather than the hard-working many. The headline reductions in taxation will be welcomed by hard-pressed families. It remains the secret of our tax code, however, that tax is often only for the little people and is generally most onerous for them. In 2006, a single worker who earns €32,000 per year and €1,000 in overtime pays tax at 42%, plus up to a further 4% in PRSI. After today's budget, a single worker earning €34,000 will pay tax at 41% and PRSI on any overtime earnings or bonuses he or she receives.

It is not surprising that people in such circumstances wonder at a Minister who facilitates a situation where more than 1,000 of the most wealthy citizens, including 32 millionaire earners, pay an effective tax rate of between 0% and 5%. The Minister supplied these figures for 2003 in a reply less than ten days ago. No amount of massaging the figures, Enron style, can deny that dysfunction in our tax system. The point about lower taxes is that for tax justice to work, and to allow us to fund schools, hospitals and other public services, everyone must pay their fair share.

A reduction of 1% in the top rate of tax is worth zilch to a person earning less than €34,000 per annum. The Minister's tables indicate there are 1.7 million workers who pay tax at 20% or less. The reduction in the higher rate of tax is worth nothing to them. By his own account, only some 400,000 people will benefit from it. For a worker earning €84,000, the value of the cut is some €520; for those on €168,000, it is worth approximately €1,360; and it is worth €1,903 to those earning €250,000.

This budget is an example of Enron economics and Humpty Dumpty accounting. I am particularly interested in the tables set out in the Budget Statement. The table on page C22, for example, shows the numbers paying tax at the various rates. I asked my colleague and party leader, Deputy Rabbitte, to bring a copy of last year's Budget Statement for comparison purposes. Last year, we were told that 658,000, or 31.9%, of taxpayers paid tax at the higher rate. In another example of Enron accounting, the Minister has performed magic by suggest that only 19%, or 438,000, will pay at the higher rate following the changes in the budget. The smile on the Minister's face indicates he knows this is a good stroke. Some 250,000 workers have disappeared from the cohort of those paying the higher tax rate. I believe it was Tommy Cooper who used to say "Just like that". Just like that, 250,000 workers have disappeared. It is a good trick and the Minister has done well.

According to the Minister, 1.75 million workers will now pay tax at 20% or less. In other words, they will pay a higher rate of VAT than income tax. That is some achievement in terms of tax justice. The reality, however, is different. At the recent Fianna Fáil Ard-Fheis, I heard both the Minister for Finance and the Taoiseach proclaim that this reclassification would allow the Government to claim it had met its promise that only 20% of workers would pay tax at the top rate. All this happened in the blink of an eye. In late September, on the first day following the summer recess, I received a table that was calculated in the original format. Some of the Minister's handlers have since been to work to recast the table.

In *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, Humpty Dumpty said in a scornful voice that when he used any particular word, "it means just what I choose it to mean, neither more nor less". Likewise, when the Minister for Finance produces a table showing table rates, it means whatever he chooses it to mean, no more nor less. If he is to acknowledge the rules to the slightest degree, he must explain why he has undertaken this fix. It is an Enron-style massaging of the figures. If the Government wishes to restate the figures, it should follow the rules and explain exactly what it is doing, instead of trying to pull a fast one.

I will put forward a simple test for the Minister's consideration and I ask him to tell me whether I am right in my conclusion. Should a person earning more than €34,000 be offered an overtime or bonus package of €1,000 in the weeks before Christmas, what will be the effect on his or her pay packet? Will the tax be deducted at 20%? Absolutely not. It will be deducted at 41%, in addition to some 4% in PRSI. If a nurse, married to a garda, earns €1,000 for an extra long weekend's work, when she examines her payslip, she will not see a 20% tax deduction but a 41% one plus PRSI. People will know the answer when they check their wage packets.

For some time I requested that budgetary tables be included in the statement and today they have been restated without so much as a blush. I suppose it is about the election.

After five years of this Government, it is time to take stock of what has been achieved. In the five years, the Government's spending programme has been awesome. The shortcomings on the delivery side have been no less striking. If the Tánaiste were in the Chamber, he would be asking the Minister for Finance if he got away with it. Despite the glowing promises made before the last election and the unprecedented tax revenues the Government has enjoyed, improvements in public services have not been delivered. We are still waiting for the promised increases in hospital beds, the promised reduction in class sizes to 20 for children of nine years and under and the promised levels of social and affordable housing for young people to start out on the property ladder.

While the package for care in the community is welcome, it is but a sticking plaster measure that will go nowhere near the core of the problems in our health care system. The headline figure for health spending is a large increase but it is still a lower percentage of national wealth when compared to other European countries. Sweden, for example, spends 60 cent on long-term care for every euro spent on health care while Ireland continues to spend only 12 cent. The effect of this massive underspend is seen in the trauma of overcrowded accident and emergency departments.

An extra €100 million package has been announced for health-related disability and mental health services. All Members were touched by Monday's "Prime Time" programme on mental health services for children and the desperation experienced by parents. Of this extra package, €75 million is for disability while €25 million is for the programme on mental health, A Vision for Change. The waiting list in Deputy Moynihan-Cronin's constituency for mental health services for children is four years. The €25 million will only see to the needs of counties Kerry, Kilkenny and Carlow, such is the level of need. Again, we say "thanks" but it is a very limited increase for a particularly needy area.

The health services employ more than 100,000 people, but the majority of employees feel they work hard and do not get due recognition. This is because of the bungling by the Minister for Health and Children and top management and poor organisation.

The biggest health policy change in the Government's lifetime is the loss of direct accountability. Professor Brendan Drumm has become the Minister for Health and Children while Deputy Harney is just for decoration. A sceptical nation was told that the abolition of the health boards and the formation of the HSE was designed to give us a more efficient health service. It is now obvious that the objective of the Minister's expensive reorganisation of the health services was not to improve service to the public, but to establish structures and processes to enable her to avoid having to answer for her actions and responsibilities either to the Dáil or the media.

**Deputies:** Hear, hear.

**Ms Burton:** There are now more than 3,000 people waiting at least one year for hospital treatments. Figures provided by the Minister last week show that 256 people are waiting for neurosurgery in Beaumont Hospital, 117 of whom have been waiting for over a year. In St. Vincent's hospital, 175 are waiting for pain relief, 65 of whom have been waiting for over a year. In Crumlin children's hospital, 674 children are on the surgery list, 199 of whom have been on the list for over a year. The national health strategy in 2001 promised that by the end of 2004, no patient would wait longer than three months. That is the reality in delivery.

[Ms Burton.]

It is even more shocking when we see the money it costs for this poor delivery of service. It is no wonder that an opinion poll yesterday showed that 58% of all voters and 60% of Progressive Democrats voters believe nothing has got better since Deputy Harney took over as Minister for Health and Children.

The Government backbenchers listened anxiously to what the Minister for Finance would do for first-time buyers and I am not sure they were impressed. They must know that every move made by the coalition in the housing market has ended in tears with no discernible improvement for first-time buyers. Ministers need to tread carefully when they try to use tax measures that appear to offer relief but end up boosting prices, as has happened more than once. It is a treacherous minefield and I see little genuine benefit in what has been announced in the budget. There is an urgent need to refocus policy to help the first-time buyer. The Government's legacy in housing is a mixed bag. Fortunes for some, massive house construction activity but frustration and anger among many whose dreams of home ownership are perpetually stopped by rising prices and the collapse of affordability. Nothing symbolises the failure of the Government to manage and distribute the gains of the Celtic tiger more than the current housing situation.

Let us take a representative young couple. John is a teacher and Niamh is a nurse, both in their late 20s and earning over €35,000 every year. They rent an apartment for €1,100 a month in Ongar, west Dublin, a community highlighted in last Saturday's *The Irish Times*. They would like to get married in four years and start a family but before this, they would like to buy a home within a reasonable commuting distance of their jobs. It seems incredible that this young and ostensibly affluent couple cannot buy a home of their own. Their parents, when they married 40 years ago, could buy a home and settle down within a reasonable distance of their work. John's older brother married in 1996 when the Celtic tiger was just beginning to roar and managed to buy a house.

John and Niamh want to know why the Government has rebalanced the property market and the chance of home ownership against them and in favour of a motley crew of landlords and investors. The Government's housing statistics on record construction levels do not speak to John and Niamh. They are locked out from buying their own home. Tonight when they do the sums after the budget, they are unlikely to feel much more confident than they were last week, particularly when interest rates will increase by 0.25% tomorrow. For the average starter mortgage in the Dublin area, €330,000, this increase will cost €63 a month, wiping out the gains in the Minister's increases.

The Minister did not say much on stamp duty. I was disappointed he did not include a left wing Fianna Fáil tax reform approach in the mix. He could have closed the loophole whereby those who bought the site of the Irish Glass Bottle Company in Ringsend saved €30 million in stamp duty. While the Minister did not want to tinker with stamp duty, he could have closed some of the loopholes. I am glad he is promising an exemption on sporting bodies. I have raised this several times through parliamentary questions and the media. I hope this will benefit the Cork GAA club which first raised it, because it deserves a break.

One of the people I am trying to assist is from the Taoiseach's constituency. She is 34 years old. Let us call her Una. She has a 12 year old daughter, Mia. She has been parenting alone since Mia was born, has a good job in a State-funded body and earns just under €39,000 per year. She would like to buy an apartment from Dublin City Council for herself and Mia for between €210,000 and €240,000, but she has a continuous affordability gap of between €50,000 and €100,000.

**Mr. Durkan:** Correct.

**Ms Burton:** If her parents could give her this amount she would be all right. She could then pay €12,000 per year for her mortgage and another €1,800 to €2,400 in management company fees for the apartment she wants. I have known this woman for a number of years and she is always just that little distance away. She cannot make it. She is one of the 6,000 people on Dublin City Council's waiting list and is in the draw for affordable housing three times a year. As the Taoiseach knows, there is a draw for affordable housing in the city and 300 to 350 lucky people win the right to buy a home. That says it all.

Why has the affordability gap for people trying to buy a home constantly widened? I do not know if the Taoiseach appreciates that the average mortgage in Dublin is approximately €330,000. In the past 18 months the average repayment in Dublin has increased from €1,453 to €2,167 per month. That means buying a home in Dublin will cost between €12,000 and €24,000 per year, and one has to eat after paying that. To be in the market a single person probably needs an income of over €45,000 while a couple needs over €75,000. These large increases in mortgage repayments, high child care costs and increasing travel costs and travel times put a great financial strain on many families. They erode the quality of family life and people's ability to sustain marriages and relationships.

The Taoiseach talks much about community and he values it greatly. The heart of a community is people in relationships or marriages and having children. The strain is too much with the kind of structure the Government has allowed to evolve in the housing market. It is pitted against

the best and brightest young people who have good education and jobs. Although they are working hard and doing it right, they are not getting there. There was not much attention to them in today's budget. The Americans call this phenomenon "toxic debt". This occurs when families and individuals buckle under the strain of buying and furnishing a house and having some quality of personal life. This Government, due to its incredible pandering to its friends the developers, builders and landlords is poisoning the opportunity to own a home for many of our best young people.

I read that this country has the longest waiting list for private helicopters and jets outside the United States. This is a mark of incredible affluence within a generation, and more power to them.

**Mr. Durkan:** Another waiting list.

**Ms Burton:** However, as we go up in the ratings for owning private jets and helicopters, the parties opposite seem to accept that owning one's own home will not be a legitimate part of the Celtic dream for up to 25% of our working population. That is an incredible change in philosophy in the parties opposite.

**Mr. Durkan:** That is correct. They are breaking new ground.

**Ms Burton:** I could talk about social housing and the poverty trap of rent allowance. Rent allowance costs the Government €400 million per year and I do not need to tell the parties opposite that when a person receives rent allowance his or her right to work is heavily restricted. If one is on social welfare one is put into a poverty trap and a property trap. One cannot work because one loses euro for euro, and because of this one will never be able to buy one's own home, not even a social house rented from one's local authority. People on rent supplement face insecurity as tenants. The majority of them are in buildings that have never been inspected for basic facilities and safety. Extra rent is unofficially gouged out of them by landlords on a widespread scale. If they begin to earn anything they are immediately cut off from rent supplement. This would never have happened if Ministers cared about disadvantaged families and the poverty traps they face. This is not a problem for just a few families. Some 60,000 households receive rent supplement, which costs the taxpayer €400 million per year, and that goes straight into the pockets of our new landlord class.

**Mr. Durkan:** Correct. It is another black hole.

**Ms Burton:** I want to talk about the environment and the spectre that is haunting the economic and financial plans of every advanced country, namely, the consequence of climate change.

For all the attention this budget gives to it one would think our country has some natural exemption and that the Crossmolina floods did not happen. St. Patrick banished the snakes and the Minister, Deputy Cowen, has banished global warming as if it does not exist.

**Mr. Treacy:** Deputy Burton will be all right if "Tommy Cooper" beside her does not make her disappear, just like that.

**Ms Burton:** This is the first budget to contain a sweetheart letter. This is from our good friend, the Minister, Deputy Roche:

Mr. Dick Roche, TD, Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government, invites interested parties to make submissions in relation to the rebalancing of annual motor taxes to provide an alternative through the motor tax system for the motoring public to drive cleaner cars and to impose penalties in respect of cars with higher CO<sub>2</sub> emission levels. [Deputy Treacy did not have the chance to read this lovely little letter.] This invitation will be published on my website ... submissions received will also be published on the website. [So what I say to him will be up there.] Submissions may be e-mailed to motortax@environ.ie or posted. [This is the good part.] All submissions should be received at the latest by 1 March 2007.

**Mr. Durkan:** How sweet. A Santa letter.

**Mr. Deasy:** I am overcome.

**Ms Burton:** If I know Deputy Roche it will take him at least three months to read the submissions.

**Mr. Rabbitte:** Dear Dick——

**Mr. Howlin:** Make me pure.

**Mr. Durkan:** Make me an offer.

**Ms Burton:** This is what the Government intends. The Government's record on preparing our country for climate change is lamentable. I never thought the day would come when Irish public servants, who prided themselves on never being caught at anything by Brussels, would be willing to pay billions of euro in fines under the Kyoto Agreement rather than make some of the simple changes.

**A Deputy:** Shame.

**Deputies:** Hear, hear.

**Ms Burton:** There was a culture among Irish public servants that we did not pay unnecessarily. However, today the Minister said he is allocating more funds for carbon purchases in Kazakhstan.

[Ms Burton.]

When Borat hears about this he will come and visit us.

**Mr. C. Lenihan:** Fine Gael attacks teachers and Labour attacks public servants.

**Mr. Durkan:** The Minister of State, Deputy Conor Lenihan, should hit the snooze button.

**Ms Burton:** It is unbelievable. It says it all when climate change is put in the hands of the Minister who cannot get the number of voters on the register right.

**Ms Lynch:** How is he going to save the world?

**Ms Burton:** It is a pollute now, pay later policy. It is environmentally irresponsible nationally and internationally. Why should a rich country like Ireland add to the problem of global warming by increasing greenhouse gas emissions and leave the bill for future generations to pay? That is irresponsible politics and would be addressed by an alternative Government.

I am surprised that simple things have not been done, such as rigorous energy standards in the construction industry and major products under the national plan to be carbon-proofed. Large-scale schemes are needed to convert existing buildings to meet energy efficiency standards. Generous grant schemes to insulate the houses of older people would be beneficial and would keep them out of nursing homes such as Leas Cross. The ways to ensure an older person does not end up in a nursing home are sufficient income, a warm, dry house and mobility aid.

I commend the Minister for one part of the education section of the budget, the commitment to the so-called fourth level, investment in research and development through higher education institutes and universities. This will reap dividends if properly spent and will generate a culture of innovation and enterprise.

The Minister is less sure-footed in his approach to policy and investment at the other end of the educational spectrum, the early childhood years. Policy is woefully inadequate and confused but the evidence of its importance is overwhelming. This can be examined in respect of economic returns aside from social considerations. The National Competitiveness Council returns to this theme in many reports, citing evidence from high performing economies of the valuable role early childhood education plays in securing the best results at later stages.

The 1% reduction in the income tax rate is estimated at €228 million for one year. This figure could start a pre-school education system. The Minister chose to give it to top earners. It would have been better spent on our children to create proper pre-school education. On education, we are as far from Boston as from Berlin. It is not a question of low taxes or better public services.

Low taxes are sustained by economic growth when one invests in education at every level.

The Minister emphasised prosperity and economic growth but the secret enemy of continued prosperity is inflation. No amount of heroic cheers can distract from the real dangers of high levels of inflation. For years we accepted a high level of inflation because of stealth taxes and charges generated by the Government, with little regard for long-term consequences. We can no longer pretend there is no downside. The Minister does not wish to refer to it but this week, as with every week, the country faces a record number of job losses. Factories are closing around the country. Workers at the gates of Leinster House today were from Castlemahon and lost out to cheap imports and cheaper labour thousands of miles away. As Fianna Fáil celebrates the budget in robust fashion, there are anxious meetings around family tables about what to do now that the spectre of redundancy is looming. If one is over 45 years of age, it is difficult to get a replacement job.

The smallest part of the budget speech was reserved for decentralisation. We could hardly read it. It is, at most, a long paragraph. If decentralisation was correctly managed, as was done by Labour in coalition with Fianna Fáil and in the Rainbow Coalition, more people would now be working in decentralised locations than is the case due to the political stroke Charlie McCreevy pulled here three years ago.

**Mr. Durkan:** And with a lot less hype.

**Ms Burton:** Stroke politics ruled the Minister's predecessor but, clever as Charlie McCreevy was, his stroke of political genius was his political nemesis. One year later the Taoiseach threw him overboard at Inchydoheny and told him to swim to Brussels.

**Mr. Kitt:** It is Inchydoney. Doheny's is the pub.

**Ms Burton:** I advise the Minister to beware of hubris and nemesis. He should not celebrate too much saving up the people's money for today's splurge. What about those who are making a two hour trek to a very expensive house, those paying high child care bills and the unfortunate people on trolleys at accident and emergency units at the weekend? Excuse me if they do not share in the jollification and meter clapping today. When election time comes they might reach for their meter and they might bite back.

**Mr. Treacy:** Part two of the Adam and Eve show.

**Mr. Durkan:** Easy now.

**Mr. Boyle:** A story teller in Cork city would tell his audience about his humble beginnings. He would say that his family had nothing growing up and the neighbours had nothing but there seemed

to be an awful lot of nothing to share. Despite him not being a particularly useful storyteller, he might have made a good economist. If one changes the story to refer to a man who has it all, a Minister for Finance who has it all and a Government that has it all, one gets to the heart of this Government's economic performance. Never has there been a Government with such resources that has used them so wastefully.

There are many indicators of Ireland's economic performance in the past 15 years. There are many more in respect of Ireland's social performance. The 30 OECD countries have several indicators of how Ireland is performing poorly. We are at the bottom of the table in terms of how much we spend on education. We are fifth from the bottom in terms of how many people leave before completing secondary education. Our health expenditure remains below the EU 25 average. Over the past ten years, the Government has had the opportunity to provide a fairer, better Ireland, a slogan heard at the recent Fianna Fáil Ard-Fheis but one that seems no closer to coming into being.

On the surface, there seems very little the Minister could have done wrong. Unfortunately, he missed the opportunity to put better measures in place. The headline figure is the reduction of the top rate of income tax from 42% to 41%. This will not benefit the majority of workers at all and will be on a sliding scale for those who pay tax at this rate.

The 1% reduction may be a sop to the Progressive Democrats or perhaps a "so long and thanks for knowing you" present on behalf of Fianna Fáil. What has not been noticed is that the Progressive Democrats has managed to achieve the same 1% reduction in income tax in the second term of Government with Fianna Fáil as the rainbow Government achieved in its two and half years of existence.

The sting in the tail is the introduction of a new form of taxation for higher earners. I am not sure if the Progressive Democrats approved it or read the fine print, but the increase in the health levy from 2% to 2.5% for people with incomes over €1,900 a week means most of the benefit of the 1% decrease in the tax rate is being taken away almost immediately. That is not bad in itself, but it is the ultimate confidence trick from the Minister and the Progressive Democrats. An increased health levy was the one item they could take out of this budget, taking into account the 1% tax rate decrease, to mask that nothing has been achieved on the stamp duty issue. The shortfall is immediately ameliorated by introducing what is, in effect, an additional tax on high-income earners.

The increase in the tax bands and credits are to be welcomed, but the index linking from when bands and particularly credits were introduced means taxpayers are more or less paying the same

proportion as when they were introduced. There is no real additional money being given to taxpayers and that is the reason we see the net increase year on year in most tax receipts of the Government.

The 1% decrease on the 42% tax rate will cost approximately €230 million. There are arguments that the money could have been used to further increase the tax credits or bands or, in particular, to reduce the taxes which have most effect on the majority of our citizens. The highest tax we collect in Ireland is not income tax, corporation tax or even stamp duty, but value added tax. Value added tax is very indiscriminate in its effect, as it is a tax on every citizen's spending, regardless of where their income is coming from.

The Government proclaims to have a social justice agenda and would have been far better served in ensuring the VAT bands were altered so people who have the least in our society would end up paying less tax.

**Mr. Sargent:** Hear, hear.

**Mr. Boyle:** We know the money will come from that source when we see next year's receipts.

The Government speaks about helping small businesses and my party has been promoting this agenda for several years. Several measures proposed today may see the light of day. I have to put in a qualification as we have seen many recent budget speeches where the Minister for Finance has announced initiatives that have yet to or will never see the light of day. It should be of some help if these measures are followed through, and they are necessary.

Our economy is far too dependent on the construction sector and our national wealth is far too dependent on the ownership of property and capital. We need small businesses to be vital. The reality is that in areas such as research and development we are far below the levels we need to be at. These measures should be welcomed if they help.

The Minister spoke about protecting the environment. If this was meant to be a seduction of the Green Party by the Minister for Finance, he should brush up on his seduction techniques. The environmental measures do not even pass as a green-wash. In my house we are considering repainting one of the rooms and exposing ourselves to the many colour charts one looks at when choosing a paint. There are many different versions of colours. Apparently one can get emerald green, pea green or olive green, none of which apply to this Government.

**Mr. Gogarty:** It is snot green.

**Mr. Boyle:** If I was to put a shade on where this Government is, it would probably be a shade of green that is not green at all. It would really be blue.

**Mr. Durkan:** There is grass green also.

**Mr. Kitt:** The Deputy should pick any other colour.

**Mr. Boyle:** With regard to environmental measures, it is a turquoise budget. It does not come close to tackling the environment needs in this country and the measures we should take. There are approximately €300 million in expenditure measures in the budget, committed to by the Government, and 10% of the money, €30 million, will be spent on either existing or new initiatives to meet many of our environmental responsibilities. Some 90% of the money will be going out of this country as environmental fines as a result of the failure of ongoing Government policies on the environment.

Despite what the Minister for Finance stated about 2 million jobs in the eco-industries in the EU, we could be producing jobs. We could have considered recycling and energy technology industries. Instead, the Minister is choosing to pay the fines rather than work within the country to improve our environment and society's involvement in that work. The Government is introducing measures such as that in the Dáil last week which put in place a "Borat buyout". We are prepared to help projects in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan or anywhere but here.

That is particularly true with regard to measures we must take on transport. The Government has put on the long finger measures to change VRT and motor taxation, the ultimate in cynicism. It has sent out a letter and by 2008, after the next general election, the measures might be put in place.

**Mr. Durkan:** It is a failure to take action.

**Mr. Kitt:** We will carry out the two of them.

**Mr. Boyle:** If there was any sense of propriety within the Government, the measures should be put in place.

**Mr. Cuffe:** They are on the long finger.

**Mr. Boyle:** The Government is sending out signals to people who care about the environment that it is prepared to do something for it, but more particularly it is looking over its shoulder to friends and supporters to ensure nothing happens at all. If that will be a continuation of business as usual, the Minister and Government can keep it.

**Mr. Durkan:** It is a two-year delivery date.

**Mr. Kitt:** The Deputy should get it right.

**Mr. Boyle:** The measures in social welfare must be welcomed as the increases are more or less in line with what many NGOs and my own party

had been looking for in pre-budget statements. This should also be put in context. In 2005, the EU-SILC survey indicated the poverty level for an individual Irish citizen was €192.74 per week. That was in 2005, so we can take it for granted the level is above €200 in 2006. One social welfare payment is above that level after the Government's changes today, the contributory old-age pension at €209.

The Government is boasting about expenditure on social protection but it remains one of the lowest levels in Europe. There were fairly mealy-mouthed words from the Minister for Finance about recognising and protecting the elderly in society. We must recognise that €209 is barely above income maintenance levels in our society, and we spend less as a proportion of our national income on pensioners than any other European country. We would need to up the level of the State pension by at least another 50% before we would be in line with other European countries and the levels at which elderly people deserve to be living.

The Government tends to speak about flagship initiatives in each budget. Unfortunately, it seems to then either drop them, forget about them or give a derisory mention. Last year the issue was child care, the year before it was disability. Rather than adding on each year the Government goes to the next fad or item which is politically sexy.

With regard to the issues I mentioned, the measures in this budget are fairly insulting to people affected by both. The additional expenditure towards disability benefit is not new, but expenditure the Government is obliged to put in place because of sections of the Disability Act coming into being from June. If the Government really wanted to promote this agenda, it would provide additional resources for opening up new areas. That is not the case.

The same is true of child care which even last year the Government got wrong. It failed to recognise child care is not about what happens with children when their parents are at work. Child care must be about a broader agenda. It is about child development. No measures were introduced last year and none was introduced this year on how we can truly cherish the children of this nation. If the Government is still serious about a constitutional amendment on children's rights, it could start showing it by providing resources in areas where they are needed.

The role of carers continues to be treated in a derisory way. The increase in the respite grant is welcome. However, the reality is the Government fails to recognise the carer's payment only goes to 15,000 carers out of a probable group of 125,000 people who care for a family member or close friend. When we add to that the fact that more than 50% of those involved in caring are over 60 years of age, we see nothing but a state of stasis

from this Government on how the role of carers can be properly recognised and resourced.

The next section is called “helping young families” and deals with assisting first-time home buyers. The Minister for Finance made the fairly bald statement, which many of us made previously, that a cut in stamp duty across the board would merely be added to house purchase prices and the benefit would go to the house seller and developers. I appreciate the leader of the Progressive Democrats and the Tánaiste would not be happy with that statement.

However, one measure hidden in the bowels of the budget deals with stamp duty relief. It is a measure for €20 million on the contract aspect of the mortgage. The only problem with it is that it is a small measure which benefits all house purchasers, speculators as well as first-time buyers. If the Government was serious about getting young people into housing, it would adopt measures we proposed, including exempting from stamp duty people who downsize, such as elderly people, and allowing the vacated properties to be bought by first-time buyers.

If the Minister wishes to think imaginatively and act differently he should listen to this side of the House. If he wishes to carry on as usual and cause further problems in the future, this budget will only exacerbate it.

**Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin:** The Fianna Fáil-PD coalition will be ten years in office next year. It needs to be judged not on this pre-election budget but on its record over the past decade. After ten years we have a health system still mired in crisis, housing is unaffordable for many thousands of families and inequality and poverty are still with us despite the Celtic tiger.

For more than a decade, the Government has had massive resources at its disposal to transform our health and education systems, to provide housing at an affordable level and to take senior citizens and those on low incomes out of poverty. In the past five years, it has had Exchequer surpluses of almost €40 billion. In November alone, it took in €1.7 billion more in taxes than was expected.

Despite all of this, the gap between rich and poor has widened. We now have one of the most unequal societies in the developed world, with those reliant on social welfare and the minimum wage hit hardest by rising costs. Many families, even those on two incomes, struggle to get by due to crippling mortgages and increases in the cost of essential items such as electricity, gas and food. All of these have recorded increases far in excess of inflation.

Huge problems exist across our public services, particularly in health care and education provision. A total of 44,000 families are on housing waiting lists. Every day, hundreds are left on trolleys in hospital accident and emergency units.

Families are left waiting for years to have their children assessed.

I emphasise it is children who suffer most. Unlike most developed states, we have no system of State-provided pre-schools and no provision in this budget addresses that clear need. In our pre-budget submission, and consistently in all our previous pre-budget submissions over the past nine years, Sinn Féin argued for measures targeted at those who need help the most. We set out clear and detailed strategies for addressing the crisis in the health service, supporting families with children, ensuring all senior citizens have a decent standard of living and ensuring the needs of young families are put ahead of the property speculators who force house prices through the roof and out of reach of ordinary citizens.

Yesterday, I called on the Minister for Finance, Deputy Cowen, to be bold and imaginative and use today’s budget to make a real, immediate and significant impact on the lives of those struggling to survive. I welcome the decision of the Minister to direct his attention towards workers on low wages, senior citizens and those who rely on social welfare. The increases he set out are to be commended. However, he could have done much more and he clearly chose not to do so. He made a political and bad choice. He had the opportunity and resources to lift many citizens out of poverty but stopped far short of what was possible and, with respect, what was required.

In my view and in that of many people not only in this House, to appease Fianna Fáil’s partner in Government, the Minister took poor decisions which will help those on the higher end of the income scale when those resources could have been used to help those in our society in desperate need. The Government decided to reduce the top rate of tax by 1% at a cost, to cite the Minister’s qualified figure, of €186 million. For that same money, the Government could have dramatically improved the welfare of senior citizens by increasing the State pension by €34.80 per week. That is the type of sum necessary to really address the issue instead of the €16 and €18 announced today. The Minister could have addressed the issue of the living alone allowance and doubled it to €15.40 per week. Instead, we find no mention of this allowance in today’s budget.

As we proposed on many occasions, he could have examined, and gone a great distance towards, providing a full medical card to every child under the age of 18 years. This measure would transform access to medical care for thousands of families. I know well this measure is not focused on need alone. However, I am also convinced it would certainly work for those who need it most and therefore is a worthwhile measure. It should have and could have been done today. It would have made a real and fundamental difference to many families who struggle to meet the



[Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin.]

needs of their children, first and foremost their health care needs.

The Government had the resources to do all of this but it did not have the political will. The biggest problem with today's budget is that once again the Government has shown it has absolutely no strategy to address the core needs of ordinary people whether in health, education or housing. The budget has no vision of a different type of society based on equality and ensuring the needs of every person in this island are met. It has no appreciation of the unique opportunities squandered by the Government with monotonous regularity.

Many people who listened today to the Minister for Finance, Deputy Cowen, will ask a number of important questions. Will poorer families be substantially better off after today's budget? Will it be easier for someone to access emergency hospital care? Will the families who spoke on "Prime Time Investigates" on Monday still have to wait up to five years for their children to be assessed? Will the people of Monaghan, Nenagh, Ennis, Roscommon or anywhere else be assured of essential hospital services? Will home ownership now be a real option for young couples and will countless others get a house at all? Will it be easier to get to work or will thousands of people continue to commute huge distances every day with gridlock now a reality in all our major towns and cities? I fear the answer to all those questions is a very certain "No".

Today's budget will have little or no impact in any of these core areas of people's lives. In relation to specific measures introduced by the Minister in today's budget, while there has been some advance, the fact is that those who were in poverty this morning will remain in poverty this evening.

**Mr. Morgan:** That is the point.

**Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin:** Sinn Féin wants to see every senior citizen in this State with enough money for a decent standard of living. We called for the pension to be increased in this budget by €34.80, the living alone allowance to be doubled to €15.40 and the fuel allowance increased to €25, not the miserly increase of €4, which is marginally more than the cost of a bale of briquettes.

**Mr. F. McGrath:** Hear, hear.

**Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin:** There is no acceptable reason in this day and age for any person to be forced to live out his or her life in poverty. There is no reason our pensioners, who created the foundation for the economic success we now enjoy, whose sacrifices gave their children the opportunities they never had, should be forced to choose between paying the rent and heating their homes. While I welcome the increase in the State

pension, the Government had the opportunity to ensure that senior citizens in this State would not be forced to live in poverty ever again, but it did not do that. In government, we in Sinn Féin would ensure that every senior citizen has a decent standard of living.

Just under 1 million people, almost one in four members of the population, are in receipt of a weekly social welfare payment of one kind or another. Many of these people are living in or at risk of poverty. The decision to increase social welfare payments is welcome, but much more should and could have been done. While people have a little more money in their pockets, €20 per week will soon be eaten up by ESB and gas bills and cost of living increases. That is the reality. Current increases across the board will gobble that up in next to no time whatsoever and there will be no appreciable change in people's circumstances.

Nearly 100,000 children live in consistent poverty in this State at a time when the Government has massive resources at its disposal. This is totally unacceptable. The vast majority of these children are in families reliant on social welfare or living on very low incomes. If the Government is serious about eliminating child poverty, it needs to substantially increase child income support, increase the minimum wage and address the spiralling costs in electricity, gas and food, all the essentials that families need and depend upon.

I particularly welcome the decision, however overdue, by the Government to increase the child dependant allowance. This has been a demand of children's poverty groups and a feature of Sinn Féin's pre-budget proposals for almost a decade. For ten years, the value of this allowance aimed at those children most in need has been allowed to decline. There was no increase and, with inflation, it steadily declined in value year after year. A succession of Ministers stood in this House and fatuously claimed that the allowance, €16 per week, needed to be kept low to prevent it becoming a disincentive to work. That was a shameless position to take for the ten years of this Government's term in office. It is very late in the day for the Minister to open his eyes to the need to increase that allowance.

In its pre-budget submission to the Minister, Deputy Cowen, Sinn Féin has called for a raft of areas to be addressed. It called for an increase in the minimum wage to €9.30 and for all those on this increased wage to be kept out of the tax net. I can identify nothing in the budget that meets this need. Sinn Féin also called for all those on the average industrial wage to be kept within the standard rate band of 20% for 2007. I accept the Minister has made this commitment but not at the required minimum wage level for which we have argued and which the Minister will find is argued for by many other social commentators. We wanted the child dependant allowance to be

increased to €30 for all recipients, after a decade of non-address of that measure. Yet what did we get? It has been met in part, but still falls far short, at only €22, which was announced today. This is one area where the Minister could have made a difference for those children who are on the very lowest levels of income dependency. Those are the families most in need and those children deserved a better effort than €22, and they certainly deserved a better effort in each of the preceding nine budgets of this Government since 1997.

The increase of €10 in child benefit coincides with our argument and I am glad that the Minister, Deputy Cowen, is listening. What about reversing the announced cost hikes in electricity and other energy supplies? These matters have not been addressed. The energy regulator's intervention has resulted in reduced increases in 2007. It is akin to saying that instead of penalising people too much, we will only penalise them to a certain extent. These are not welcome increases, they are punitive increases that will affect the poorest families in our society most.

Having a job is not a guarantee that a family will be able to live free from poverty. Nearly 14% of households in poverty are headed by someone with a job, many of them, according to the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, driven there by double taxes and stealth charges by a Government that claims to be a low tax administration while inflicting regressive taxes on working-class people. Yet there is little focus on addressing the plight of the working poor in this budget. The one significant measure to tackle low pay that was introduced in recent years is — I give credit where it is due — the minimum wage. When it was first introduced in 2000, it represented 54% of average industrial earnings. By June 2006, it represented just over 50%. We in Sinn Féin have called for the minimum wage to be increased to €9.30 from January 2007 so that it represents 60% of average industrial earnings and for everyone on and below the minimum wage to be kept out of the tax net. We also called for those on or below the average industrial wage to be kept in the standard rate tax band of 20%.

These measures would have had a major impact and would have helped those families cope with rising costs. Unfortunately, while the Minister kept those on the minimum wage out of the tax net, his failure to act boldly and decisively has ensured that more than 100,000 people will remain in poverty for yet another year. In examining the Minister's figures, I noted a striking feature, that those just below the average industrial wage, people on €30,000 per annum, gain least from this budget. Workers on €30,000 per annum will gain €8 per week, compared to gains of at least twice that per week for those on or above €35,000. This is another example of this warped thinking. We are not looking seriously at those

most in need. The Minister is rewarding everyone across the board instead of focusing, as he should, on trying to eradicate poverty in our midst and giving young people, in particular, their right to reach their full potential in this life.

I believe there is widespread support across the island for putting the needs of those who are most vulnerable in our society first, our senior citizens, children and those on low incomes. Perhaps it is idealistic of me, but I have great faith in the Irish people. I believe the vast majority of people on this island who are doing well and have benefited from the economic boom also possess a strong social conscience. Certainly, the greater number of them have not lost that. Many people who have climbed the ladder of success have not sought to haul that ladder up after them. They may have been forced to take out private health insurance, but they feel ashamed when they see their fellow citizens on hospital trolleys and they may be able to ensure their children can attend university, but they feel sick at the sight of school children in need.

They may be sure of a safe and secure retirement but they were horrified by the revelations concerning Leas Cross. These are the realities and the Sinn Féin voices in Opposition want to see a different society, a society of equals. The Government has failed once again to grasp that point. Its members are but sticking-plaster operators responding to a raft of different demands. They are not people of vision and have failed once again to use a golden opportunity to make a critical difference in the lives of those who depend on them most. Shame on them for that.

**Mr. Gregory:** Ba mhaith liom buíochas a ghabháil leis na Teachtaí Neamhspleácha as an deis a thabhairt dom labhairt faoin gcáinainnéis anocht. The Independent Deputies wish to restate their commitment to the effect that they will always side with working people and the disadvantaged in society. That is our mandate and will be our priority in this House. We will do so as voices from the backbenches, as we are today, or, in the future, as a group of Independents in a more strategic position to influence Government policy.

It is our objective to try to achieve a fairer society. To achieve this aim, the budget should be used as a mechanism to redistribute the wealth of the country to benefit those most in need, including the elderly, sick, disabled and disadvantaged, and the carers and working people who struggle to survive on low incomes.

If we examine the budgets of the Fianna Fáil-Progressive Democrats Governments for the past nine years, we see clearly that the vast majority of budgetary measures have consistently benefited the better-off much more than those most in need. This is a matter of record and has resulted in an increasingly unequal society. The creation of such inequality is the very opposite

[Mr. Gregory.]

to the pursuit of fairness. We stand for fairness and equality.

There are undoubtedly positive measures in today's budget, some perhaps motivated by the impending general election. In the past nine years, when Ireland's economy became one of the strongest through the labour of its workers, the same Fianna Fáil-Progressive Democrats Government, through arrogant mismanagement, left our hospitals in crisis. Elderly people have been left on trolleys night after night and people on waiting lists have been denied hospital treatment in a two-tier system in which access to health care is based on ability to pay rather than the urgency of one's medical needs.

Some aspects of the health service provided by the Government were labelled the shame of Europe when Ireland was listed a shameful 25th out of 26 countries in a European health consumer survey. The Independent Members, including Deputy Connolly in Cavan-Monaghan, Deputy James Breen in Ennis and Deputy McHugh in Tuam, have championed the cause of addressing the requirement to have modern local hospital services available to all in need. These Deputies, with the full support of their Independent colleagues, have tirelessly focused attention on the health care needs of their communities, but the Government continues to fail to provide the hospital services so urgently needed.

The budget proposes to double the ceiling on mortgage interest relief for first-time buyers. This is welcome in itself but rising interest rates will neutralise this measure. It should not be permitted to obscure the fact that owing a home of one's own has become unattainable for many. For many more, the only way they can achieve this basic human right is to take on crippling life-long mortgages. The Government failed to take action to control the price of building land, the only measure that would have kept house prices down. The Government capitulated to its builder-developer friends and reneged on the provision of thousands of social and affordable homes. Many families could now be in such homes had Fianna Fáil and the Progressive Democrats stood firm against the cartel of builders, but they let the people down, which is a shame. Had they stood firm, the common good would have been pitted against vested and organisational interests, which the Minister bragged about today. However, they failed to do so.

**Ms Harkin:** Well said.

**Mr. Gregory:** In my constituency, Dublin Central, the average price of a house is in excess of €420,000. Young people from Cabra, East Wall and Drumcondra are being forced out of their communities by unaffordable prices and many must leave Dublin to buy an affordable home.

This is a direct result of the actions of the friends of Fianna Fáil, the builder-developers' corrupt rezoning of land and control of the supply of building land, thereby forcing a price increase.

Deputies Catherine Murphy and Joe Higgins recently highlighted a new housing scandal whereby private management companies are being imposed on residents in new housing estates. This is another rip-off whereby developers extort management fees from hard-pressed householders to earn millions for themselves.

**Mr. J. Breen:** It is a disgrace.

**Mr. Gregory:** So far the Government has failed to act.

No matter what the opinion polls suggest, I simply do not believe the people will have confidence in Fianna Fáil, a political party that failed to take any action to control the price of building land to provide sufficient affordable homes. This will be one of the most important issues before the electorate next May and nothing in this budget will obscure it.

The biggest con of the budget is the constant boast of the Progressive Democrats and Fianna Fáil that they keep taxes down.

**Mr. Treacy:** It is a fact.

**Mr. Gregory:** They never mention the hidden stealth taxes and the VAT. Some 20% of all taxation revenue is derived from consumer taxes.

**Mr. Durkan:** They have failed again.

**Mr. Gregory:** The Government starves local authorities of funding——

**Mr. Treacy:** That is not true.

**Mr. Gregory:** ——deliberately to necessitate local taxes such as the bin tax. It is incredible, but true, that at the very same time as working class people in Cabra, East Wall and Ballybough were organising themselves to combat bin charges, the super rich who earned over €1 million each paid less than 5% tax. Some paid none at all.

When Fianna Fáil was squeezing stealth taxes and bin charges from people on low incomes, the report of the Revenue Commissioners showed a marked increase in the level of tax avoidance by the super rich. The elderly, those living alone and those on low incomes bear the brunt of such inequitable taxation the most.

The Independent Members very much welcome the pension increases for the elderly, which are long overdue. Nobody deserves worthwhile increases more than elderly citizens, but they have never been given their fair share. Deputy Harkin points out that Ireland is way behind most European countries in the provision of care for the elderly and in social provision generally. In

the European OECD countries, the average pension is 68% of the average industrial wage. Until now in Ireland, it was a mere 34%. Our elderly deserve better and much more. Some of the pension increases will be eroded by gas and electricity price rises, thus reminding us of the sell-out of our own natural resources in the Corrib gas field despite the Trojan work of Deputy Cowley and the small community in Rosport who oppose the multinational oil company, Shell.

**Mr. Treacy:** Leave them under the water.

**Mr. Gregory:** Is it any wonder that prices dramatically increase when our own natural resources are handed over to multinationals for free?

Despite the surplus of billions of euro, there remains a great deal of social injustice which has received little more than lip service from the Government. A recent report ranked Ireland as 29th worst out of 30 countries for investment in education. Just as we have a two-tier health system so we also have a two-tier education system. In central Dublin, where the office of the Minister for Education and Science is located, many of the children have the least chance of getting a university education. Some overcome great obstacles, through their own efforts and those of their parents and teachers, and achieve great things but most never reach third level, whereas in more affluent areas the reverse is the case. This is inequality at its worst.

The small rural and inner city schools must constantly campaign to achieve even the most basic of resources to help the children overcome disadvantage. Deputy Healy has stated that in South Tipperary over half of the national school pupils are in overcrowded classrooms. This budget will do nothing to address these issues. The State has again failed, and continues to fail, to provide the pre-schools that could make such a difference to these children.

People with disabilities must also continually campaign for basic human rights. Despite years of struggle there are still unacceptable waiting lists for respite and residential care. Deputy Finian McGrath has campaigned ceaselessly here for the rights of all those with a disability. He recently highlighted here that there are nearly 4,000 people with intellectual disabilities on waiting lists for residential and respite services. We Independent Deputies regard this as one of the most important challenges facing us.

Mental health problems are a major social issue that has never been given the priority it deserves on the political agenda. This Government in the past few days shamefully tried to divert attention from its responsibilities on this issue. The truth is that during nine years of Fianna Fáil-Progressive Democrats misgovernment, when so many millions of euro were squandered by incompetence

and arrogance on electronic voting machines and the like, with no accountability whatsoever, funding for mental health services was reduced. It decreased despite the great need of a sector that deserves and demands our highest priority, yet there was not a single mention of this sector in today's budget.

These are just some of the issues and priorities that we as Independent Deputies have sought to highlight over the past five years. Had we been in the position of influence held by the Progressive Democrats, the 2% party, we would have ensured those issues had the highest priority on the Government agenda and that the necessary action be taken.

As we face a general election we will continue to fight for the rights of working people and of the most disadvantaged sectors. That is our commitment and priority.

**Mr. J. Breen:** We will be back to see it through.

**Mr. Gregory:** Some of my Independent colleagues represent constituencies along the west coast, an area neglected by successive Governments. Independents such as Deputies James Breen, Harkin, McHugh and Cowley have been the strongest voices in this House for the major issues in the west, whether the urgent need for infrastructural investment or the hospital projects in Tuam and Ennis championed by Deputies McHugh and James Breen. Deputy Connolly has fought for basic lifesaving hospital services in Monaghan General Hospital. Deputy Cowley fearlessly supports a small community against the multinational Shell Oil. Deputy Healy has focused national attention on the need for greater investment in job creation projects in Tipperary pointing out that unemployment levels in Carrick-on-Suir are six times the national average. Deputy Catherine Murphy by her election put child care on the political agenda and the early child care supplement was last year's budget response to that, but there was no increase in this budget, ensuring this will remain an election issue.

Deputy Finian McGrath has been a powerhouse in support of people with disabilities and educational disadvantage in Dublin North-Central. With Independent Deputies like these who have energy, commitment and determination we can help build a modern, progressive but most of all more humane, equal and caring society.

*Sitting suspended at 6.45 p.m. and resumed at 7.15 p.m.*

#### **Allocation of Time: Motion.**

**Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach (Mr. Kitt):** I move:

That, notwithstanding anything in Standing Orders, the Financial Motions by the Minister

[Mr. Kitt.]

for Finance shall for the purpose of debate be moved and grouped together in accordance with the following schedule and the proceedings thereon, and on any amendment thereto, shall in the case of each resolution be brought to a conclusion by one question which shall be put from the Chair not later than the times indicated as follows:

- (i) Resolution No. 1 (20 minutes)
- (ii) Resolutions Nos. 2 and 3 (45 minutes)
- (iii) Resolutions Nos. 4 and 5 (50 minutes).

Question put and agreed to.

### Financial Resolutions 2007.

#### Financial Resolution No. 1: Income Tax.

**The Taoiseach:** I move:

(1) THAT, as respects the year of assessment 2007 and subsequent years of assessment, section 122 of the Taxes Consolidation Act 1997 (No. 39 of 1997) is amended by substituting in the definition of “the specified rate” in paragraph (a) of subsection (1)—

(a) “4.5 per cent” for “3.5 per cent” (inserted by the Finance Act 2004 (No. 8 of 2004)) in both places where it occurs, and

(b) “12 per cent” for “11 per cent” (inserted by the Finance Act 2003 (No. 3 of 2003)).

(2) IT is hereby declared that it is expedient in the public interest that this Resolution shall have statutory effect under the provisions of the Provisional Collection of Taxes Act 1927 (No. 7 of 1927).

This resolution amends the specified rate used to calculate the taxable benefit to employees, usually bank employees, for example, from loans provided by their employers at below the market rates of interest. Where an employee receives such a loan at a rate which is below the specified rate, the employee is chargeable to tax on the benefit-in-kind reflected by the difference.

The specified rate, which is differentiated as between home loans and other loans, is reviewed annually in the light of the rates available in the marketplace to ensure that it remains within the range of market rates. The review this year showed that home loan rates have been rising and are now in the range of 4.24% to 4.53%. That is up 1% on the last market rates of 3.25% to 3.56% when it was reviewed this time last year. In line with this, it is proposed to increase the specified rate for home loans by 1%, that is, from 3.5% to 4.5%.

In regard to other loans, the A category overdraft rate used to determine the specified rate for such loans has also increased and is now in the range of 10.8% to 12.2% or 12.25%, increased from a range of 10% to 11.65% at this time last year. The specified rate on these loans is also being increased by 1% from 11% to 12%. This change will take effect from 1 January 2007 for the year of assessment of 2007 and subsequent years. The 1% rate in the specified rate will result in an increased yield to the Exchequer from benefit-in-kind in respect of this type of loan, up €3 million in 2007 and €4 million in a full year. In other words, this is an annual review of those individuals who benefit, almost exclusively bank employees, from loans their employers give them at below market rates of interest. It has not been changed for the past few years because there was no need based on the calculation. This year there is a need, and it is as per the figures I have given.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Before calling Deputy Gilmore, I remind the House that this is a committee-type debate for the resolutions.

**Mr. Gilmore:** As I understand it, the purpose of this resolution is to raise the thresholds for the relief on income tax for preferential loans as distinct from the ordinary loans that people take out. I was interested to hear the Taoiseach’s presentation to the effect that people who get loans at below the market interest rate should not enjoy an additional benefit from having got such a loan. This deals with the whole area of home loans and home purchase.

There were great expectations before the budget that there would be considerable relief for those purchasing their homes. I welcome the measure to increase mortgage interest relief and this resolution is somewhat related. However, it has to be borne in mind that in the past 18 months alone the mortgage repayment on the average loan has increased by approximately 50%. In some cases people are paying €500 per month more for their home loan than 18 months ago. It is hitting people very hard. The measure announced today, while welcome, will be wiped out once there is another increase in interest rates which is anticipated.

The other measure which I regret was not addressed by the Minister for Finance was the question of reforming stamp duty.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** The Deputy is moving away from the resolution before the House.

**Mr. Gilmore:** I do not think so. Let me put it this way — the preferential loan is normally obtained to meet the purchase of a house which for many people includes the payment of stamp duty.

**Mr. Rabbitte:** One is snookered.

**Mr. Gilmore:** Anybody who looks at the small print of the Budget Statement for what might be done for stamp duty will see in B.13 that things are being done. There is a new stamp duty relief for Stock Exchange members. That is an interesting idea for the first-time buyer who needs to trade up from the small home or the one or two bedroom apartment, to more suitable accommodation when he or she has a family. Some of my constituents in those circumstances are caught for a stamp duty bill of €30,000. In looking for reform of stamp duty they will be greatly relieved to read in this budget that stamp duty is being reformed for Stock Exchange members but not for people buying a home.

During the past couple of months the Government has perpetrated a very cruel deception on young people who are seeking to buy a home. The Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform, Deputy McDowell, was the first to say that something would be done in the area of stamp duty. In fact, on day one he was going to abolish it altogether saying we did not need it.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** The Deputy is straying outside the resolution.

**Mr. Gilmore:** He rowed back from that. It created the impression that something was going to be done about stamp duty which has not happened.

**Mr. Ardagh:** I am delighted at the opportunity to make a brief contribution. I will not stray any wider than Deputy Gilmore has done. There are many favoured employees of financial institutions who get loans from the financial institution at no interest charge. There is a benefit-in-kind at which this financial resolution is directed. I do not think any of the employees of these financial institutions, many of whom live in the leafy suburbs of Deputy Gilmore's constituency, will complain too much about the increase of 1%. This applies not only to mortgage loans but ordinary loans that these people sometimes take out to buy cars. That is included here where the rate is increased from 11% to 12% as well as the increase from 3.5% to 4.5% for the mortgage.

In regard to home loans generally, the Deputy said stamp duty is a cruel deception. At all times the Minister for Finance, Deputy Cowen, has stated that this is not the time to raise the stamp duty issue.

**Mr. Gilmore:** It is the time.

**Mr. Ardagh:** If the stamp duty was reduced the price of properties would increase and the buyer would suffer.

**Mr. Rabbitte:** The Government has the Tánaiste where it wants him. I never thought I would see the day.

**Mr. Ardagh:** To give him his due, the Tánaiste said he did not intend that to happen in the life of this Government.

**Mr. Rabbitte:** That is what he said when the Minister, Deputy Cowen, told him he would not do it.

**Mr. Durkan:** The next Government will do it.

**Mr. Ardagh:** It is something he will do in Government, which I am sure he will be with Fianna Fáil after May when we will look again at the whole question of stamp duty.

**Mr. Rabbitte:** In your dreams.

**Mr. Ardagh:** Deputy Gilmore said that mortgage payments have increased by €500 per month which is equivalent to €6,000 per year. Interest rates have increased by approximately 1%. Therefore, he is talking about loans of €600,000. It is far from €600,000 that the people who reside in Deputy Rabbitte's constituency or mine would have mortgage payments.

**Mr. Durkan:** Be careful.

**Mr. Ardagh:** The price of apartments, affordable housing and shared ownership housing for which my constituents borrow would not amount to an increase of €500 per month or anywhere near it. I commend the resolution to the House.

**Mr. Rabbitte:** I wish to raise a point which the Minister might take on board. Recently I dealt with a case where a young couple in my constituency bought a site and built a house on it. They were put to the pin of their collar to do this on modest incomes. They received a significant bill for stamp duty on the site. As they did not build the house themselves because they needed to get a builder to build a house on the site, the site was subject to stamp duty. If they had claimed to have built the house themselves, it would have been exempt. In circumstances where young people who take the initiative to purchase a site and cause a house to be built, having the site liable to stamp duty is not much of an incentive.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** The Deputy has made a point totally outside the terms of the resolution and I would prefer if he did not develop it further.

**Mr. Rabbitte:** The Ceann Comhairle should not invite me to speak about BIK on preferential loans etc., as it would drag me into territory into which I do not wish to go.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Unfortunately we are all confined to the contents of this resolution.

**Mr. Durkan:** Arising from Deputy Ardagh's intervention, when considering home loans the Government seems to consider that every action it might take to address the issue would cause inflation in house prices. I do not know what has been happening for the past ten years. To my mind that is what has been happening.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** The Chair does not know what is happening.

**Mr. Durkan:** I am talking about home loans.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** We are discussing Financial Resolution No. 1, which is very specific——

**Mr. Durkan:** It is.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** —— and very narrow. We cannot have a general debate on it.

**Mr. Durkan:** I am not having a general debate on it.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** There will be an opportunity for that tomorrow.

**Mr. Durkan:** I am talking about the reply that was given by Deputy Ardagh, which was in order, I presume. I am responding to the points he raised.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** The Chair was wrong to allow Deputy Gilmore to develop the argument outside the scope of the resolution. Deputies Ardagh and Rabbitte then came in and now the Deputy is speaking. All those contributions have been outside the scope of the resolution.

**Mr. Durkan:** What is sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander. A little sauce goes around well.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** We cannot have a general debate on it.

**Mr. Durkan:** I will not do so.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I would prefer if we stayed within some sort of order.

**Mr. Durkan:** I would have finished by now if the Ceann Comhairle had not interrupted me.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** The Chair never interrupts — the Chair intervenes. It is only people like the Deputy who interrupt.

**Mr. Durkan:** If the Ceann Comhairle had not intervened I would have finished by now. In that area the Minister could make many interventions which would have the effect of stabilising house prices for a specific part of——

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

**Mr. Durkan:** Wait until I finish, for God's sake. We are not that short on time.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** No, I am not allowing a general debate at this stage. There will be an opportunity tomorrow.

**Mr. Durkan:** I am talking about home loans——

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Yes. This resolution relates to loans for a specific category of person and benefit-in-kind.

**Mr. Durkan:** —— and preferential home loans and the taxation element that levels the preferential options for those who have preferential loans as opposed to those who do not. There are countless variations of the intervention that could be taken that could have managed the market in such a way as to allow first-time house buyers to be able to compete in the marketplace like everybody else. We were able to do that when there was no money in the country.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** The Deputy has made his point and I ask him to resume his seat.

**Mr. Durkan:** Now that money is blowing out of the Minister's pocket——

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

**Mr. Durkan:** The Minister spoke about money blowing out of his pocket all day and all week.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** The Deputy will have an opportunity tomorrow to develop it.

**Mr. Durkan:** The newspapers contained very good coverage of the projections relating to this issue. That was the obvious action to take and it could have been done.

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

**Mr. Durkan:** I am concluding.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** We cannot have a general debate.

**Mr. Durkan:** I am not having a general debate. I am merely making a point that I will not get the opportunity to make again in this context.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** The Deputy will have the opportunity tomorrow to make it when he is in order.

**Mr. Durkan:** The Ceann Comhairle is very magnanimous altogether. I thank him very much. I will indulge in that tomorrow.

Financial Resolution No. 1 agreed to.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** It is proposed to discuss Financial Resolutions Nos. 2 and 3 together.

## Financial Resolution No. 2: Mineral Oils.

**The Taoiseach:** I move:

(1) THAT for the purposes of the tax charged by virtue of section 95 of the Finance Act 1999 (No. 2 of 1999), that Act is amended, with effect as on and from 1 January 2007, by substituting the following for Schedule 2 to that Act, as amended by section 79(a) of the Finance Act 2006 (No. 6 of 2006):

“Rates of Mineral Oil Tax.

Description of Mineral Oil	Rate of Tax
<i>Light Oil:</i>	
Leaded petrol	€553.04 per 1,000 litres
Unleaded petrol	€442.68 per 1,000 litres
Super unleaded petrol	€547.79 per 1,000 litres
Aviation gasoline	€276.52 per 1,000 litres
<i>Heavy Oil:</i>	
Used as a propellant with a maximum sulphur content of 50 milligrammes per kilogramme	€368.05 per 1,000 litres
Other heavy oil used as a propellant	€420.44 per 1,000 litres
Kerosene used other than as a propellant	€00.00
Fuel oil	€14.78 per 1,000 litres
Other heavy oil	€47.36 per 1,000 litres
<i>Liquified Petroleum Gas:</i>	
Used as a propellant	€63.59 per 1,000 litres
Other liquified petroleum gas	€10.00
<i>Substitute Fuel:</i>	
Used as a propellant	€368.05 per 1,000 litres
Other substitute fuel	€47.36 per 1,000 litres
<i>Coal:</i>	
For business use	€4.18 per tonne
For other use	€8.36 per tonne

(2) It is hereby declared that it is expedient in the public interest that this Resolution shall have statutory effect under the provisions of the Provisional Collection of Taxes Act 1927 (No. 7 of 1927).

Resolution No. 2 provides with effect from 1 January 2007 for the removal of the non-auto rates of mineral oil tax on kerosene and liquid petroleum gas. When VAT is included these amount to approximately 1.8 cent on a litre of kerosene and 1.1 cent on a litre of LPG. The changes will apply primarily to kerosene and LPG used for heating. It is estimated that these measures will cost the Exchequer approximately €24 million next year.

Resolution No. 3 provides for excise duty increases on tobacco products with effect from midnight, which when VAT is included amounts to an increase of 50 cent on a package of 20 ciga-

rettes with *pro rata* increases on other tobacco products. This increase will bring the price of a packet of 20 cigarettes in the most popular price category to €7.05. It will ensure that taxation policy continues to play a key part, along with the work of the Department of Health and Children and the Office of Tobacco Control in discouraging smoking. It is particularly the case among young smokers where price sensitivity is greatest. It is anticipated that the excise yield from tobacco products will be €1.197 billion in 2007. This represents an increase of €98.5 million over the projected figure if there were no change in the current excise rates. There will also be some increases in the VAT yield.

I recommend both resolutions to the House.

**Mr. Durkan:** I welcome Resolution No 2 although it is not my wont to welcome resolutions



[Mr. Durkan.]

at any time. However, we should all welcome anything that would address the burden that is imposed on householders arising from gas and electricity price increases in the past three months, which flew in the face of international trends. Although the degree of alleviation is not nearly as great as one would have liked, any excise duty that adds to the burden of costs will result in the relocation of businesses. We have spoken about that issue and no doubt it will arise in the course of the debate tomorrow.

Having regard to the all-island electricity market, to what extent do we compare with Northern Ireland on excise duty in this area? I am delighted to note that the Tánaiste has entered the House, which is a major achievement because he left rather suddenly earlier tonight. I thought he had gone off to climb a telegraph pole. I officially welcome him back. On a momentous occasion like this, the debate could not continue without his enlightened approach. Perhaps the Taoiseach might elucidate further on the comparisons between the excise duty here and that in Northern Ireland and the degree to which we are in an enviable or other position.

As one of the few remaining living smokers, I am afraid I am hit again by the excise duty increase on tobacco products. While I am loath to welcome such a provision, since it is coming in my direction there is nothing I can do to deflect it. I humbly accept that particular burden, as unfortunately I am totally guilty.

**Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin:** The proposed removal of excise duty on kerosene and liquid petroleum gas is welcome. However, these are marginal decreases and will only bring those rates in line with those North of the Border.

In light of increased dependence on these forms of heating, particularly among senior citizens, was consideration given to whether the value added tax that applies could also have been considered under this proposition? Is the Taoiseach in a position to shed light on that matter? Once we have dealt with the excise duty, the reality is that value added tax is the significant imposition in the context of the Government's take from the overall cost of kerosene and LPG. While this is coming into effect from 1 January 2007, there is a calculated cost measure for the remainder of this year. Do I understand that this is in anticipation of people waiting until the new year before purchasing fuel at the reduced price?

The increase in excise duty on packets of 20 cigarettes by 50 cent and *pro rata* increases on other tobacco products come into effect from midnight. I am no longer a smoker and in the context of encouraging people not to smoke, this is a welcome proposition. We must demonstrate that stopping people smoking is the real intent behind Financial Resolution No. 3. One cannot

fail to take account of the concluding statement in respect of the resolution that it will yield an estimated €2 million in the short time remaining before the end of the month and an additional €112 million throughout 2007.

The Taoiseach is accompanied by a number of advisers and it is important that we demonstrate this mechanism is not intended as another means of gathering revenue from people because they are smokers. Will he clarify that it is motivated by an intention to discourage people who are already smokers from continuing and also to discourage young people who might be attracted to the habit from taking it up? Will he indicate the percentage decrease in the demand for tobacco products that was factored into the calculation of the additional excise duty yield to the year's end and for 2007? That is an important point, in respect of which clarification must be provided. The information I seek should be readily available from the near army of advisers accompanying the Taoiseach. In my opinion, the information to which I refer is important in terms of demonstrating to people, particularly smokers, that the real purpose and intention behind the resolution is health-motivated.

**Mr. Ardagh:** I welcome the reduction in excise duty relating to heating oil, which will work out at a decrease of €8 on 500 litres or €16 on 1,000 litres. The reduction will come into effect on 1 January 2007. I hope that a cold snap, accompanied by heavy snow, does not occur at the end of this month when people are waiting to purchase home heating oil. The cost of such oil increased in recent times following increases in the price of petrol and oil on the world stage.

**Mr. Durkan:** The price dropped on the world stage.

**Mr. Ardagh:** This is a welcome move on the part of the Government that will in some way help to reduce the burden shouldered by people in terms of the cost of home heating oil.

On the cost of cigarettes, I recall that when I was eight years old one could go to the local shop and buy a single Player's cigarette. In his budget speech, the Minister indicated that he intends to encourage people to sell cigarettes in packets of 20 in order to discourage young people from taking up smoking. If, as the Taoiseach stated, the price of a packet of 20 cigarettes is to rise to €7.05, this will act as a significant deterrent in the context of discouraging young people from smoking.

There is no doubt that the sale of tobacco generates significant amounts of money for the Exchequer. The figure in this regard currently stands at €1.2 billion and will increase by €100 million this year. The intention behind the increase in the cost of cigarettes is health-motivated and represents an attempt to try to reduce

the number of cancers and the level of heart disease among citizens. The Irish Cancer Society was seeking a €2 increase in the price of a packet of 20 cigarettes. I am sure the Minister for Finance would have liked to increase the price by that amount, if for no other reason than to protect people's health. As outlined by the Minister, a difficulty arises in the context of inflation and the effect an increase in the price of cigarettes has on the rate of increase in the consumer price index, CPI. The social partners must take on board what the Minister suggested, namely, that the price of cigarettes be removed from the CPI.

**Mr. Durkan:** If the price of cigarettes is removed, there will be nothing left in the CPI.

**Mr. Ardagh:** What we are trying to do is improve the health of the nation's citizens. Remarks that do not assist in that regard are not helpful.

**Mr. Hogan:** The Deputy should be in the Progressive Democrats. He is quite arrogant and knows everything.

**Mr. Durkan:** He will be the next applicant.

**Mr. Ardagh:** We must encourage the social partners to agree that the increase in the price of cigarettes will not be included when wage demands are being made. It is important that this should be done and that the social partners should take this suggestion on board.

This is the first increase of 50 cent in the price of packets of 20 cigarettes. I hope that over the next four years the price will increase by 50 cent each year not to accrue additional revenue for the Government through excise duty, but to ensure a reduction in the number of people who smoke and also to reduce the number of cancers and level of heart disease among citizens. I fully support the increase of 50 cent in the excise duty on packets of 20 cigarettes.

**Mr. Rabbitte:** I do not take any great issue with either of these resolutions. The reduction in excise duty in respect of home heating oil is timely, appropriate and necessary. Fuel poverty is a major issue for a good number of families. It is also an issue for some elderly people. As has been remarked, and notwithstanding the apparent *volte face* by the regulator in respect of gas and electricity prices, the extent of fuel price increases is significant. It is fine to increase the fuel allowance by €4 to €18. That is a welcome development but this remains an issue for many people because only a small number of those affected qualify for fuel allowance. There are many people on low incomes who will not be eligible for the allowance. This reduction in the excise duty on home heating oil is welcome.

I am bound to say that Deputy Ardagh is right regarding the scientific evidence, but the 50 cent

increase in the price of cigarettes is hardly immaterial for a senior citizen who has long since become addicted. It will be painful, but on the scientific evidence and given that we want to encourage people to stop and discourage the young from taking up the habit, it is very hard to muster any argument against it.

There used to be debates on the issue in this House, and one could expect Deputies from Dundalk and my own constituency, where Gallaher's, which has now sadly been restructured out of existence, was a good employer, to argue against tax rises. However, it is very hard to say that the Minister is not correct in introducing this disincentive. Medical provision for the cancers that ensue is enormously costly. It carries a terrible price in human health, and if we were successful in dissuading only a small number of young people from embarking on the habit, it would be worthwhile. I therefore have no difficulty in assenting to the two resolutions.

**Mr. Mulcahy:** I too wish to speak on resolution No. 3, which deals with excise duty on cigarettes. As a non-smoker, I am reluctant to enter the debate, since I hate to tell others what they should or should not do. What we are trying to do, if we are honest with ourselves, is execute an instrument of health policy and, to a certain degree, social engineering.

Two valid points have been made in the debate, the first being that we must discourage the young from smoking, to which end we should of course increase excise duty as much as possible. On the other hand, there may be older people, as Deputy Rabbitte has pointed out, who are addicted to cigarettes, meaning that the increase may cause them some hardship. We must examine the issue in terms broader than the excise issue.

I support the 50 cent rise. The Irish Cancer Society had sought a rise of €2, and I would personally have favoured a larger increase in the duty on cigarettes. Many young people nowadays have large disposable incomes, and an extra 50 cent for them might not make a great deal of difference.

Another issue is smuggling, since the more that one increases the price of cigarettes, the greater the temptation to smuggle them into the jurisdiction. The relationship between price increases and smuggling should be examined very carefully. Regarding the CPI, the social partners must be put under a little more pressure. I would like to secure agreement early in 2007 that, by the time of the next budget, cigarettes can be removed from the CPI, with much larger increases in tobacco excise duty.

If one really wishes to stop young people, one should also consider access. Young people can use cigarette vending machines everywhere. With those caveats, I offer my strong support for resolution No. 3.

**Mr. Naughten:** I had not planned to speak on resolution No. 3 but changed my mind after hearing the contributions. Even if one increased the price of cigarettes to €10 a packet, a sizeable proportion of the population would not be discouraged. If we are to address the issue, we must engage in new thinking. I know that the former Minister for Health and Children, Deputy Martin, was complimented on introducing the smoking ban, which has undoubtedly reduced the numbers of those who smoke, especially among older people. However, it has encouraged young people to smoke, and statistics show an increase in smoking among that group. One need only visit a night club any weekend of the year to see why. If we are serious, we must admit that putting 50 cent on a packet of cigarettes is not the magic bullet that will solve the problem of smoking. It is about time we got real in that regard.

My main reason for taking the floor was to speak on the second resolution, regarding excise duty. I welcome the decision, since it will provide some relief to many families under great financial pressure. It will eradicate the laundering of home heating oil across the Border, something extremely welcome in itself. I know that my colleague, Deputy Crawford, has raised the issue numerous times in the House in the context of the chemical residue following cross-Border fuel-laundering.

However, I am disappointed that we are not considering the extension of excise relief on bio-fuels. The Minister must be commended for the incentives put in place for the agriculture sector to grow energy crops. However, there is not much point in doing so if there is no market for them, and the budget does nothing to create such a market. It is disappointing that we did not introduce excise relief across the board for renewable fuels, whether home heating oil or vehicle oil.

I know that the Progressive Democrats closely followed our policy document on renewable energy.

**Mr. Durkan:** They are going nuclear.

**Mr. Naughten:** However, they failed to achieve anything in the budget when it comes to providing a market for renewable energy.

**Mr. Durkan:** It is the Ringsend nuclear reactor.

**Mr. Naughten:** It is pointless to hand out grants, which is why the Minister said in his Budget Statement that the incentive would cost the Exchequer only €6 million by 2009. The uptake will not be large, since there is not much point in providing an incentive unless one provides a market to ensure that people can make a return.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I call Deputy Sargent.

**Mr. Ring:** I had indicated that I wished to speak.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Yes, but so did Deputy Sargent before Deputy Ring.

**Mr. Ring:** Deputy Sargent has only just entered the Chamber.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Deputy Sargent was here before the Deputy.

**Mr. Ring:** No, he was not. He came in after me.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Even if the Deputy raised his hand ahead of him, on the basis of proportionality, he would be entitled to come in. Two members of the Fine Gael Party have spoken and no one from the Green Party.

**Mr. Ring:** The same thing happened during last night's Adjournment debate, when there were three. We have had that row before. Let us be fair in the House.

**Mr. Sargent:** In fairness, I am prepared to wait and allow Deputy Ring to speak before me. I have no issue; I passed Deputy Ring on my way back from speaking to the Ceann Comhairle. I am happy to speak, but I will not press my claim.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I call Deputy Sargent.

**Mr. Sargent:** I support resolutions Nos. 2 and 3, which are as interesting for what they fail to say as for what they say. I will highlight one or two aspects that occur to me. It is interesting that we are dealing with the difficulties that arise when there are two Administrations on the island with different views on excise and other charges. That does not only happen regarding home heating oil. The change is valid to alleviate the hardship caused on one side of the Border as it competes with the other.

There have been discussions on this issue, so why must we have this measure when discussions took place between the Departments of Finance and Environment, Heritage and Local Government on other areas? We do not, for example, take account of the fact that the large volume of fuel being bought south of the Border and burned in the North is enough to add €50 million a year to our Kyoto penalties. I wonder about the motivation for this measure and whether it serves only to avoid the elephant in the room. The Minister for Finance referred in his Budget Statement to the provision of €270 million to fund a programme of carbon allowance purchases. This sum of money could be used to provide grants for housing insulation and other measures to save energy, but instead it is being exported from the country.

Other issues come into play in terms of harmonising regulations on either side of the Border. I understand, for example, that it costs the Northern authorities €44 million per annum to manage illegal dumping from the South, which arises because of the differences in refuse charges in the two jurisdictions. It may be time to take a more practical approach to the harmonising of regulations North and South. Perhaps this measure is a signal that this is beginning to happen. I welcome it for that reason but seek clarification as to whether it will lead to a more comprehensive addressing of all these issues North and South.

I welcome the measure relating to tobacco products. It is easy to welcome it because, as a non-smoker, the price increase will not affect me. I meet many smokers who say they would like to give up a habit that is such a waste of money but are unable to do so because they are addicted. Given that a considerable number of elderly people smoke, I wonder whether this measure involves some clever arithmetic in that the increase in the pension, for example, may be offset by the increase in excise duty on tobacco products. There are various ways of looking at this from an economic point of view. Ultimately, however, I support the notion of getting across the message that smoking is bad for one's pocket as well as one's health. That seems to be the thinking behind this measure.

It would be interesting to discover whether this increase is sufficient in the context of the cost to the health service of dealing with the effects of smoking. Has any such figure been calculated? What is the cost to the health service of meeting the needs of those who smoke? The health service needs as many resources as possible and the greatest possible capacity in terms of hospital beds. We must take action where we can reduce the possibility of people requiring hospital treatment.

**Mr. Ring:** What will the Government do to ensure companies implement the reductions in the price of fuels? In the past, increases in the price of fuel and other commodities were put into effect at midnight on the day of the budget. Such increases are always passed quickly on to the consumer. What action will be taken to ensure these reductions are passed on to consumers tomorrow?

The increase in the price of tobacco products is the meanest attack of all. Having listened to the arguments put forward by previous speakers, I wish to make clear at the outset that I do not smoke and that I hate cigarettes, but I know many people who love them. Smoking is an addiction and for some people, it is their only joy in life. It is their choice to smoke.

Why should we focus only on smokers? What about those who abuse alcohol, some of whom

cause havoc on the roads and destroy families? We see the effects of excessive alcohol consumption in every village, town and city at weekends. Why is there no increase in the cost of alcohol products? Why are we punishing the elderly person, for instance, who never goes out to the cinema or anywhere else and whose only indulgence is smoking?

I can give other examples of this hypocrisy. Why does the Government not target those who drink cola? I saw a television programme recently which showed that one can of cola can adversely affect a person's blood sugar and that regular consumption can cause weight gain and other harmful physical effects. A better example relates to the daily and weekly carnage on our roads. Why do we not tax motorists off the road? Why are we attacking only one section of society? The Tánaiste and Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform, Deputy McDowell, can laugh since he does not have to pay for fuel. His motoring costs are met by the taxpayer and he has no understanding of what is going on. Neither he nor the Taoiseach has driven a car in the past ten years. The Minister could not tell me the cost of a litre of diesel because his driver fills the ministerial car to bring him into work in the morning and bring him home at night.

I recognise that smoking is bad for one's health and that smokers' lives are shortened by their habit, but the abuse of alcohol is responsible for more deaths than smoking. We are hypocrites in this regard because we are afraid to tackle the vintners and other vested interests. If the Taoiseach goes to Croke Park next Sunday, one of the first signs he will see will tell him that the all-Ireland hurling championship is sponsored by Guinness. The increase of 50 cent in the price of 20 cigarettes will be a hardship for some elderly people. I would like to vote against this motion but I know my party will not take that approach so there is no point in me getting into an argument about it.

**Mr. McDowell:** Deputy Ring used to have an interest in the all-Ireland championship but that is no longer the case.

**Mr. Ring:** I have a major interest in it.

**The Taoiseach:** There is no excise duty on electricity and natural gas. Deputy Ó Caoláin made the point that there is no excise duty on kerosene in Northern Ireland. The reduced VAT rate of 13.5% applies to heating fuels. In many other EU member states, the standard VAT rate is applied.

Deputy Ó Caoláin can be assured that the motivation in increasing the excise duty on cigarettes relates to public health and is designed to discourage smoking. Our calculation is that this increase will lead to a 2% decrease in the volume

[The Taoiseach.]

of tobacco consumption based on what would otherwise be the case.

**Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin:** It is not a significant decrease.

**The Taoiseach:** We did not opt for a greater increase in excise duty because such increases have a major impact on the consumer price index. It is for this reason that the Minister for Finance asked the social partners to consider whether tobacco products should be removed from the goods included in the CPI. He has made this point on more than one occasion, as have I. The impact on the CPI of this increase is 1.46%. Statistics prove that an increase in the excise duty on tobacco products leads to a reduction in the numbers who smoke.

Tax will account for 80% of the price of 20 cigarettes, which seems sufficient. If tobacco becomes too expensive, smugglers will take advantage, as happens in many jurisdictions. We must try to strike the correct balance. The Minister did not increase the excise duty on tobacco products for several years. The price of cigarettes in this State is the second highest in the EU, after the United Kingdom. The overall tax take on a packet of 20 cigarettes, including excise duty and VAT, will be €5.50 after this increase. That is fair.

I understand the Minister was not inclined towards this increase but he listened carefully to the public health arguments. A major campaign was conducted by all the interested organisations, including ASH, which always makes its case at this time of year, the Irish Cancer Society and others. Members on all sides of the House were bombarded with representations from these groups. They passionately believe that the tax element is useful in discouraging smokers. Cigarette prices have increased in the past ten years at a significantly higher rate than the increase in the CPI. The tax-inclusive price of a packet of 20 cigarettes has increased by 80% while the CPI has increased by less than 40%.

Deputy Ring put forward the side of the argument on this issue that is no longer easy to make. There was a time, as Deputy Rabbitte said, when this issue was always the subject of lively debate in this House. There are arguments on both sides but we all agree on the health aspect of it. Fiscal policy is part of the overall health strategy aimed at discouraging smoking.

There are elements other than increased pricing in the health strategy. These include increasing controls on the sale of cigarettes; more prominent health warnings on packets; a prohibition on tobacco advertising and sponsorship of events, including GAA events; a restriction on smoking in public areas and workplaces; and health education programmes as well as actions by health professionals. Increases in tobacco duty have been introduced to ensure tax policy plays a central part in the overall strategy. After today's

increase, the price of a packet of 20 cigarettes will be €7.05.

Deputy Mulcahy can be assured rigorous efforts are made to combat tobacco smuggling. This is evidenced from the growing number of seizures and prosecutions made as a result of these efforts. In 2006, until 24 November, 14,044 seizures were made, yielding 46 million cigarettes with a retail value of €14.6 million. That shows the extent of smuggling. Of that figure, 11,974 were made from postal consignments and 1,907 were made in airport seizures, giving a combined retail value of €8.3 million. Seizures at sea ports numbered 163 with a retail value of €6.3 million. To date, 120 prosecutions have been instituted, resulting in fines of €52,675.

Several Members spoke of striking a balance between taxes and price. If the tax was increased by 90%, it would be a huge encouragement to the smuggling brigade. The actual tobacco content and the excise content per thousand cigarettes for the UK is €239.16 while Ireland's is slightly lower at €214.04. Next in the table is France with a much lower figure of €160. In Eastern Europe, Latvia stands at €15.60, Lithuania, €21.90 and Estonia, €33.87. There is an enormous divergence between their figures and ours. One can see the incentive for smuggling as there are large amounts of money involved.

We must hope the other campaigns, such as health promotion, will convince people that smoking is dangerous and is a killer. Large numbers of young people still take up smoking. Price is an important issue and hopefully today's increase will have some impact on young people smoking. A recent survey conducted by the Office of Tobacco Control for the 12 month-period until June 2006 showed a decrease in smoking. Some 24% of the population now smokes compared to 27% three years ago and 31% eight years ago. That is a fair reduction. The same survey gave a breakdown of smokers by age group: 18% of 15 to 18-year-olds; 33% of 19 to 35-year-olds, the dominant group; 22% of 36 to 70-year-olds; and 11% of people over 70 years of age smoke. Deputy Ring can say to his friends who smoke that if they want to reach 70 years of age and over, not smoking will increase their chances. Like all of us, he will want to keep his friends as long as he can.

**Mr. Ring:** I know a 90-year-old lady who smokes 40 fags a day and she claims she was never as healthy.

**The Taoiseach:** I thank Members for their support on both resolutions.

**Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin:** On the 2% figure given by the Taoiseach, what does it actually represent? Does it represent the daily smoker who instead of 50-a-day will smoke 49 a day or one fewer cigarette a week? The impact is not as great as one would have wished. For a 50 cent increase in the price and a 2% adjustment in the expected

turnover in cigarette and other tobacco sales, it does not seem to be an encouraging return. Other measures must be adopted to ensure the message gets across.

**The Taoiseach:** That is the calculation. A figure of 2% would make a difference. However, it cannot be taken in isolation. This must be brought in with other health promotion elements. The 2% figure will mean 100 million fewer cigarettes being smoked which shows how many cigarettes are smoked every day.

**Mr. Stagg:** Having some knowledge of this subject, I can assure the Taoiseach there is no question of somebody giving up one cigarette a week. However, it will be a good result if 2.5% of smokers give up. I wish I was one of that 2.5%.

**The Taoiseach:** It will be successful if there is a 2% drop in cigarette consumption. Some 100 million cigarettes fewer being smoked is not an insignificant amount. While the yield from excise is large, a greater amount of money goes to the health budget for smoking-related illnesses. The statistics show that the predominant cause of ailments such as heart disease is smoking. Deputy Ring has a point that alcohol and narcotics are damaging but smoking is killing people in large numbers. Sometimes fiscal policy can be used to change such situations. I thank the House for its support for the two resolutions.

Financial Resolution No. 2 agreed to.

**Financial Resolution No. 3: Tobacco Products.**

**The Taoiseach:** I move:

(1) THAT for the purposes of the tax charged by virtue of section 72 of the Finance Act 2005 (No. 5 of 2005), that Act is amended, with effect as on and from 7 December 2006, by substituting the following for Schedule 2 to that Act:

“SCHEDULE 2

Rates of Tobacco Products Tax

Description of Product	Rate of Duty
Cigarettes ....	€151.37 per thousand together with an amount equal to 17.78 per cent of the price at which the cigarettes are sold by retail
Cigars ....	€217.388 per kilogram
Fine-cut tobacco for the rolling of cigarettes ....	€183.443 per kilogram.
Other smoking tobacco ....	€150.815 per kilogram

”.

(2) IT is hereby declared that it is expedient in the public interest that this Resolution shall have statutory effect under the provisions of

the Provisional Collection of Taxes Act 1927 (No. 7 of 1927).

Financial Resolution No. 3 agreed to.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** It is proposed to discuss Financial Resolutions Nos. 4 and 5 together.

**Financial Resolution No. 4: Value-Added Tax.**

**Tánaiste and Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform (Mr. McDowell):** I move:

(1) THAT the level of the turnover from taxable supplies below which persons shall not, unless they otherwise elect, be taxable persons be increased to €35,000 from €27,500 in respect of a person’s supply of services, and to €70,000 from €55,000 in respect of a person’s supply of goods and that, accordingly—

(a) section 8 of the Value-Added Tax Act 1972 (No. 22 of 1972) be amended by substituting “€35,000” for “€27,500” (inserted by the Finance Act 2006 (No. 6 of 2006)) and “€70,000” for “€55,000” (as so inserted) in subsections (3), (3A) and (9) wherever they occur, and

(b) the Sixth Schedule to the Value-Added Tax Act 1972 be amended by substituting “€35,000” for “€27,500” (inserted by the Finance Act 2006) in paragraphs (viib) and (viic).

(2) THAT this Resolution shall have effect as on and from 1 March 2007.

(3) IT is hereby declared that it is expedient in the public interest that this Resolution shall have statutory effect under the provisions of the Provisional Collection of Taxes Act 1927 (No. 7 of 1927).

Resolution No. 4 provides for an increase in the VAT registration thresholds for small businesses from €27,000 to €35,000 for services and from €55,000 to €70,000 for goods. The resolution provides that the new thresholds will take effect from 1 March next year. This change will cost €35 million in 2007 and €53 million in a full year. As a result, it is anticipated that 8,000 businesses could be removed from the VAT net in the year. This measure will also remove the administrative burden for small businesses and for Revenue. The existence of registration thresholds allows certain small businesses to remain outside the VAT net and helps small, new businesses to develop. The measure will also reduce the administrative burden for Revenue. The changes represent an increase of over 27% in the VAT registration thresholds.

Resolution No. 5 provides for an increase from 4.8% to 5.2% in the flat rate farmers’ refund. This was last changed in 2005 when it was increased

[Mr. McDowell.]

from 4.4% to 4.8%. The new rate of 5.2% will take effect from 1 January 2007. The flat rate scheme is a simplified and practical method of applying VAT recoupability to farming. It compensates unregistered farmers on an overall basis for the VAT charged on their purchases of goods and services. This is achieved without applying the normal VAT rules on registration, record keeping, invoices and returns. As required by EU law, the Revenue Commissioners have calculated the flat rate on the basis of macroeconomic data for the last three years. The revised flat rate for 2007 takes into account a number of changes in the method of calculating the refund following consultation with the farming bodies. These consultations are ongoing. The increase in the flat rate will cost €13.5 million in 2007 and €16 million in a full year. The livestock rate, which has traditionally been at the same rate as the flat rate, is being maintained at 4.8%. The livestock rate is charged by VAT registered farmers and other businesses on the supply of livestock and live greyhounds and the hire of horses. Under EU law we are permitted to maintain the livestock rate below 5%. I commend both resolutions to the House.

**Mr. Hogan:** I do not oppose these resolutions. Resolution No. 4 is an important measure and the package of resolutions for small business brought forward by the Minister for Finance is welcome. Over the last few years the indigenous sector has been hit with many additional regulatory burdens. Better regulation documents have floated around the Department of the Taoiseach over recent years. Regulatory burden is supposed to be assessed on the basis of necessity and proportionality. Until now I have seen no evidence of this.

The principle the Minister has brought forward in this resolution is a first step towards removing an unnecessary paperwork burden that has accumulated over a number of years for fledgling businesses that are trying to get off the ground. Although a modest number of companies will be exempt, I do not denigrate the resolution. The Minister has broken the ice on establishing this principle. Because a turnover of €70,000 for goods and €55,000 for services is not a large amount, I am sure the number of companies exempt will be small.

The form filling and bureaucracy a start-up business must go through requires urgent attention by the State. Small business people are the kingpins of the national economy as regards going through the frustrating experience of getting started. The various monthly and bimonthly returns in VAT and tax are cumbersome for fledgling companies that lack the expertise or the wherewithal to employ the necessary accounting expertise to get started. The future of our

national economy will be more dependent on small, Irish businesses, entrepreneurs in our own jurisdiction, rather than foreign direct investment. I have sought these changes in the past and I acknowledge that the Minister has taken the first step.

The other package of measures in the small business sector is equally important and valid. One of the measures was initiated during the 1994-97 rainbow Government when we exempted from tax liability the profits of small businesses under €50,000. This builds on that up to €150,000 related to corporation tax liability and the timing in which it was made. My one criticism of the Government over the last number of years is that it has tried to make ends meet in its Exchequer figures by bringing capital acquisitions tax, capital gains tax and particularly corporation tax liability forward into the current year of operations that will generate the tax liability. It is the only sector that must pay money to the Revenue based on money it has not yet earned. Paying corporation tax before the end of the current tax year for notional income that will accrue by the end of December is unfair and should be examined in future budgets. However, I support the resolution and the expansion of the VAT thresholds. The Minister for Finance has done a good day's work in exempting businesses with small turnovers from VAT and getting them started. We should examine other regulatory burdens on small businesses that could be removed, particularly for the first year or two, or below a particular turnover, to get them started and give them a breathing space from the bureaucracy they must go through.

**Mr. Kirk:** Section 58 of the Finance Act 1983 contained a provision whereby unregistered farmers could claim back the VAT component of the cost on capital expenditure projects. This applied mainly to farmyard development. I assume that stands and will not be affected by any of the provisions we are discussing here. The other issue is the growing of willow and other crops. We are at an early stage in the development of this concept in Ireland, although considerable research has been carried out on it in the North. There will be a lead-in period for the establishment of these crops with heavy capital expenditure by individual farmers who want to get into it. Will the Finance Bill early in the new year give consideration to these circumstances to add to the worthwhile and welcome incentives that have been announced today?

**Mr. Rabbitte:** The Tánaiste referred to a 27% increase for VAT registration.

**Mr. McDowell:** The threshold has increased by 27%.

**Mr. Rabbitte:** I do not oppose either of these resolutions. In the area of services we are spawning a number of new companies and we need to increase this. The threshold of €35,000 turnover is very modest. Many small businesses are overwhelmed by bureaucratic requirements. Is this the main thrust behind this change, as distinct from the imposition of VAT? The amount of €52.5 million per year is not insignificant. The complaints I hear relate to the regulatory burden.

I see Deputy Johnny Brady is offering and I was going to liven up the night by opposing resolution No. 5 but I agree with it.

**Mary Coughlan:** It might not be a good idea.

**Mr. J. Brady:** It is an election year.

**Mr. Treacy:** Has Mullingar moved to Navan?

**Mr. Rabbitte:** The removal of 8,000 small companies from the register for VAT seems high. Are the figures entirely negligible in some cases and substantial in other cases? I presume some would have minimal liability and others would have a higher figure.

**Mr. J. Brady:** I compliment the Minister on the changes made, particularly in agriculture. I am delighted that Deputy Rabbitte, leader of the Labour Party, is interested in agricultural matters.

**Mr. McDowell:** And business.

**Mr. Naughten:** Maybe the Government will become interested now.

**Mr. J. Brady:** I heard one of Deputy Rabbitte's party's Dublin Deputies suggesting that the Minister for Transport compulsorily purchase land for road improvements and motorways. I do not know how Fine Gael feels about that. The parties can sit down together and iron it out. Deputy Rabbitte has an interest in agriculture and may persuade Fine Gael not to implement the policy.

**Mr. Rabbitte:** I am rooted in it and was raised in it.

**Mr. J. Brady:** Farmers suffer, as I have, at the hands of the NRA. My farm was divided in two, but it is great to see progress.

**Mr. Stagg:** I thought he would say the compensation is great.

**Mr. J. Brady:** No one is ever compensated for having a farm divided. I know farmers who suffer at the hands of the NRA but it is in the best interests of—

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** The Deputy should speak on Resolutions Nos. 4 and 5.

**Mr. J. Brady:** I am trying to get to the point. We are lucky that we have a caring Minister for Agriculture and Food. That is half the battle.

**Ms Lynch:** Is the Minister not embarrassed?

**Mr. J. Brady:** Farming organisations are impressed with what the Ministers for Finance and Agriculture and Food have done for the sector. Agriculture is going through difficult times. Major changes are taking place and it is important that we have caring Ministers and a caring Government.

**Mr. J. Breen:** I hate to interrupt but could Deputy Johnny Brady ask the Minister for Agriculture and Food about unannounced farm inspections?

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** The Deputies should speak on Resolutions Nos. 4 and 5.

**Mr. J. Brady:** I welcome the VAT relief from 4.8% to 5.2%, a matter about which I have contacted these two Ministers. Stock relief for farmers is continuing. Certain tax exemptions apply for income from certain leases of farm land from January 2001. The budget also includes a new exemption of €20,000 per year. The cost is estimated at €500,000 for 2007 and €1 million for a year. The extension of stamp duty relief for farm consolidation is welcome, particularly where farmers' lands are divided because of motorways. Changes to stamp duty relief for young farmers—

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** The Deputy should speak on budget provisions.

**Mr. J. Brady:** All these issues refer to the resolution. I welcome the budget and thank the Ministers for their interest in agriculture.

**Mr. Ardagh:** Dublin South-Central is one of the most socially disadvantaged constituencies in the country and has a very low attendance at third level compared to the farming counties. When I hear the love-in between Deputy Johnny Brady and Deputy Rabbitte, and the Minister's comment that the increase is based on macro-economic data and that it follows consultation with the farming bodies, I wonder why the flat rate is being increased from 4.8% to 5.2%. Fair dues to them and I hope they enjoy it.

Regarding the increase in VAT registration thresholds, I welcome the Government initiative and accept what Deputies Hogan and Rabbitte said about the regulatory burden on small business. It is quite easy for mandarins and officials, with major support in their offices, to design



[Mr. Ardagh.]

these forms and seek their completion on a regular basis. It is very difficult for the one man operation, assisted by a partner or spouse and working all hours to make a few bob, to do paperwork. The burden, particularly on small business people, should be reduced in whatever way possible.

There is also the question that if the exemption limit is raised too much, there may be competition with people in the VAT-registered scheme. With the current availability of SSIA money, there will be a number of new kitchens or windows being installed, or footpaths will be surfaced. There are companies that are registered, paying VAT and fully compliant, as well as companies that would be fully compliant except for the VAT issue. They definitely have a competitive advantage, which must be taken into account.

I ask to what extent that has been taken into account. Why has the exemption been set at this level? Is it because the amount involved is so minimal and it costs more to collect and administer than the amount received? Is it to help the small business person reduce the regulatory burden, as Deputy Rabbitte and others stated?

**Mr. Naughten:** I wish to speak on Resolution No. 5, relating to agricultural VAT relief. I welcome this measure but point out that when agriculture and general inflation is taken into account, farmers will be short changed by this calculation. The resolution should provide for the payment to farmers not registered for VAT because of their input costs over the previous three years. However, they can only recoup VAT through the sale of produce to a VAT-registered business.

As we know, the introduction of the single farm payment has meant that commodity prices in general have gone down and will continue to do so. The volume of production going through farms is also going down, so farmers are losing out because they are not selling the same amount of product and therefore cannot get the refund back in VAT that has already been paid on inputs.

We were also promised a review of this structure a number of years ago but nothing has happened. It is unacceptable that the issue has not been reviewed, as a significant anomaly exists within the current system of recovering VAT paid by farmers on input costs. The mechanism which exists of getting it back through the sale of produce will not allow farmers to do so because of the single farm payment.

Agricultural inflation is running significantly higher than ordinary inflation, and this has not been taken into account in the rise of output costs. Yet the farmer's returns from produce has decreased because of the significant control of grocers and major retailers over food produce.

Milk is a significant example of what has gone on over the last number of years. Farmers are genuinely being short changed.

This increase should have come about last year, when there was no change made to the recovery of VAT for farmers. As a direct result, farmers have lost out on an additional €16 million that they should have been entitled to recoup. Will the Tánaiste and Minister for Justice outline when this review will be completed, as it has been ongoing for the past two or three years? It is about time we got a decision.

**Mr. Cassidy:** I welcome the initiative in the budget looking to help the small business industry, and in particular the business expansion seed capital scheme. The work and recommendations of the Small Business Forum will stand to this country over the next five, ten or 15 years. If we look past 2013, we will have to look to small Irish-owned businesses that today number 250,000, employing over 800,000 people, as we were told by the Minister.

This budget has considered the area very seriously. As Deputy Hogan and many Deputies on this side of the House have done, I welcome the initiatives taken on board by the Minister, particularly the suggestions heard by the Oireachtas Committee on Enterprise and Small Business. Many of the initiatives are very worthwhile and I look forward to their implementation.

**Mr. McDowell:** With regard to the farmers' flat rate and Deputy Johnny Brady's comments, VAT incurred on the construction of farm buildings and land drainage is still reclaimable. The amounts of VAT reclaimed under the provisions mentioned by the Deputy were of the order of €32 million in 2005 and the same amount to the end of October 2006. There is no change.

I listened to the Deputy talking about his land being bisected — the one dividend will be the many sites on which to put up election posters on either side of the road.

**Mr. Treacy:** The Minister would give him some assistance.

**Mr. Naughten:** The Minister would be an expert in that anyway.

**Mr. McDowell:** Listening to Deputy Ardagh speaking about Dublin South-Central reminds me that agriculture was wiped out in my constituency under a Fine Gael and Labour Government. The nuns on Merrion Road gave up their last few cattle and that was the end of agriculture in Dublin South-East. I warned the Government at the time it would happen, but it was wiped out just like that.

Member states are given some latitude in how they decide to exempt small businesses from the

VAT registration requirements. It cuts both ways, as if a company is unregistered, VAT cannot be recovered on inputs. It is not as if the money is all thrown away from the Revenue's point of view. An unregistered trader who falls below the threshold cannot recover VAT on the inputs and cannot pass it on to the customer. That trader would effectively have to take that hit themselves.

The incidence therefore depends very much on the trade. I remember as a barrister the difference between being registered and unregistered was very significant, as it was effectively 21% of everything except the VAT on the paper and pencil and something else. Very little VAT was reclaimable.

**Mr. Rabbitte:** Would the Minister have been above the threshold?

**Mr. Ardagh:** He would have been very embarrassed if he was not.

**Mr. McDowell:** On the other hand, if there was a high-cost input into the business, and a company was selling windows to SSIA holders, for example, there would be much VAT. If that cannot be recovered, it would not have the same distorting effect on competition. That is the significant difference. There is another angle if a company is supplying to VAT-registered customers or end users who cannot reclaim the VAT. The distortion effect is much more marked if a company is supplying to retail customers who cannot reclaim the amount, or consumers in other words. In those circumstances, the difference between having a 21% VAT obligation and not having it could be quite considerable, particularly in the case of somebody with very low VAT inputs.

It differs from business to business and on the nature of the business as to whether there is a distorting effect. From the Revenue's perspective, there are costs involved in dealing with very small businesses. To take an example, requiring an exchange of forms every VAT period with every minute start-up business along with an examination of cheques for minute amounts would impose a significant charge on Revenue's time.

By the same token, Revenue does not lose out. It is not the end of the world for Revenue if somebody who has significant VAT on inputs into his or her business which is not recoverable does not register. I should emphasise registration is always optional. Anybody who wants to register can. Certain people below the VAT threshold register because it makes sense due to the nature of their businesses.

Ireland is among those countries with the highest VAT registration thresholds. Our nearest neighbour, the UK, traditionally maintains its thresholds at a high level and has the highest level in the EU at £61,000. As I stated, such high thresh-

holds bring their difficulties. They can give rise to distortion in competition between those just below the threshold and those just above it. This distortion effect is exaggerated the higher the threshold is set.

It is considered the increases proposed in the budget today are more than adequate to give small start-up companies breathing space and an opportunity to achieve a foothold in the market before their turnovers reach the level which requires them to register and account for VAT. The threshold also caters for small businesses operating on a part-time or hobby basis. For various reasons, including the sporadic nature of their activities or the seasonal nature of their markets, such businesses often experience difficulties in complying with VAT accounting requirements in a consistent way. From Revenue's point of view, it makes sense to give a degree of latitude to those firms.

Some countries in the EU have no VAT registration threshold. It must be charged and that is it. To give the House an example, Ireland has thresholds of €35,000 and €70,000. Italy has no threshold. I mentioned the UK which has a threshold of £61,000, equivalent to €86,000. The gross averaging out of EU member states without being weighted is €17,212 for services and €21,000 for goods. We are certainly way above the average which makes sense.

Regarding what Deputy Cassidy stated, it is important to note this is not merely a Revenue convenience measure. The small business forum demanded this. It pressed its case strongly and was heard. We should acknowledge the case was made and heard at committees of this House. Deputy Cassidy presided at meetings where these issues arose. It is important to note the Government listened to the voice of small business on this issue.

Regarding agriculture, the changes in VAT were strongly canvassed by farming organisations. I pay tribute to the Ministers for Finance and Agriculture and Food for the way in which they listened carefully to those representations and acted on them. The question was asked whether the review which has been ongoing for some time is likely to come to a conclusion. I am informed by my colleague the Minister for Agriculture and Food, Deputy Coughlan, that it will do so in the relatively near future. We will have certainty arising from that review.

**Mr. Naughten:** We will have it next year so.

**Mary Coughlan:** You or me?

**Mr. Naughten:** Me.

**Mr. McDowell:** General consensus exists in the House that these resolutions should be passed. Generally speaking, they are an ease for small

[Mr. McDowell.]

businesses, be they agricultural or non-agricultural. It is part of building an enterprising society in Ireland and reducing the burden of the State on small-scale economic activity. In all circumstances, the Minister for Finance is to be greatly complimented for the pro-business, pro-enterprise and pro-farming nature of the budget he tendered before the House today.

**Deputies:** Hear, hear.

Financial Resolution No. 4 agreed to.

**Financial Resolution No. 5: Value-Added Tax.**

**Mr. McDowell:** I move:

(1) THAT the rate of flat-rate addition to the consideration in respect of the supply of agricultural produce or an agricultural service by a flat-rate farmer be increased from 4.8 per cent to 5.2 per cent, and that, accordingly, section 12A (inserted by the Value-Added Tax (Amendment) Act 1978 (No. 34 of 1978)) of the Value-Added Tax Act (No. 22 of 1972) be amended in subsection (1) by substituting “5.2

per cent” for “4.8 per cent” (inserted by the Finance Act 2005 (No. 5 of 2005)).

(2) THAT this Resolution shall have effect as on and from 1 January 2007.

(3) IT is hereby declared that it is expedient in the public interest that this Resolution shall have statutory effect under the provisions of the Provisional Collection of Taxes Act 1927 (No. 7 of 1927).

Financial Resolution No. 5 agreed to.

**Financial Resolution No. 6: General.**

**Mr. McDowell:** I move Financial Resolution No. 6:

THAT it is expedient to amend the law relating to inland revenue (including value-added tax and excise) and to make further provision in connection with finance.

Debate adjourned.

The Dáil adjourned at 9.05 p.m. until 10.30 a.m. on Thursday, 7 December 2006.

## Written Answers.

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**The following are questions tabled by Members for written response and the ministerial replies as received on the day from the Departments [unrevised].**

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*Questions Nos. 1 to 4, inclusive, answered orally.*

*Questions Nos. 5 to 28, inclusive, resubmitted.*

*Questions Nos. 29 to 37, inclusive, answered orally.*

### Light Rail Project.

38. **Mr. Allen** asked the Minister for Transport if the route for the joining of the two existing Luas lines has been selected; if this project will begin and be completed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41746/06]

**Minister for Transport (Mr. Cullen):** The Railway Procurement Agency (RPA) began a public consultation on five potential routes for connecting the two existing Luas lines in November 2005. I understand that the RPA plans to publish a further consultation document in the New Year outlining how all of the route options compare.

I also understand that the RPA is engaged in dialogue with Dublin City Council, Dublin Bus and the Dublin Transportation Office in relation to the implications of the potential routes for bus services and other road users. Subject to a satisfactory outcome to those discussions and the public consultation, the RPA expects to identify a preferred option in the coming months and following this an application for a Railway Order will be made.

The construction timescale will be dependent on the route chosen following the public consultation and the discussions with stakeholders, and on the outcome of the statutory approval process. A second stage of this project will extend the line to Liffey Junction via Grangegorm and Broadstone. Subject to an enforceable Railway Order,

the scheduled completion date for the overall project is 2012.

It is important to ensure that this project can be implemented in a way which gives appropriate priority on the road network for both Luas and bus services, while also delivering on the objective of creating an integrated public transport network by linking the two existing Luas lines and extending that link to interchange with the Maynooth and Navan suburban rail services.

### Rail Network.

39. **Mr. Kenny** asked the Minister for Transport if Irish Rail will expand its use of the Phoenix Park tunnel; if he will discuss this issue with Irish Rail; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41767/06]

**Minister for Transport (Mr. Cullen):** The Phoenix Park Tunnel is an existing railway line connecting Heuston Station with Connolly Station and North Wall Freight Yard. I am informed by Iarnród Éireann that the line is in good condition and is in regular use for freight services and transfer of rolling stock. The line is also occasionally used for passenger trains for major sporting events at Croke Park e.g. football and hurling All Ireland finals when trains from Cork and Kerry go direct to Connolly Station.

The railway line is not used for commuter services from the South West or as a commuter link between Heuston Station and Connolly Station because it would not be possible to accommodate additional peak train services into Connolly Station. The lines into and out of Connolly Station are already at full capacity and any additional capacity created in the future will be needed to cater for growth on the DART, Northern Suburban and Maynooth lines. Connections between Heuston Station and Connolly

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Station are provided by LUAS and Dublin Bus services.

Iarnród Éireann regards the Interconnector tunnel as the best option for providing additional cross city capacity. Approval has been granted for design development for the Interconnector alignment and its proposed station locations and layouts. This is expected to be completed in mid 2007.

The new city centre rail station being constructed in the Docklands area will provide additional capacity on the Maynooth line, pending the construction of the proposed Interconnector tunnel.

### Public Transport.

40. **Mr. Crowe** asked the Minister for Transport if he will accept CIÉ's request for increases in fares across its train and bus network. [41672/06]

102. **Mr. S. Ryan** asked the Minister for Transport his views on the application by CIÉ for a 9% increase in fares for 2007; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41661/06]

117. **Mr. Wall** asked the Minister for Transport the role of his Department in relation to the setting of bus and rail fares; his strategy in relation to incentivising public transport uptake through the fare system; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41622/06]

**Minister for Transport (Mr. Cullen):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 40, 102 and 117 together.

The standard single fare charged by the CIÉ companies, and by the Railway Procurement Agency in respect of LUAS is, based on custom and practice, subject to control by me. CIÉ has applied for an average increase in 2007 of 9% in Iarnród Éireann and Bus Éireann fares and a 10% increase in Bus Átha Cliath fares. CIÉ has based its application on a projected 6% increase in costs in 2007, plus a 3%-4% increase to meet historical fuel cost increases over recent years which CIÉ contend have not been adequately dealt with in previous fare increases.

CIÉ's application is currently under consideration in my Department and I intend to announce a decision in the matter shortly. My objective in relation to public transport fares is, taking account of underlying cost factors and inflation, to secure a good balance between anticipated revenues, cost control and compensation for loss making services by way of Exchequer subvention so that public transport is an attractive option for the travelling public and the public transport companies operate on a sound financial basis.

The detailed design of fare structures, including promotional and incentive fares, is a matter for the public transport companies. All three CIÉ companies use discounted fares of various types,

including the tax saver annual and monthly ticket scheme, to promote the use of public transport.

### Greenhouse Gas Emissions.

41. **Ms B. Moynihan-Cronin** asked the Minister for Transport the action he is taking through vehicle standards, road pricing, public transport provision or otherwise to reduce carbon dioxide emissions from the transport sector here; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41653/06]

66. **Mr. Naughten** asked the Minister for Transport if he will initiate discussions with companies selling cars here to see if they will commit to selling at least flexfuel model in their respective line ups at a price comparable to regular petrol version as has been promised by French motor companies; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41789/06]

94. **Mr. Noonan** asked the Minister for Transport the specific measures being pursued by his Department to encourage commuters to adopt more sustainable means of travel and transport; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41760/06]

**Minister for Transport (Mr. Cullen):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 41, 66 and 94 together.

My Department's principal contribution towards improving the sustainability of transport is through a range of Transport 21 investments. Transport 21 will provide unprecedented levels of funding for public transport over the next ten years, and represents a major rebalancing of investment in favour of public transport, which will facilitate modal shift towards public transport. Increased public transport use and the provision of an alternative to the private car remains a fundamental objective of the public transport investment programme.

Investment under the National Development Plan in recent years has funded a major expansion in the capacity of commuter rail and bus services. Total investment in CIÉ operated transport services over the period 2002-2005 amounted to €2.24 billion.

Under Transport 21 public transport capacity is set to almost double over the period of this investment programme. A high level of investment in rail and bus services will be maintained and will total approximately €16 billion for public transport throughout the country. The capital provision for public transport in 2007 is a record €777 million. This investment will result in a further expansion of public transport capacity.

Transport 21 provides funding for other sustainable transport initiatives. The purpose of these initiatives is to make cleaner, more environmentally-friendly vehicles available, within public transport, the haulage industry and taxis. These initiatives include pilot projects for biofuel and

hybrid-electric technologies, and eco-driving. My Department will be engaging with the relevant sectors to progress these initiatives. We are also providing significant financial and other support for a range of traffic management initiatives, including bus priority and the provision of improved facilities for cycling and walking.

The continued development of the national road programme, under Transport 21, makes a positive contribution by improving the road network. This allows traffic flow more freely and efficiently, so reducing traffic congestion and helping to limit emissions.

Specific measures in relation to improving private car fuel efficiency are being tackled in the context of European Union transport policy. Many of the issues can best be approached from a European or even an international perspective rather than addressing specific car suppliers in individual Member States.

Europe has a specific strategy to reduce CO<sub>2</sub> emissions from passenger cars. As part of this strategy Ireland supports the EU Voluntary Agreements negotiated between the European Commission and the international motor industry aimed at achieving emission reductions through designing efficiency improvements into new vehicles. According to the European Commission's most recent annual report on the impact of the voluntary agreements, in 2004 CO<sub>2</sub> emissions from new cars, at 161g of CO<sub>2</sub>/km, were 12.4 % below 1995 levels. The Community objective under the strategy is to reach an emission level of 120 g of CO<sub>2</sub>/km by 2012 at the latest.

In support for that strategy, it is a requirement that all new vehicles registered in Ireland conform to the EU Type-Approval System emissions standards. Furthermore, as part of the periodic compulsory roadworthiness testing schemes, vehicles are examined to ensure that they comply with the emissions standards.

The European Commission is currently reviewing that strategy and the options available to further reduce CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. The revised strategy, which will be subject to an impact assessment, will be based on an integrated approach to reduce CO<sub>2</sub> emissions from cars, involving the various stakeholders and will examine car technology, fuels, infrastructure and driver behaviour.

It is generally recognised that the achievement of significant emission reductions in the transport sector is difficult even in a low growth scenario, but it is particularly so given the strong economic growth and growing population scenario that is the case in Ireland. In this context, my Department remains committed to delivering a sustainable transport sector that will support Ireland's economic, social and environmental aspirations now and in the future.

#### **Rail Network.**

42. **Mr. Perry** asked the Minister for Transport

when the route for Metro West will be decided; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41776/06]

**Minister for Transport (Mr. Cullen):** Transport 21, which was launched late last year, includes Metro West, linking Tallaght, Clondalkin, Liffey Valley and Blanchardstown to Metro North. The RPA, in consultation with South Dublin and Fingal County Councils and other key stakeholders, have identified two appropriate route corridors for Metro West between its terminus at Tallaght and its connection with Metro North.

I launched the public consultation process for Metro West on 22nd November last. 50,000 newsletters will be circulated to households and other interested parties along the proposed routes as part of this consultation. The newsletter contains a map showing the two broad corridor options and an assessment of each of these options.

The RPA will consult widely with people living and working along the proposed routes, public representatives, agencies and local authorities. This process gives people an opportunity to express their views and have these views taken into account in the implementation of the project.

The route finally selected may be a variant or combination of the route options or other options identified during consultation. It is expected that a preferred alignment will be identified in 2007. Once an emerging preferred route option has been identified, RPA will prepare an Outline Business Case seeking approval to proceed with a Railway Order application.

#### **Driving Tests.**

43. **Mr. M. Higgins** asked the Minister for Transport his strategy in relation to the commencement of section 10 of the Road Traffic Act 2006; the target in the average number of weeks wait for a driving test at which point he will commence this section; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41650/06]

**Minister for Transport (Mr. Cullen):** Under the Road Safety Authority Act 2006 (Conferral of Functions) Order 2006 (S.I. No. 477 of 2006) the Road Safety Authority has responsibility for the oversight of the operation of the driver licensing system. Section 10 of the Road Traffic Act 2006 re-enacts existing enabling provisions which apply to provisional licences so that they apply to learner permits. The section also provides that regulations may require learner drivers to undergo a course of instruction. This provision will, in particular, facilitate the introduction of compulsory basic training of motorcyclists.

The section also provides that a period may be specified, following the granting of a learner permit, during which a learner driver may not apply for a driving test. This is intended to ensure that there will be a minimum period during which a

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learner driver has to undergo instruction before being allowed to apply for a test.

The commencement of this section will be considered in the context of a package of recommendations in relation to driver licensing reform which I am expecting to receive shortly from the Road Safety Authority and having regard to the progress that the Authority makes in dealing with the driver testing backlog.

#### Departmental Agencies.

44. **Mr. Eamon Ryan** asked the Minister for Transport when he expects to establish the new Dublin Transport Authority; the powers the authority will have to issue directions to CIÉ companies in relation to the public transport services they provide and the procurement measures they follow. [41703/06]

61. **Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin** asked the Minister for Transport if he will extend the 1 December 2006 deadline for submissions on the proposed Dublin Transport Authority as requested by one of the transport unions, the NBRU. [41674/06]

62. **Ms Burton** asked the Minister for Transport the way he proposes to ensure that the proposed Dublin Transport Authority is fully accountable. [41664/06]

67. **Mr. Boyle** asked the Minister for Transport the way he will absorb the Dublin Transportation Office within the new Dublin Transport Authority; the arrangements that will be made for existing staff within the Dublin Transportation Office; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41705/06]

76. **Mr. Gogarty** asked the Minister for Transport the measures that will be in place to ensure that land use planning will be co-ordinated with future transport plans which will be set by the Dublin Transport Authority; and the sanctions that will be available to the new authority if local authority development plans, local area plans or individual planning applications run contrary to transport planning objectives. [41709/06]

80. **Mr. G. Murphy** asked the Minister for Transport when the chairperson and board of the Dublin Transport Authority will be appointed; if he intends that they will operate in shadow format pending the passage of enabling legislation; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41742/06]

93. **Mr. Kehoe** asked the Minister for Transport the location from which the expertise required to perform the work undertaken by the Dublin Transportation Office will be acquired to validate the many extensive and complex transport projects planned over the next ten years. [41785/06]

100. **Mr. Coveney** asked the Minister for Transport if the legislation to formally establish the Dublin Transport Authority will be introduced before the Christmas 2006 recess; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41743/06]

116. **Ms O. Mitchell** asked the Minister for Transport if he will reconsider the recommendation to completely disband the Dublin Transportation Office in view of its vast experience, expertise and unique skills in traffic forecasting and planning. [41784/06]

132. **Mr. Perry** asked the Minister for Transport the role which the proposed Dublin Transport Authority will have in relation to land usage in the greater Dublin area; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41775/06]

135. **Mr. McGinley** asked the Minister for Transport if he has held discussions with both the DTO and the Railway Procurement Agency in relation to their future status and function once the Dublin Transport Authority is established; the issues which emerged from such discussions; the actions his Department intends to pursue to overcome the concerns of both bodies; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41747/06]

140. **Mr. Eamon Ryan** asked the Minister for Transport the reason he is considering disbanding the Rail Procurement Agency and including its role within the proposed Dublin Transport Authority; the reason he has not taken a similar position with regard to the National Roads Authority; and the terms and conditions that will apply for RPA staff who transfer to the new authority. [41704/06]

**Minister for Transport (Mr. Cullen):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 44, 61, 62, 67, 76, 80, 93, 100, 116, 132, 135 and 140 together.

I published the report of the Dublin Transport Authority Establishment Team on the 9th of November. I sought the views of interested parties on the proposed structure, functions and powers of the Authority before I finalised the legislation to establish the Authority on a statutory basis. Officials in my Department have held meetings with a wide range of interested parties. A number of written submissions have also been made to my Department. I have indicated to all interested parties that it is not my intention that all consultation will come to an end in early December. However, I am anxious to finalise the drafting of legislation and in this context I am seeking to identify the core objectives and concerns of interested parties in relation to a Dublin Transport Authority. There will continue to be opportunities to address matters of detailed concern, as is normal practice, following the publication of legislation.

I now intend to take the opportunity to reflect on the views expressed and concerns raised during the consultation process before finalising my legislative proposals. These include the issues raised in the Deputies' Questions. It would be premature and unfair to those who participated in the consultation process to comment on issues or concerns raised by them during the process. It remains my intention to publish legislation at the earliest opportunity, having regard to matters raised during consultations, and to enact the legislation in the lifetime of the current Dáil.

Regarding the accountability of the Authority, a number of recommendations have been made in the report of the Establishment Team in this regard. Their recommendations include making the Authority accountable to the Oireachtas and the establishment of an Advisory Council representing a diverse range of interests. I am confident that these and other measures under consideration will provide an effective accountability framework for the new Authority.

As I have stated previously, the Team's report made a number of recommendations on the integration of transport and land use planning. The Government accepted the objective of the proposals made by the Team, which was to ensure a coherent approach to land use and transport planning in the Greater Dublin Area. However, it was concerned that the proposals contained in the report would unnecessarily dilute the democratic accountability of the planning process. The Government has, therefore, decided to adopt an alternative approach to meeting the objective of the Team on the lines jointly recommended by my colleague Dick Roche T.D., the Minister for Environment, Heritage and Local Government, and myself. Details of the proposed arrangements are available within the statement I issued when publishing the Team's report on the 9th of November.

I am actively examining the appointment of an interim chairperson and the establishment of an interim Authority. The interim Authority will be mandated to progress the putting in place of necessary organisational arrangements, such as the recruitment of a senior management team, prior to the enactment of legislation. It is not envisaged that the interim Authority will seek to discharge substantive functions pending the enactment of legislation to provide statutory authority for its work.

#### **Road Signage.**

45. **Ms McManus** asked the Minister for Transport the amount provided for road signage in the Book of Estimates 2007. [41647/06]

**Minister for Transport (Mr. Cullen):** My Department is responsible for policy and funding issues in relation to national roads only. National roads account for 5% of the overall Irish road network. Matters, including signage, relating to

non-national roads are a matter for my colleague the Minister for Environment Heritage and Local Government and Local Authorities. The responsibility for road signage on national roads rests with for the National Roads Authority (NRA) under section 19(1)(c) of the Roads Act 1993.

However, I understand from the NRA that in 2007 they plan to allocate €13 million to the provision of road signage. This funding is provided out of the road construction sub-head (B.1.1) published in the Book of Estimates. This reflects the fact that most road signage is provided during the construction phase of national road schemes.

#### **Road Safety.**

46. **Mr. Timmins** asked the Minister for Transport when the new road safety strategy will be implemented; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41774/06]

**Minister for Transport (Mr. Cullen):** The Government Road Safety Strategy 2004-2006 sets a primary target of a 25% reduction in road collision fatalities by the end of 2006 over the average annual number of fatalities in the 1998-2003 period. This was always an ambitious target and one that required the continued commitment to a strategic, integrated approach by all of the road safety agencies.

Significant initiatives identified in the Strategy that have been realised to date include the introduction of a new system of metric speed limits, the further extension of the operation of the penalty point and fixed charge systems from April 2006, and, the establishment of the Garda Traffic Corps. The Corps, provides the basis for the achievement of the significant gains in road safety that emanate from consistent high levels of traffic law enforcement.

Other major proposals identified, such as the plans to establish a system of private sector operation of speed cameras under the auspices of the Gardaí, are well advanced.

The Road Traffic Act 2006 has been enacted and a number of key measures commenced. These include the provision to combat drink driving through enabling roadside Mandatory Alcohol Testing (MAT) and a ban on the use of hand-held mobile phones while driving. We are making progress across the wide range of initiatives identified in the current Strategy, which is now coming to an end, and I am satisfied that all of the agencies involved are fully committed to the achievement of the goals that underpin the Strategy.

The Road Safety Authority (RSA) is responsible for the preparation and submission to me for my approval of the next Road Safety Strategy which will commence in 2007. The RSA went out to public consultation in October and I understand they have received a substantial number of suggestions and proposals as a result of this pro-



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cess. The Authority will also be engaging directly in the coming weeks with the relevant stakeholders. It is expected that the Strategy will be finalised and presented to me for approval in the first quarter of 2007.

#### Road Network.

47. **Mr. Durkan** asked the Minister for Transport the extent to which traffic surveys have been undertaken with a view to determination of the extent to which the port tunnel is expected to relieve or exacerbate traffic flows on the M50 or other approach roads to Dublin city from all directions; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41624/06]

59. **Mr. Cuffe** asked the Minister for Transport the role his Department has had in the devising of a new traffic management regime for the opening of the port tunnel; the city centre travel restrictions that will apply on trucks exiting the port; and the enforcement measures that will ensure trucks use the port tunnel rather than the existing road network to access the port. [41708/06]

146. **Ms O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Transport the action he has taken directly or in assisting the National Roads Authority and the local authorities to manage the large increase in traffic on the M50 when the port tunnel opens in December 2006. [41641/06]

257. **Mr. Callely** asked the Minister for Transport the works that have been identified which will be required to be carried out to the approach roads of the northern portal of the Dublin port tunnel; the schedule for such work; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41855/06]

**Minister for Transport (Mr. Cullen):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 47, 59, 146 and 257 together.

I refer the Deputies to my reply to Priority Question No. 30.

#### Departmental Agencies.

48. **Ms O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Transport the directions he has made to the National Roads Authority under section 41 of the Roads Act 1993 since coming into office. [41642/06]

**Minister for Transport (Mr. Cullen):** I have not issued any directions to the National Roads Authority under this Section of the 1993 Act since I took up office in this Department.

#### Road Network.

49. **Mr. Gormley** asked the Minister for Transport the tolling arrangements being devised for the West Link bridge on the M50 following the

possible buy-out of the tolling concession held by the existing operators and the stated aim to extend the toll to 2035 to pay for the second phase of the upgrade of the M50; the expected level of toll that will be introduced; the private sector involvement planned; and the technology that will apply for collecting the toll. [41711/06]

**Minister for Transport (Mr. Cullen):** At the outset, I should explain that overall responsibility for the planning, design and implementation of national road improvement projects, including the M50 Upgrade, is a matter for the National Roads Authority (NRA) and the local authorities concerned. I have no function in relation to the day-to-day operation of these projects.

In addition, the statutory power to levy tolls on national roads, to make toll bye-laws and to enter into toll agreements with private investors in respect of national roads, including the M50, is vested in the National Roads Authority (NRA) under Part V of the Roads Act 1993 (as amended by the Planning and Development Act 2000).

As the Deputy is aware, last January, for commercial and strategic reasons, the National Roads Authority (NRA) decided to end the arrangement with National Toll Roads plc (NTR) that has been in place under an agreement entered into in 1987 for the collection of tolls at West-Link up to 2020. Instead, the NRA is separately procuring a single point barrier free toll system which will become operational in quarter 3 of 2008. This will coincide with the completion of Phase 1 of the upgrade of the M50 — the section between the N4 and the Ballymount interchanges.

It is intended that the M50 Free Flow contract will be awarded in February 2007 and will involve an eight year contract to provide for the design, implementation and operation of the free flow tolling arrangements. At the end of this period, the NRA will have the option to extend the contract for a further three years or to re-advertise for a new operator.

I understand that the toll revenue from the barrier-free single point toll will be used to fund Phase 2 and Phase 3 of the M50 upgrade and the cost of introducing barrier free tolling as well as the costs of terminating NTR's West-Link contract.

With regard to the level of tolls that will be introduced when the new system becomes operational in 2008, the NRA advise that the toll levels will be comparable to current levels (indexed linked) and there will not be more than one tolling location. The NRA intend to submit proposals for the barrier free toll arrangement for Government consideration in due course.

I understand from the NRA that barrier-free tolling will be achieved by an electronic toll collection system, which allows for tolling without vehicles having to stop or even slow down. Under the new system, the identification of vehicles will

be facilitated by Automated Vehicle Identification technology and an automatic number plate recognition system (i.e., video enforcement) with users availing of either pre or post payment means. Automated toll collection in a barrier free environment can deliver an improved level of service by increasing the throughput capability of a toll plaza and reducing queues.

I recently sought and obtained Government approval for the drafting of the necessary legislation to support the enforcement of tolls under the planned free-flow tolling arrangements. I hope to bring the Bill before the Oireachtas early next year.

### Departmental Expenditure.

50. **Mr. Cuffe** asked the Minister for Transport the reason for a shortfall of €101.3 million in capital spending within the 2006 transport budget; the specific projects that did not use up their spending target; when did he become aware that there would be a shortfall in spending in each case; the reason the spending was transferred to the roads budget; and when the need for such additional spending in the roads budget was made apparent. [41707/06]

52. **Mr. Deasy** asked the Minister for Transport the reason unspent moneys allocated to be spent on public transport projects in 2006 will now be transferred to be spent on road projects; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41779/06]

**Minister for Transport (Mr. Cullen):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 50 and 52 together.

I have reassigned €101.3 million from the 2006 Transport 21 public transport allocation due to a projected underspend in this area. These funds have been transferred to the national roads budget for 2006 to allow an acceleration of their Transport 21 programme. The amount transferred will be recovered from the national road allocation over the course of Transport 21, as required. This demonstrates the value of the ten year capital envelope which permits the active management of the overall Transport 21 allocations throughout the year.

Various factors which were outside the control of the implementing agencies have led to the underspend in public transport. The Luas extensions to Cherrywood and the Docklands and the Iarnród Éireann Kildare Route project are at Railway Order stage. At the beginning of the year, it was anticipated that the Railway Order process in respect of these projects would have been concluded and that construction would have commenced, with a consequent drawdown of Exchequer funding. The Railway Order processes did not proceed as quickly as anticipated when the original allocations were made. In addition, the Cherrywood project is the subject of a judicial review.

However, preparations are continuing to bring these projects to construction at the earliest date. Subject to an enforceable Railway Order, construction will commence on the Kildare Route and Docklands projects early in 2007, while progress on Cherrywood must await the outcome of the judicial review. The rate of development of the Quality Bus Corridor programme by the local authorities has also been slower than planned. These factors have resulted in a reduction of €101.3 million in the public transport allocation.

The Department reviews progress on the investment programmes with its agencies on a monthly basis and the results of these reviews are used to update financial allocations on an ongoing basis. Funds were reassigned to the roads budget first in June and again in October 2006 and November 2006, based on regular monthly reviews of spending.

The roads programme for 2006 was implemented at a faster rate than anticipated. Good weather over the summer months accelerated construction so that completion dates for key phases of certain projects were brought forward. The funds available for reallocation from the public transport programme were transferred to the roads programme so that work could continue on an accelerated basis.

The allocation of the additional funding to the roads programme has allowed for accelerated construction work on certain schemes. In particular, the N8 Cashel to Mitchelstown scheme was able to move forward at a much faster construction rate that would have been possible without additional funding. In addition, land acquisition was accelerated on a number of motorway projects. The additional expenditure on land acquisition this year reduces the amount of land payments required on these projects in later years.

### Traffic Management.

51. **Mr. Ferris** asked the Minister for Transport if he has proposals to include new projects to relieve urban congestion in Transport 21. [41677/06]

**Minister for Transport (Mr. Cullen):** Transport 21 provides funding for measures to relieve urban congestion in a number of ways through the provision of increased public transport services, through investment in improved traffic management systems and through the construction of urban bypasses and relief roads schemes. Each element of the programme will contribute to easing congestion, both in Dublin and in our other urban centres.

Transport 21 will transform the public transport system in the Greater Dublin Area through the development of an integrated network of light rail, Metro, heavy rail and buses running on an expanded Quality Bus Network. This will lead to almost a doubling of public transport passenger journeys by 2015. This together with the upgrad-

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ing of the M50 and new traffic management systems will make a major contribution to reducing congestion in the capital. The establishment of a Dublin Transport Authority will provide a coordinated approach to the issue of traffic management and will, therefore, result in improvements to traffic flow.

On a national level, Transport 21 provides funds to develop public transport in provincial cities and to provide for traffic management schemes including bus priority measures and park and ride facilities. The roads programme includes provision for the bypassing of many towns which greatly reduces congestion. Already the benefits of the bypasses are being enjoyed by towns such as Monaghan, Fermoy and Cavan. With the continued completion of projects under Transport 21, I expect congestion in urban areas to ease on a gradual basis.

*Question No. 52 answered with Question No. 50.*

#### **Road Traffic Offences.**

53. **Mr. Hogan** asked the Minister for Transport if he supports the idea of a dedicated court division to deal specifically with road traffic offences; if he has had discussions with the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform on this issue; the outcome of such discussions; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41734/06]

**Minister for Transport (Mr. Cullen):** This proposal is primarily a matter for my colleague the Minister for Justice and the Courts Service. My officials will liaise with their counterparts in the Department of Justice in relation to the assessment of this proposal.

#### **Public Transport.**

54. **Mr. Callely** asked the Minister for Transport his Department's policy with regard to commuters travelling into the city; the level of public transport services; the number of daily commuters; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41530/06]

75. **Mr. Callely** asked the Minister for Transport the evaluation that has been carried out on the use of the private car as a mode of transport for commuting on a daily basis in the greater Dublin area over the past ten years and the switch from a private car to public transport; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41529/06]

**Minister for Transport (Mr. Cullen):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 54 and 75 together.

Policies to promote public transport over the private car were set out in the final report of the Dublin Transport Initiative in 1994 and in the

Dublin Transportation Office (DTO) transport strategy "A Platform for Change", which was published in 2001. The National Development Plans 1994 to 1999, and 2000 to 2006 also placed a particular emphasis on investing in expanding the capacity of our public transport systems to reduce the reliance on private car. The numbers travelling on public transport have significantly increased as a result of the major investments that have been made under the National Development Plans, against the background of significant increases in car ownership levels.

A significant focus of Transport 21, the Government's 10-year capital investment framework for transport, published in November 2005, is to transform the level and quality of public transport services in the Greater Dublin Area. TRANSPORT 21 ring-fenced some €13bn for delivery of a set of public transport projects, broadly drawn from A Platform for Change, in the GDA. TRANSPORT 21 provides funding for major suburban rail, Luas, Metro, and bus projects which will have the result of significantly increasing coverage of the region by public transport networks.

At present, some 200 million passenger journeys are made annually on public transport alone in the Greater Dublin Area. This is set to increase to 375 million by the end of Transport 21.

#### **Road Safety.**

55. **Mr. Allen** asked the Minister for Transport when he will act upon the proposals for reform of the regulations which apply to provisional and inexperienced drivers presented to him by the Road Safety Authority; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41739/06]

**Minister for Transport (Mr. Cullen):** I refer the Deputy to my reply to priority questions 1 and 2 on the 2 November in which I indicated that the RSA has submitted to me a range of proposals with a particular focus on licensing reform and on targeting drivers between 17 and 24 years old.

I share the concern of the RSA Board about the high risk factors of death and serious injury to this particular category of drivers. I have met with the Chief Executive Officer of the RSA to discuss the proposals. I have now asked that the Authority come back to me as soon as possible with a structured approach to a complete transition, with time lines, from the current regime of provisional licences to a regime of learner permits and restricted category drivers and related learner/driver formation arrangements. I know that such a complete transition will take time, but that there is great potential for saving young lives in this approach.

#### **Rail Services.**

56. **Ms B. Moynihan-Cronin** asked the Minister for Transport the feasibility study, cost-benefit

analysis, consultants report or other research he has commissioned since the publication of the strategic rail review on the possibility of a subsidy for rail freight here; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41654/06]

85. **Mr. Noonan** asked the Minister for Transport his views on the development of the rail freight industry; the measures he will pursue to achieve this purpose; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41761/06]

**Minister for Transport (Mr. Cullen):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 56 and 85 together.

I refer the Deputies to my reply of the 2nd November, 2006 to Dail Question Nos. 41, 77 and 79. My Department has not commissioned any further study or research on the possibility of providing a subsidy for rail freight.

#### Traffic Management.

57. **Mr. Crowe** asked the Minister for Transport his views on the recent Greater Dublin Area Transport Survey 2006; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41671/06]

**Minister for Transport (Mr. Cullen):** The recent Greater Dublin Area (GDA) travel survey was carried out by Millward Brown IMS on behalf of the Dublin Transportation Office (DTO). The survey field work was undertaken between the months of March and July of this year and some 2,500 households in the counties of Dublin, Kildare, Meath and Wicklow participated. The survey procedure involved a face-to-face interview with a selected household member and the completion of a seven day Travel Diary by members of the household aged 11+ years.

The survey highlights more than ever the need to upgrade public transport in the Greater Dublin Area to reduce dependence on the private car, which is one of the aims of the TRANSPORT 21 Investment Programme.

#### Road Safety.

58. **Mr. Crawford** asked the Minister for Transport when he will introduce mandatory basic training for motorcyclists; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41736/06]

**Minister for Transport (Mr. Cullen):** I refer the Deputy to my reply to Question No. 8 on the 2 November. Under the Road Safety Authority Act 2006 (Conferral of Functions) Order 2006 (S.I. No. 477 of 2006) the Road Safety Authority has responsibility for the oversight of the operation of the driver licensing system including the preparation of proposals for draft regulatory provisions relating to driver licensing and testing. In this context the Road Safety Authority is responsible for bringing forward proposals for the introduction of compulsory initial practical training for motorcyclists.

However, a prerequisite for the introduction of such training is the availability and registration of motorcycle instructors. The Road Safety Authority is responsible for registering driving instructors. A consultation document published jointly by my Department and the RSA last May set out proposals for the registration of driving instructors and invited submissions to be made by the 8 September. These submissions are being considered by the RSA. New instructors are to be registered from 1 July 2007 and it is intended that all instructors will be registered by the 1 July 2008.

*Question No. 59 answered with Question No. 47.*

#### Road Traffic Offences.

60. **Mr. Coveney** asked the Minister for Transport if he has discussed the roll-out of the remaining penalty point offences with the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform; if this remains a priority; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41741/06]

68. **Mr. Howlin** asked the Minister for Transport when he will bring the full list of penalty point categories into force; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41657/06]

**Minister for Transport (Mr. Cullen):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 60 and 68 together.

The roll-out of the penalty points system to the range of offences set out in the Schedules to the Road Traffic Act 2002 was commenced in October 2002 in respect of speeding offences. It was progressed further in 2003 to cover driving without insurance and non-wearing of safety belt offences and extended in 2004 in respect of the offence of careless driving.

The range of penalty point offences was significantly extended from 3 April 2006 with the addition of 31 new offences. The most recent extension was in September 2006 to bring the offence of holding a mobile phone while driving within the ambit of the system. The total number of offences to which the penalty point system now applies is 36.

The focus of the roll-out of the penalty points system to date is on offences that relate primarily to the behaviour of drivers. This reflects the fact that 86% of all road deaths can be attributed to driver behaviour in its broadest sense.

The relevant support systems must be put in place to support the extension of the penalty points system, and where applicable, the fixed charge system. Discussions are held in advance with the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform and other agencies regarding the timing of each scheduled roll-out of new offences to ensure that the relevant interfaces are in place between the Garda Síochána and the Court Services IT systems, and, the Department of the

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Environment, Heritage and Local Government who hold and administer the National Driving File.

The progressive extension of the penalty point system will continue to be pursued but I have no definitive timeframe at this point in relation to the remaining offences.

*Questions Nos. 61 and 62 answered with Question No. 44.*

### Traffic Management.

63. **Mr. Quinn** asked the Minister for Transport his policy in relation to the use of bus lanes by motorcyclists; and the road safety research this policy is based upon. [41627/06]

79. **Mr. Morgan** asked the Minister for Transport if he has reviewed the proposal to allow motorcycles to use bus lanes. [41680/06]

130. **Mr. Hogan** asked the Minister for Transport his proposals in relation to permitting motorcyclists use bus lanes; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41735/06]

145. **Ms Lynch** asked the Minister for Transport his proposals to amend regulations to allow hackneys to use bus lanes; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41628/06]

**Minister for Transport (Mr. Cullen):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 63, 79, 130 and 145 together.

The use of bus lanes is provided for in the Road Traffic (Traffic & Parking) Regulations 1997 and 1998. The primary purpose of bus lanes is to facilitate and promote bus based public transport. The regulations, which have national application, generally limit the use of bus lanes to buses and, in the case of with-flow bus lanes, to cyclists also.

Having regard to the role of taxis in providing an on-street immediate hire service, an exemption to the restriction relating to the use of with-flow bus lanes is allowed in respect of taxis when they are being used in the course of business. Many representations have been received by my Department seeking to extend access to bus lanes in relation to a wide range of other road users including hackneys. A review of the access issue was carried out in 2001 and took account of the physical characteristics of the vehicles seeking access. The result of that review was to maintain the existing position.

Earlier this year, the Road Safety Authority carried out and presented to my Department some research in relation to motorcycle safety and proposed that the issue of allowing motorcyclists access to bus lanes on a pilot scheme basis be examined. Following consultation with the other

relevant agencies, it has been decided to proceed to the detailed specification of pilot schemes.

### Road Traffic Offences.

64. **Ms O. Mitchell** asked the Minister for Transport when drug driving testing will be introduced on roads here; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [36317/06]

114. **Dr. Twomey** asked the Minister for Transport when he will introduce measures to randomly check drivers for illegal drugs usage; the tests he will use; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [36329/06]

**Minister for Transport (Mr. Cullen):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 64 and 114 together.

It is illegal to drive while under the influence of drugs to such an extent as to be incapable of having proper control of a vehicle. The Road Traffic Acts provides that a member of the Garda Síochána may, where he or she is of the opinion that a person in charge of a mechanically propelled vehicle in a public place is under the influence of a drug or drugs to such an extent as to be incapable of having proper control of that vehicle, require that person to go to a Garda station and further require that person submit to a blood test or to provide a urine sample.

The Medical Bureau of Road Safety analyses blood and urine specimens received under the Road Traffic Acts for the presence of a drug or drugs. In 2004, 569 specimens were tested for the presence of a drug or drugs. 354 specimens tested positive and 215 were found to be negative for the presence of a drug or drugs.

There is no feasible basis yet in Ireland or in Europe for the introduction of a scheme of preliminary roadside testing for drugs. Testing devices are still in the prototype stages.

At a meeting of the Pompidou Group of the Council of Europe in Strasbourg in July 2006, representatives from all over Europe addressed the issue of random drug testing of drivers at the roadside in the light of the most up to date developments throughout this region.

The Medical Bureau of Road Safety and An Garda Síochána participated in that seminar, which concluded that there is currently no device considered to be reliable enough in order to be recommended for roadside saliva screening of drivers for drugs. The Medical Bureau is keeping abreast of developments in this area.

### Traffic Management.

65. **Mr. Broughan** asked the Minister for Transport the discussions he has had with the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government regarding a joint effort at improving road traffic and planning legislation to curtail the increasing problem of the use of large trucks of several axles to deliver to small neighbourhood

shops; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41620/06]

**Minister for Transport (Mr. Cullen):** Statutory responsibility for decisions in relation to the implementation of traffic management measures rests with each individual road authority and similarly the application of planning law is a matter for each planning authority. I have not had discussions with my colleague, the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government on the issue referred to by the Deputy because these are matters that are being pursued at local level rather than at Ministerial level.

*Question No. 66 answered with Question No. 41.*

*Question No. 67 answered with Question No. 44.*

*Question No. 68 answered with Question No. 60.*

#### **Public Transport.**

69. **Ms Shortall** asked the Minister for Transport the way in each case the public service obligation payment for 2006 for Iarnród Éireann, Bus Éireann and Dublin Bus was arrived at; the routes, areas, passenger profile or other category on which the PSO applies; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41623/06]

**Minister for Transport (Mr. Cullen):** Following publication of the 2006 Book of Estimates, which set out the overall provision available for compensation to CIÉ in 2006 in respect of its public service obligation, my Department determined, in consultation with CIÉ, the allocation of the provision between the three CIÉ companies taking into account the needs of each company and plans for the expansion of services. The compensation is not broken down by route, area or passenger traffic.

70. **Mr. Rabbitte** asked the Minister for Transport the funding stream for the provision of quality bus corridors; the amount available in 2007; the amount available under Transport 21; the amount provided in each of the years since 2002 and to date in 2006; the amount drawn down in each of those years; and the persons by whom it was drawn down and the project in relation to same. [41646/06]

**Minister for Transport (Mr. Cullen):** The Department of Transport is the source of funding available to local authorities for provision of Quality Bus Corridors and other traffic management measures. The Dublin Transportation Office and the Cork, Galway, Limerick and Waterford local authorities administer these

grants on behalf of my Department. Allocations for Traffic management grants in the Regional Cities include provision for Bus Priority and Park & Ride in those cities. The amount provided for under the Transport 21 funding package for Traffic Management in the Greater Dublin Area is €599 million over its 10-year life. A further €226 million is provided for bus priority measures, traffic management and park and ride facilities in other cities. The amount made available for Traffic Management grants in the GDA and the Regional Cities was €40.2m in 2002, €46m in 2003, €46.9 in 2004, €45.8 in 2005, and €52m in 2006. The amount in 2007 in the Greater Dublin Area and regional cities is €55million. Draw-downs amounted to €24m in 2002, €45.5m in 2003, €45.3m in 2004, €45.8m in 2005 and €13.2m to date in 2006. This funding was drawn down for a variety of projects by Bray Town Council, Dublin Bus, Dublin City Council, Dun Laoghaire Rathdown County Council, the Dublin Regional Authority, the Dublin Transportation Office, Fingal County Council, Kildare County Council, the Local Government Computer Services Board, Meath County Council, the Office of Public Works, the Quality Bus Network Project Office, South Dublin County Council, An Taisce and Wicklow County Council in the Greater Dublin Area, and Cork City Council, Galway City Council, Galway Co. Council, Limerick City Council, Limerick County Council, and Waterford City Council in the Regional Cities.

Notice of the projects in respect of which this funding was drawn down for the years 2002-2005 has been sent to Deputy Rabbitte. The equivalent data for 2006 is awaited from the local authorities and will be forwarded to the Deputy when received.

#### **Proposed Legislation.**

71. **Mr. Penrose** asked the Minister for Transport the Bills he expects to publish before the end of 2006; and thereafter the Bills he expects to publish before the general election. [41651/06]

**Minister for Transport (Mr. Cullen):** The Government Press Office publishes the Government's planned legislation programme at the beginning of each Dáil session. The Bills published in any one term depend on a range of factors including the demands on Dáil time for other business, requirements for urgent legislation etc. Planned legislation for the next Dáil session will be published by the Government Press Office early in the new year.

#### **Public Transport.**

72. **Mr. O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Transport his views on the absence of dedicated park and ride bus linked facilities that are not a feature of Operation Freeflow 2006; the reason for this

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absence; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41764/06]

141. **Aengus Ó Snodaigh** asked the Minister for Transport if Operation Freeflow will achieve its intended purpose over the festive period. [41676/06]

**Minister for Transport (Mr. Cullen):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 72 and 141 together.

The planning of Operation Freeflow is a matter for the Operation Freeflow Committee, which is chaired by An Garda Síochána and brings together the relevant local authorities and agencies. Operation Freeflow 2006 was launched on 27 November 2006, and runs until 7 January 2007. I understand that, as in previous years, Operation Freeflow includes a range of measures to improve traffic flow in Dublin during the Christmas and New Year period, including the deployment of additional Gardaí on traffic duty in the City.

Operation Freeflow has now been running for over a decade, and has an established record of improving traffic flow at what is the busiest time of the year. I expect it to be of great benefit to people travelling in Dublin during this period this year, as it has been in the past. This year, there are no temporary park and ride facilities provided as part of Operation Freeflow. I understand that the Operation Freeflow Committee was not in favour of including such facilities, as the usage of the facilities provided in the past two years has been extremely low.

73. **Mr. Connaughton** asked the Minister for Transport when he will introduce 100 private sector buses to the Dublin bus market as promised in early 2006; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41750/06]

82. **Ms C. Murphy** asked the Minister for Transport when the second hundred buses identified as being required immediately in the Dublin Bus network review will be provided; if, in view of the identified need for such services, he will outline the reason for the delay in providing funding for buses; if his approval of new licenses to private operators form part of his response to the network review; if the newly licensed routes to be operated by private providers will be subject to the competitive tendering process; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41511/06]

97. **Mr. Rabbitte** asked the Minister for Transport when he expects the 100 private sector operated buses to be fully deployed and operating in Dublin; the areas they will serve; the estimated cost of these buses and services to the Exchequer; and the funding set aside for these buses in the Book of Estimates 2007. [41658/06]

104. **Mr. Bruton** asked the Minister for Transport the role which will be played by the Dublin Transport Authority in relation to the regulation of bus services in the greater Dublin area; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41749/06]

138. **Mr. J. O'Keeffe** asked the Minister for Transport if the bus industry will be opened up to competition in 2007; the measures he has taken to allow this to occur; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41745/06]

**Minister for Transport (Mr. Cullen):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 73, 82, 97, 104 and 138 together.

The Government has made a number of significant decisions in recent times that will provide a solid basis for expanded and improved bus services throughout the country over the coming years. As announced in my statement of 28 September 2006, the Government has decided that the regulation of the bus market and future decisions on the allocation of all public subsidies for bus services in the Greater Dublin Area will be taken by the new Dublin Transport Authority. Legislation to establish the Authority is now at an advanced stage of preparation and a consultative process in line with the commitment under "Towards 2016" is underway.

The DTA will have responsibility for contracting with all operators in the Dublin market. It will also be responsible for monitoring the quality and cost of service by all operators and ensuring value for money on all routes.

Under the Government's transport investment framework—Transport 21—it is anticipated that there will be a requirement in the GDA for an expansion of the number of buses providing scheduled services. This will require at least 200 extra buses over the next two years. The Government has decided to meet this initial requirement by providing up to €30m necessary funding to enable Dublin Bus to buy 100 additional buses. I understand from Dublin Bus that these buses are currently being delivered and they should all be in place by early next year. Their deployment is a matter for the company.

A further 100 buses are to be procured from the private sector by the Dublin Transport Authority to provide services on new routes. This is to be done by way of competitive tendering. This forms part of an initiative to facilitate the entry of private operators, by awarding franchises to operate routes accounting for 15% of the expanded Dublin bus market (approx 200 buses) exclusively to such operators by way of competitive tendering. The question of providing funding for these services does not arise at this juncture nor will the cost to the Exchequer be evident until the tendering process is completed by the DTA.

It is envisaged that the identification of routes for these buses and the award of franchises will be a matter for the DTA. Following this, all new routes will be subject to a competitive tendering process open to all operators. The precise arrangements will be approved by Government on the basis of proposals from the DTA.

New legislation is also being prepared to replace the existing bus licensing regime under the Road Transport Act 1932 with a modern regulatory and licensing regime in line with commitments in the Programme for Government. This new legislation will address a range of issues including improved enforcement arrangements and the introduction of a single licensing code for all bus operators. The new legislation will be designed in a manner consistent with EU law on public service obligations and State aids and in such a way as to create new opportunities for private operator involvement in the bus market.

In advance of the legislation replacing the 1932 Act, my Department will continue to process any applications or notifications for new or amended bus services received from both private and public bus operators under the existing regulatory regime.

#### Road Network.

74. **Mr. Hayes** asked the Minister for Transport when the negotiations regarding the State's purchase of the West Link toll bridge will be completed; if it is intended that the sector of road between the N3 and N4 will also be purchased by the State; if this will form a separate contract; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41778/06]

139. **Mr. Stagg** asked the Minister for Transport the amount provided in the Book of Estimates 2007 for the buy out of the West Link toll bridge; and when he expects same to be drawn down. [41645/06]

**Minister for Transport (Mr. Cullen):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 74 and 139 together.

I refer the Deputy to my response to Question No. 251 which is attached. In relation to the question of a provision in the Book of Estimates for 2007, there is no such provision in the Abridged Estimates & Summary Public Capital Programme, 2007.

*Question No. 75 answered with Question No. 54.*

*Question No. 76 answered with Question No. 44.*

#### Rail Network.

77. **Mr. P. Breen** asked the Minister for Transport if the abandonment of the Metro and Luas line to serve the area between the existing green and red Luas lines in the south Dublin suburbs

was sanctioned by him; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41786/06]

113. **Mr. Timmins** asked the Minister for Transport if he will instruct the Railway Procurement Agency to bring the alignment design for the south side Metro and Luas lines dropped from Platform For Change to a point where it can request local authorities to provide for the land reservations in their development plans; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41787/06]

**Minister for Transport (Mr. Cullen):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 77 and 113 together.

I want to begin by refuting the suggestion that the lines referred to by the Deputy have been abandoned. While Transport 21 involves a very large commitment of financial resources, those resources are also finite. Transport 21 provides funding for the delivery of an extensive rail based network in the period 2006 to 2015. This network is based on the Dublin Transportation Office strategy "A Platform for Change". The Railway Procurement Agency is tasked with the delivery of the Luas and Metro elements of Transport 21. In the short to medium term the RPA is focused on delivering all Luas/Metro projects for which financial support is provided for in Transport 21.

The DTO strategy remains the longer-term strategic framework for transport in the Greater Dublin Area. Funding is provided for feasibility studies on those elements of the "A Platform for Change" which are not included in Transport 21. These include a metro line from Tallaght via Kimmage to the city centre and the proposed Luas line from the city centre to Dundrum via Terenure. The RPA will investigate the feasibility of these suggested projects during the timescale of Transport 21. This work will help define in more detail the corridors to be used for these projects. The Government has already taken decisions on Transport 21 and more particularly on the key elements of an integrated transport network for the Greater Dublin Area, based on a robust professional analysis by the DTO and the relevant transport delivery agencies. Over the past year we have developed a growing momentum on the delivery of this very large investment programme. The reality is that we cannot do everything at once and have to prioritise. However this does not mean that projects that are not scheduled for construction during Transport 21 are off the agenda. Our intention is that feasibility and planning work should proceed on those projects so that they are ready for a future investment programme.

78. **Mr. Naughten** asked the Minister for Transport the reason the Cork commuter rail project did not begin construction in 2006; when this project will begin; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41788/06]



**Minister for Transport (Mr. Cullen):** Subject to a satisfactory outcome to the Railway Order process, it is expected that the construction of the Glounthaune to Middleton railway line can commence in 2007 and still be completed in line with Transport 21. The Railway Order process has taken longer than anticipated. I appointed an Inspector to hold a Public Inquiry into CIE's application for the project on 26 May last. The Inquiry opened on 31 October and concluded on 3 November. I am now awaiting the report of the Inspector into the Public Inquiry before I can make my decision as to whether to grant the Railway Order.

*Question No. 79 answered with Question No. 63.*

*Question No. 80 answered with Question No. 44.*

#### **Public Transport.**

81. **Mr. Ring** asked the Minister for Transport if he is satisfied with the take up by local authorities of funding allocated for the provision of park and ride facilities; the measures he has pursued to encourage such take up; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41768/06]

**Minister for Transport (Mr. Cullen):** My Department provides funding to the DTO in respect of the Greater Dublin Area (GDA) and the local authorities in the regional cities for the development of park and ride facilities. These local authorities are aware of the availability of this funding, and it is a matter for each of them to identify and prioritise projects, and apply for funding to my Department. I should add that my Department is in regular contact with these authorities about the need to bring forward projects in the interest of promoting public transport.

*Question No. 82 answered with Question No. 73.*

83. **Mr. M. Higgins** asked the Minister for Transport the status of the Bus Éireann application to his Department to provide an extra 2,000 services per week as part of the proposals for an improved bus service in Galway; his views on its proposals; the funding that has been made available in 2007 to facilitate the early introduction of these plans; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41649/06]

**Minister for Transport (Mr. Cullen):** Under section 24 of the Transport Act 1958, Bus Éireann is not required to hold a licence under the Road Transport Act 1932. However, since 10 January 2001, the company is required by Ministerial direction to notify my Department of proposed new services or proposed changes to exist-

ing services at least four weeks prior to their introduction. In this context Bus Éireann submitted proposals to my Department on the 27th September, 2006 relating to a complete restructuring of its Galway City services network. Further clarification was sought from the company and this information was recently received and is under consideration in my Department. Separately I have approved funding of up to €50 million for Bus Éireann for the purchase of 160 new buses in the period 2007/2008. The deployment of these new buses is a matter for Bus Éireann but I understand that some of the new buses will be deployed in the Galway area.

#### **Road Safety.**

84. **Dr. Upton** asked the Minister for Transport when he proposes to legislate for the compulsory fitting of cyclops mirrors on all heavy good vehicles. [41667/06]

**Minister for Transport (Mr. Cullen):** In October 2006, the European Commission published a proposal for a directive to require existing HGVs to be retrofitted with enhanced mirrors on their passenger side to improve the lateral field of indirect vision of drivers. Consideration of the proposal by Member States commenced last month. Ireland together with some other Member States are seeking to have the proposal amended to also provide for the compulsory retrofitting of cyclops mirrors to certain HGVs to address the blind spot to the front of these vehicles.

I welcome the European initiative in relation to the retrofitting of enhanced mirrors to existing HGVs. The Road Safety Authority has advised my Department that, in the light of this initiative, it intends to await the outcome of the consideration of the proposal by the European institutions before proceeding further with the development of national measures in relation to the retrofitting of mirrors to existing HGVs.

*Question No. 85 answered with Question No. 56.*

#### **Public Transport.**

86. **Mr. Deenihan** asked the Minister for Transport the way he will address the situation whereby the number of passengers being carried by bus services in the Dublin area has declined in the past year; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41756/06]

**Minister for Transport (Mr. Cullen):** The number of passengers carried by Dublin Bus increased from 137.1 million in 1997 to 149.8 million in 2004. There was a decrease in passenger numbers carried in 2005 to 146 million, which coincided with the introduction of the Luas to

Sandyford and Tallaght which currently carries in excess of 25 million passengers annually. However, the underlying growth on the services of Dublin Bus is strong and the Company expects to increase its passenger carryings in 2006 to approximately 148 million. I expect this trend to continue as the 100 additional buses for which I approved funding in September continue to come on-stream during 2007 and as further bus priority measures are implemented.

#### Road Safety.

87. **Mr. S. Ryan** asked the Minister for Transport the reason he has not set down a speed limit by way of primary or secondary legislation to dictate in all circumstances the maximum speed at which vehicles may travel over DBM base course where that surface is in use; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41660/06]

**Minister for Transport (Mr. Cullen):** The maximum default road speed limits that apply to motorways, national roads, regional and local roads and to roads in built-up areas are set down in the Road Traffic Act 2004 as 120, 100, 80 and 50 kilometres per hour respectively.

This 2004 Act also provides that each county council and city council has power to intervene and, through the making of bye-laws, to apply a special speed limit from a range of values in lieu of a default speed limit at any location where the council deems that it is appropriate to do so. In addition, under a new policy measure introduced in the 2004 Act, a county manager or a city manager has power to make a roadworks speed limit order to apply a speed limit from that range of values at a location where roadworks are being carried out.

#### Public Transport.

88. **Mr. Gilmore** asked the Minister for Transport the arrangements in place to routinely publish the many elements of the quarterly service performance reports from Bus Éireann, Iarnród Éireann and Dublin Bus that are not commercially sensitive. [41617/06]

134. **Mr. Broughan** asked the Minister for Transport the service performance standards he has set down for Bus Éireann, Iarnród Éireann and Dublin Bus through the 2006 memorandum of understanding; and the way he will improve same in the 2007 memorandum of understanding. [41619/06]

**Minister for Transport (Mr. Cullen):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 88 and 134 together.

I have arranged for the details of the service availability and quality targets included in the 2006 Memorandum of Understanding on Service Levels and Targets (MOU) with Bus Átha Cliath,

Bus Éireann and Iarnród Éireann to be forwarded to the Deputy. The memoranda for 2007 have not yet been finalised. My Department will shortly publish on its website those parts of the quarterly reports from the companies concerned relating to service quality and quantity targets.

#### State Airports.

89. **Mr. Kehoe** asked the Minister for Transport when the break up of Aer Rianta will be completed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41783/06]

142. **Mr. Stanton** asked the Minister for Transport further to Parliamentary Question No. 1134 of 27 September 2006, if decisions have been made regarding the future financial sustainability of Cork Airport, in particular the funding of the new terminal; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41730/06]

**Minister for Transport (Mr. Cullen):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 89 and 142 together.

All three State Airport Authorities must demonstrate their financial and operational readiness for the post-independence era. Recognising that the airports will require coordinated strategies for the achievement of this operational and financial readiness, the Dublin Airport Authority (DAA) has to be satisfied, in the first instance, that the transition to full autonomy takes full account of the challenges currently faced by the DAA. Between now and end 2009 the DAA will be required to finance a €1.2 billion investment programme that includes Terminal 2 and other important projects. I note that the Commission for Aviation Regulation (CAR) has confirmed its intention to review the current airport charges determination because of the need to take account of the DAA's 2006 Capital Investment Plan.

The actual timing of airport restructuring will be contingent on the creation of the appropriate conditions that will ensure the financial sustainability of all three State Airports. Cork's future autonomy will be considered in the light of the other challenges being faced by DAA at present. Accordingly the transition to autonomy will depend on the approach to funding capital investment into the future, the optimum mechanisms for allocating airport assets among the three State airports and all relevant aspects of the three airports' financial sustainability.

#### Public Transport.

90. **Mr. Stanton** asked the Minister for Transport further to Parliamentary Questions Nos. 7 and 13 of 2 November 2006, if there has been further progress regarding the comprehensive proposal on integrated ticketing from the integrated ticketing project board plans to extend

[Mr. Stanton.]

integrated ticketing outside the Dublin area; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41731/06]

**Minister for Transport (Mr. Cullen):** I await proposals from the Integrated Ticketing Project Board in relation to scope, timelines and a budget for the phased completion of the integrated ticketing project. I expect these details to be included in the Board's report up to end November 2006, which I expect to receive in shortly. While ultimately integrated ticketing is to be national in scope, the current focus is on implementation in the Greater Dublin Area.

#### Road Safety.

91. **Ms Burton** asked the Minister for Transport the reason for the ongoing delay in commencing fully the Road Traffic Act 2006. [41665/06]

**Minister for Transport (Mr. Cullen):** The Road Traffic Act 2006 was enacted on 16 July 2006 and 15 of the 23 sections were commenced with effect from 21 July 2006. The remaining provisions are being rolled out progressively, section 16 (in part) was commenced with effect from 1 September 2006 and I expect to commence some further sections of the Act shortly.

#### Infrastructure Projects.

92. **Mr. Gogarty** asked the Minister for Transport the measures he will take to reduce the cost of land acquisition for both road and public transport projects. [41710/06]

**Minister for Transport (Mr. Cullen):** I am aware of the increasing land cost element of roads and public transport projects. Discussions are taking place between relevant Government Departments and State agencies on the issue.

*Question No. 93 answered with Question No. 44.*

*Question No. 94 answered with Question No. 41.*

#### Departmental Staff.

95. **Mr. O'Shea** asked the Minister for Transport the number of departmental staff in each of the years since the creation of his Department and the number at present; the staff cost in each of those years and at present; the number that have transferred to outside agencies, authorities, or other transport bodies that come under his Department's remit in each of those years; and the savings in staff costs in his Department that have been made since the creation of the Road Safety Authority, the Taxi Commission, the Railway Safety Commission and so on. [41643/06]

**Minister for Transport (Mr. Cullen):** The table outlines the number of Departmental staff and the staff cost in each of the years since the creation of my Department.

Year	Staff number	Staff cost for the year
		€
2002	731	25,709,000
2003	543	21,805,000
2004	542.5	22,869,000
2005	539.5	24,652,000
2006 to date	692.36	38,368,000 (estimate)

As the Department was established in mid 2002, the numbers shown for that year include posts from the then Department of Public Enterprise that were subsequently transferred to the Department of Communications Marine and Natural Resources (DCMNR).

Furthermore, the staff number shown for 2006 includes both additional staff from DCMNR following the transfer of responsibility for shipping and ports matters to my Department on 1st January last as well as posts that are in the course of being transferred to the recently established Road Safety Authority. The staff of the Road Safety Authority are currently being paid by the Department of Transport and this arrangement will continue until early 2007.

It is not possible to identify any staff members who may have resigned from the Department to take up positions in outside agencies, authorities, or other transport bodies that come under this Department's remit. The staff that I am aware of who are on secondment to one of these such bodies include two Assistant Principals who are currently employed by the Commission for Aviation Regulation. The cost for staff on secondment to the Railway Safety Commission for the 2006 period to date is €445,083. All staff in the Taxi Regulator's office were recruited directly by that office.

Generally speaking, staff working in bodies other than the RSA are in respect of new or expanded functions and therefore did not allow for specific savings in staff numbers in my Department.

#### Air Accident Investigations.

96. **Mr. English** asked the Minister for Transport if he has received the details of the investigation by the IAA into a recent death on an Irish aircraft; the way he will act in regard to the findings of this investigation; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41773/06]

**Minister for Transport (Mr. Cullen):** The IAA is carrying out an investigation following a recent death on board an Irish aircraft. I am informed by the IAA that this investigation is still in pro-

gress. In the light of this it would not be appropriate for me to comment at this stage. I will consider, in the light of the outcome of this investigation whether any further action on my part in this matter is appropriate.

*Question No. 97 answered with Question No. 73.*

#### **Rail Network.**

98. **Mr. J. O’Keeffe** asked the Minister for Transport if he is satisfied with the situation whereby rail projects scheduled to begin in 2006 as part of the Transport 21 programme were not begun; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41744/06]

**Minister for Transport (Mr. Cullen):** I am generally satisfied with the pace of implementation of the railway upgrade programme in the first full year of investment under Transport 21. Construction has commenced on the Portlaoise train care depot and on the new Docklands station, and planning and design is well underway for a number of projects including the Navan rail link and the Western Rail Corridor. Delays in the commencement of main works have occurred in three rail projects, due to delays in the statutory Railway Order processes.

I announced my decision to grant the Railway Order for the Kildare Rail Project on the 13th August last, in line with the recommendations of the Inspector to the Public Inquiry into the project. The preparation of the Order, which took longer than expected, was completed between my Department and the Office of the Attorney General on the 1st December. I signed the Order on 5 December, further to the signing by the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government on 4 December in relation to his consent for the provisions of the Order affecting roads. I understand Iarnród Éireann has commenced enabling works and is proceeding with detailed design and procurement, with a view to commencing the main works early next year.

In respect of the Cork-Midleton Rail Project, I appointed an Inspector to hold a Public Inquiry into CIE’s application for the project on 26th May last. The Inquiry opened on 31 October and concluded on 3 November. I am now awaiting the report of the Inspector into the Public Inquiry before I can make my decision as to whether to grant the Railway Order. Subject to completion of the Railway Order process, it is expected that the construction of the line can still be completed on schedule in 2008.

Among the various Luas/Metro projects under Transport 21 only the proposed Luas extension to Cherrywood was scheduled to commence construction before the end of 2006.

I signed the Railway Order for that extension on 14 August last. However, as the Deputy will be aware, a third party subsequently sought leave

in the High Court to challenge the grant of this Order by way of judicial review and the matter is now before the courts. The scheduled completion date for this project was 2010 and every effort will be made, subject to the outcome of the current legal proceedings, to minimise the impact of the latter on this timetable.

#### **Public Transport.**

99. **Mr. G. Mitchell** asked the Minister for Transport if his attention has been drawn to the number of Dublin Bus buses which have been converted to biofuels usage; his views on the expansion of biofuel usage to all public transport vehicles; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41752/06]

**Minister for Transport (Mr. Cullen):** The recent Energy Green Paper set targets for biofuel penetration in transport of 2% by 2008 and 5.75% by 2010. Transport 21 also contains provision for initiatives to promote sustainable transport.

In that context, Dublin Bus is currently undertaking a pilot trial of the use of biofuels in its fleet. This involves five buses using a 5% biofuel blend. The results of this trial and similar trials being undertaken by Bus Eireann and the German-Irish Chamber of Industry and Commerce will be assessed and used to aid decision making on future biofuel penetration in the public transport sector.

*Question No. 100 answered with Question No. 44.*

#### **Air Services.**

101. **Mr. Durkan** asked the Minister for Transport his plans for the future role and development of Aer Lingus with particular reference to its future ownership, shareholding and share trading; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41670/06]

103. **Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin** asked the Minister for Transport his views on Ryanair’s recent acquirement of a further 31 million Aer Lingus shares bringing its stake in the former national airline to over 25% and the consequences this will have for the future of aviation in this State. [41673/06]

128. **Mr. Sargent** asked the Minister for Transport the implications of the 25% purchase of Aer Lingus with regard to future board decisions that can be taken by the company; and if his Department has considered raising the matter with the European or national competition authorities in view of the fact that such a minority stake may give Ryanair certain blocking rights on the activities of one of its main competitors. [41714/06]

129. **Mr. Crawford** asked the Minister for Transport if he will provide an update on the European Commission's investigation of the proposed take over of Aer Lingus by Ryanair; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41737/06]

278. **Mr. Durkan** asked the Minister for Transport his vision for the future of Aer Lingus; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42032/06]

**Minister for Transport (Mr. Cullen):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 101, 103, 128, 129 and 278 together.

As a result of the successful flotation of the airline Aer Lingus now has the means to fulfil its potential and contribute in a positive way to the country's economic development. The company's capital requirements have been met though the IPO, which will enable it to implement its business plan.

The future development of the company is a matter for the Board and management of Aer Lingus as it is now a publicly listed company. Developments in relation to future ownership, shareholding and share trading are not within my control as Minister but subject to the various regulatory provisions relating to listed companies. The Minister for Finance and I said clearly in response to the present takeover bid that the State would not be selling its shares in Aer Lingus.

I have previously stated that the Government's view is that Ireland's strategic interest in aviation is best served by the provision of regular, safe, cost-effective and competitive air services linking the country to key business and tourism markets around the world and that the Government's strategic objectives would not be well served by a takeover of Aer Lingus by Ryanair.

The Commission is currently examining the proposed merger as notified by Ryanair pursuant to the EC Merger Regulation. A decision by the European Commission on whether to approve the merger, approve it subject to certain conditions or initiate a Phase 2 investigation must be made by 20th December.

The Government is opposed to the Ryanair bid, as it believes that a merger between the two companies would have a detrimental impact on competition in aviation services to and from Ireland. Officials from my Department have held a number of meetings with officials from the European Commission to outline the Government's position in relation to the bid and a number of legal and economic submissions have been made.

With a shareholding of over 25%, the support of Ryanair would be required for any proposed change to the company's Memorandum and Articles of Association and other changes requiring special resolutions. Ryanair will however be

unable to prevent the adoption of ordinary resolutions or to have a nominee appointed to the Board unless it achieves the support of other shareholders. I do not consider that the Ryanair shareholding would have the effect of impeding the ability of Aer Lingus to develop its business and to compete with Ryanair.

*Question No. 102 answered with Question No. 40.*

*Question No. 103 answered with Question No. 101.*

*Question No. 104 answered with Question No. 73.*

### **Departmental Programmes.**

105. **Mr. O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Transport the progress made by his Department in relation to its disability sectoral plan; the measures which have been implemented; the measures which remain to be implemented and the timeframe for this; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41765/06]

**Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Mr. Gallagher):** A motion of both Houses of the Oireachtas approving 'Transport Access for All', my Department's Sectoral Plan under the Disability Act 2005, was passed on 17/18 October 2006 along with the Plans of five other Government Departments.

The Plan is now being implemented in conjunction with the Transport 21 investment programme and accessibility is being promoted in two ways. First, accessibility is being built into new transport infrastructure projects from the design stage. Secondly, funding is being provided to continue with the phased modification of existing infrastructure and facilities to make them accessible.

All major refurbishment projects at bus and rail stations, together with the construction of new stations and the purchase of trains or buses take account of the needs of people with mobility and sensory impairments. Work in this area is now being extended to taxis as well as air and marine passenger transport.

In general, the timescales for the various elements of the Plan are expected to be completed within the 10-year timeframe of Transport 21. Individual targets are set out in an Appendix to the Sectoral Plan.

*Question No. 106 answered with Question No. 36.*

### **Road Network.**

107. **Dr. Twomey** asked the Minister for Transport the reason the anticipated level of PPP investment in our roads programme as set out in Estimates 2006 did not materialise in 2006; and if

he will make a statement on the matter. [41790/06]

143. **Mr. McEntee** asked the Minister for Transport the anticipated level of PPP investment in the national road programme for 2006; the actual amount which will be invested through PPPs for 2006; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41770/06]

**Minister for Transport (Mr. Cullen):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 107 and 143 together.

I understand from the NRA that the anticipated level of PPP investment in the national road programme for 2006 is approximately €120m. This is less than the original forecast set for the year of around €160m. The difference is due to the accelerated completion of the M1 Dundalk Western Bypass and the M4/M6 Kilcock-Enfield-Kinnegad Bypass PPP schemes, both of which were completed in 2005, months ahead of their expected completion in 2006.

Contracts for the N25 Waterford Bypass and the N7 Limerick Tunnel Scheme were awarded earlier this year and this means that in the period from 2003 (when the first PPP Contract, the M4/M6 Kilcock-Kinnegad contract was awarded), to August 2006 (when the N7 Limerick Tunnel, the most recent contract was awarded), approximately €1 billion in private finance has been secured for investment in the national road network.

The remaining PPP contracts i.e., for M3 Clonee-Kells, M50 Upgrade Phase 2, M7/ M8 Portlaoise-Castletown/Portlaoise-Cullahill and the N6 Galway-Ballinasloe, are all planned to be awarded by Quarter 3, 2007.

*Question No. 108 answered with Question No. 34.*

#### **Public Transport.**

109. **Mr. G. Murphy** asked the Minister for Transport the progress made in relation to the implementation of integrated ticketing; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41740/06]

118. **Ms McManus** asked the Minister for Transport the position regarding the integrated ticketing project; the timescale and budget this project is working to; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41648/06]

**Minister for Transport (Mr. Cullen):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 109 and 118 together.

The position in relation to the Integrated Ticketing Project was set out in the response to Parliamentary Question Numbers 7 and 13 on 2nd November 2006. I await proposals from the Integrated Ticketing Project Board in relation to scope, timelines and a budget for the phased completion of the integrated ticketing project. I expect these details to be included in the Board's

report up to end November 2006, which I expect to receive shortly.

#### **Road Safety.**

110. **Mr. Neville** asked the Minister for Transport the way he will deal with the findings of a recent report which revealed that Border counties experience a higher level of road deaths and fatalities than other parts of the State; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41763/06]

**Minister for Transport (Mr. Cullen):** The functions assigned to the Road Safety Authority include a mandate in relation to the collation of all relevant data and statistics.

The new Authority, as part of its remit, will examine what information is currently available and what information is required on road traffic accidents from all the relevant Departments and Agencies, including the Gardaí.

The recent report referred to by the Deputy, entitled *Steering to Safety* which was compiled by the Health Safety Executive, will be included as part of this process. The report provides a significant degree of knowledge that will support and inform the deployment of road safety measures, which are pursued within the planning framework of the multi-annual Road Safety Strategies.

#### **Road Traffic Offences.**

111. **Dr. Upton** asked the Minister for Transport the progress made on the mutual recognition of penalty points between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland; and the reason for the ongoing delay. [41666/06]

**Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Mr. Gallagher):** The North South Work Programme, as agreed by the North South Ministerial Council, included a commitment to examine the mutual recognition of penalty points between the Republic of Ireland and the North. However, in addition to the fact that separate penalty point systems operate in the two jurisdictions on this island, the system that operates in Northern Ireland differs from that applying in Great Britain. For that reason, it was agreed that it would be more appropriate to pursue the question of mutual recognition of penalty points on the basis of the operation of the three systems and that it would also be more appropriate that it would be dealt with under the auspices of the British-Irish Council.

As Northern Ireland has the lead role for transport matters in the BIC, the authorities in that jurisdiction are taking the lead in considering this issue. It was agreed at the British-Irish Council meeting on the 9 February last that officials should examine the prospects for greater co-operation in the treatment of road traffic infringements where the penalty falls short of disqualification. Arising from work in this area I have

[Mr. Gallagher.]

agreed with the UK Minister for State for Transport the terms of reference proposed for a study of the feasibility of greater cooperation between us in relation to lesser road traffic infringements with a view to our officials undertaking a study on this basis and reporting back to us next year.

### Public Transport.

112. **Mr. Wall** asked the Minister for Transport the timescale in each case for the opening up of the park and ride sites promised as part of the Transport 21 announcements and those sites outlined under the Metro west and Metro north and Dunboyne line projects. [41621/06]

**Minister for Transport (Mr. Cullen):** Funding for park and ride facilities is included under Transport 21, to be provided in the context of rail and Luas/Metro developments, as well as through local authorities. In the case of local authorities, it is a matter for the authorities themselves to prioritise projects and apply for funding.

In relation to new Luas and Metro projects under Transport 21, the planned associated park and ride facilities will open at a time which will coincide with the opening of the project concerned. For instance, Metro North and Metro West are scheduled to be completed in 2012 and 2014 respectively and the planned associated park and ride facilities will open to coincide with those dates.

The planning and design of the Navan Rail Link is a matter for Iarnród Éireann in the first instance. I understand that the old Navan rail line will be re-opened in two phases with the first phase running off the Maynooth line, at Clonsilla, to the M3 interchange at Pace, near Dunboyne. The major park and ride facility at Pace on the M3 interchange will be included in this phase of the project.

The current position regarding this phase is that detailed design work is underway and Iarnród Éireann expect to submit a Railway Order application in mid 2007 for statutory approval to enable the railway upgrade works to proceed with a view to completion of phase 1 in 2009, as provided for in Transport 21.

*Question No. 113 answered with Question No. 77.*

*Question No. 114 answered with Question No. 64.*

### State Airports.

115. **Mr. English** asked the Minister for Transport if he remains confident that the development of a second terminal at Dublin Airport remains on time and on budget; if the verification team he appointed to examine the cost of the project

continues to monitor this project; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41772/06]

**Minister for Transport (Mr. Cullen):** The Dublin Airport Authority has confirmed to me that work on the development of Terminal 2 remains on programme and on budget. Planning approval was granted by Fingal County Council on 25 October 2006 and the matter is now the subject of appeal to An Bord Pleanála. Design and procurement activities remain on programme in support of the planned commencement of construction works in April 2007, subject to planning approval, and in line with the Government mandate of delivering Terminal 2 before the end of 2009.

With regard to the work of the verification team, the consultants appointed by my Department to verify the specification and cost of the second terminal concluded that the methodology, approach and execution of the planning objectives and considerations for passengers adopted by the DAA accords with best practice. They also found that the estimated cost of the new terminal is within industry norms for this type of project in a European capital city.

The work of the verification team has now been completed and the report is available on my Departments website. ([www.transport.ie](http://www.transport.ie))

*Question No. 116 answered with Question No. 44.*

*Question No. 117 answered with Question No. 40.*

*Question No. 118 answered with Question No. 109.*

### Rail Network.

119. **Ms Shortall** asked the Minister for Transport if he has received costings from the Railway Procurement Agency for the undergrounding for the proposed Metro north from the city centre to past Ballymun; if not, the way the proposed method of construction was arrived at; and if he will seek such a costing from the RPA. [41662/06]

**Minister for Transport (Mr. Cullen):** The Railway Procurement Agency is currently looking at a number of options and is engaged in consultation with stakeholders on the best design solution for Ballymun. No decision has yet been made on the proposed method of construction.

Based on figures published by the World Bank, I am advised that the cost of an underground metro is five to six times the cost of an at-grade metro. The additional costs would mainly be in the construction of deep underground stations — which can cost considerably more than an at-grade station. Running underground through

Ballymun would require two (DCU and Ballymun) additional deep underground stations.

In addition to the cost implications, the RPA's preference for locating as much as possible of the line overground is based on sound transportation and planning grounds.

The success of Luas has demonstrated that the public is attracted to accessible public transport. Going underground, or even elevated, decreases the accessibility of the system. Metro only goes underground in areas where there is simply no room at street level to accommodate it. It is standard practice around the world to bring metros above ground wherever possible. Going underground also adds to the construction timetable and brings a higher level of construction risk associated with tunnelling.

#### Rail Services.

120. **Mr. Connaughton** asked the Minister for Transport his views on the concerns of Irish Rail that DART services may be affected due to delays in a carriage refurbishment contract; his further views on whether emergency contingency plans must now be put in place to ensure that commuter services are not affected; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41751/06]

**Minister for Transport (Mr. Cullen):** I refer the Deputy to my reply to Question number 40078 on 28 November 2006. The position remains the same.

#### Traffic Calming Measures.

121. **Mr. Penrose** asked the Minister for Transport the strategy he has in place to curb traffic associated with the school run. [41652/06]

**Minister for Transport (Mr. Cullen):** In 2005, An Taisce began a pilot project of a Safer Routes to School scheme, under their Green Flag programme. The Dublin Transport Office is funding the project from the Traffic Management Grants Scheme, which is funded by my Department. This is a two-year pilot, covering the 2005-2006 and 2006-2007 school years, and involving 30 schools, primary and post-primary, in the GDA.

I am advised that the results of this pilot will be considered in 2007, to help inform a new initiative to assist schools and parents in better managing the transport of children to and from school.

#### Road Network.

122. **Mr. Gormley** asked the Minister for Transport the reports he has commissioned with regard to the construction of a new eastern bypass connecting the M50 to the south Dublin docks; when he expects to receive such a report; if he will

make it publically available; and the process that will be involved in the progression or otherwise of the project. [41712/06]

**Minister for Transport (Mr. Cullen):** Under Section 17 of the Roads Act, 1993, the National Roads Authority has overall responsibility for the planning and supervision of works for the construction and maintenance of national roads.

I indicated at the launch of Transport 21 that feasibility study work would be undertaken on the Eastern Bypass. This work is currently being pursued by the National Roads Authority.

#### Air Services.

123. **Mr. Ring** asked the Minister for Transport the legality of amending the existing bilateral agreement between Ireland and the US, in the absence of an agreement on an open skies agreement between the EU and the US; if this can now proceed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41769/06]

**Minister for Transport (Mr. Cullen):** I informed Government in September this year of my intention to pursue all possible avenues to provide for the entry into force at the earliest possible date of the EU US open skies agreement including the transitional arrangements relating to Ireland already agreed between the EU and the US I also indicated that, in the event that an EU US agreement is not achievable within a reasonable timeframe, I intend to seek to implement, in accordance with applicable Community law, the essential elements of the transitional arrangements relating to Ireland by way of an amendment to the Ireland US bilateral air services agreement.

While allowing some time for clarification of the intentions of the US administration following the US elections, I am considering all of the options to progress this matter as soon as possible including the legal issues arising under Community law in relation to an amendment of the Ireland US bilateral air services agreement.

#### Public Transport.

124. **Mr. Quinn** asked the Minister for Transport the role of his Department in relation to the co-ordination of park and ride and public transport services, and feeder bus services to these sites; and the reason his Department is not proactive in the provision of these sites and services to them. [41626/06]

**Minister for Transport (Mr. Cullen):** In relation to the provision of transport services and infrastructure, including park and ride facilities, my Department's role is a policy one, in the overall context of transport strategy. In this context, the key framework is provided by Transport 21,



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underpinned, in the Greater Dublin Area, by the Dublin Transportation Office's Platform for Change.

The co-ordination of public transport links with park and ride facilities is a matter for the relevant public transport providers, park and ride facility operators and local authorities, as appropriate.

#### Sale of Vehicles.

125. **Ms Enright** asked the Minister for Transport his proposals in relation to the roadside sale of cars; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41758/06]

**Minister for Transport (Mr. Cullen):** Section 71 of the Roads Act 1993 sets down a specific procedure enabling Local Authorities to deal with unauthorised signs, caravans and vehicles on public roads. The enforcement of this legislation is a matter for the Local Authorities and the Garda Síochána.

#### Road Safety.

126. **Mr. O'Shea** asked the Minister for Transport his proposals to bring forward legislation to allow for penalties to be applied to local authorities and specific personnel for non-compliance with road safety standards at roadworks. [41659/06]

**Minister for Transport (Mr. Cullen):** Under Section 13 of the Roads Act 1993, the maintenance and construction of roads is a matter for the road authorities concerned, subject, in the case of national roads, to standards specified by the NRA pursuant to Section 19 of that Act. I have no proposals of the kind referred to by the Deputy.

#### Public Transport.

127. **Mr. Boyle** asked the Minister for Transport the public transport projects which are to receive capital funding within the Estimates 2007; the relevant funds allocated to each project; and the nature of the works that will be undertaken. [41706/06]

**Minister for Transport (Mr. Cullen):** The 2007 Estimates assign €777 million to public transport investment under the Transport 21 programme.

The following initial allocations have been made but it is important to stress that these are subject to ongoing review over the course of the year as part of the Department's active management of the Transport 21 allocations:

- Planning and implementation of LUAS and metro projects: €195 million
- The CIE capital investment programme, including the railway safety programme, planning and implementation of railway

development projects and additional buses: €496 million

- DTO traffic management grants programme: €40 million
- Planning and implementation of integration measures in the Greater Dublin Area (ticketing, park and ride etc): €16 million
- Provincial traffic management and park and ride facilities: €15 million
- Public transport accessibility: €15 million.

*Questions Nos. 128 and 129 answered with Question No. 101.*

*Question No. 130 answered with Question No. 63.*

#### Road Safety.

131. **Mr. McCormack** asked the Minister for Transport the specific measures being pursued to tackle driver fatigue related road accidents; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41755/06]

**Minister for Transport (Mr. Cullen):** The Road Safety Authority (RSA), which has responsibility for road safety advertising and promotion, has acknowledged that driver fatigue could be a contributory factor in up to a fifth of driver deaths in Ireland. They also say that driving when very tired is as dangerous as driving while over the drink drive limit.

The Authority revealed these facts at the launch of their winter road safety campaign in October 2006, which highlights the dangers of driver fatigue. That campaign includes a 30 second radio advert and poster advertising in garage forecourts that are designed to communicate the dangers of fatigue when driving.

Details of the Authority's current campaign on dealing with driver fatigue are available on its website at [www.rsa.ie](http://www.rsa.ie)

*Question No. 132 answered with Question No. 44.*

#### Regional Airports.

133. **Ms Enright** asked the Minister for Transport when he will announce his funding allocations to regional airports; the level of State funding he regards as sufficient to develop our regional airports; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41759/06]

**Minister for Transport (Mr. Cullen):** Transport 21 includes a provision of 100 million Euro in exchequer grants for capital works, including both safety/security projects and developmental projects, at the six regional airports over ten years to 2015.

The capital expenditure grant scheme for the regional airports which my Department launched earlier this year involves a planning and implementation framework extending to 2010 and a budget of 65 million Euro out of this total of 100 million Euro. The grant applications from all six regional airports are being assessed and prioritised by my Department with the assistance of expert advice and I expect to be in a position to announce each airport's allocation under the scheme in the near future.

It is also my intention to announce the 2006 allocation for each regional airport under a new scheme which provides for subvention of operational expenditure incurred by these airports in the provision of core airport services. I believe that in combination, the new schemes will help to focus on the public service obligation role of the regional airports and boost their contribution to balanced regional development.

*Question No. 134 answered with Question No. 88.*

*Question No. 135 answered with Question No. 44.*

#### **Road Safety.**

136. **Mr. P. McGrath** asked the Minister for Transport if he supports a zero alcohol level for inexperienced drivers; if so, when this measure will be introduced; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41782/06]

**Minister for Transport (Mr. Cullen):** The Road Safety Authority is currently developing a new Road Safety Strategy for the period 2007 onwards. The Strategy is expected to be finalised in the first quarter of 2007.

With regard to the possibility of reducing the blood alcohol concentration limit for learner drivers to zero, I expect the Road Safety Authority to carry out a detailed examination of this issue, taking into account matters such as EU and best international practice. I would be happy for my Department to engage with the Road Safety Authority on the outcome of such a detailed examination.

#### **Local Authority Development Plans.**

137. **Mr. Sherlock** asked the Minister for Transport the role of his Department in relation to the local authority development plan process; the number of personnel in his Department dedicated to inputting his Department's views on development plans; the mechanisms in place to ensure that national transport policy is reflected in local authority development plans; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41631/06]

**Minister for Transport (Mr. Cullen):** The main role of the Department of Transport to date in this area has focused on providing an effective

input into the preparation of the National Spatial Strategy and the Regional Planning Guidelines. These in turn provide the critical spatial and regional policy underpinning for local authority development plans. When preparing their development plans local authorities are obliged by law to have regard to the relevant Regional Planning Guidelines and to take account of any relevant policies of the Government or Ministers.

The Department has also made an active input into the development of regional land use and transport strategies for the principal provincial cities and their surrounding regions, such as the Cork Area Strategic Plan. It was also an active participant in the work of the Dublin Transportation Office in the preparation of its long term strategy A Platform for Change. These strategies in turn influence the content of local authority development plans.

The Department will continue to be active in this area in the future. While there are no staff dedicated solely to this work, staff from a number of Divisions across the Department contribute as required. The Department has also appointed liaison officers for each of the regions who monitor developments in relation to the implementation of the Regional Planning Guidelines for their region.

*Question No. 138 answered with Question No. 73.*

*Question No. 139 answered with Question No. 74.*

*Question No. 140 answered with Question No. 44.*

*Question No. 141 answered with Question No. 72.*

*Question No. 142 answered with Question No. 89.*

*Question No. 143 answered with Question No. 107.*

#### **Infrastructure Projects.**

144. **Mr. Hayes** asked the Minister for Transport the impact of the Critical Infrastructure Act 2006 on the development of projects contained in Transport 21; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41777/06]

**Minister for Transport (Mr. Cullen):** The primary purpose of the Planning and Development (Strategic Infrastructure) Act 2006 is to improve the efficiency of the development consent process for specific types of strategic infrastructure, including major transport projects of the type provided for in Transport 21. It restructures An Bord Pleanála to create a special named division of the Board to deal exclusively with stra-

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tegic infrastructure projects and provides for a 'fast track' procedure for planning applications for major infrastructure projects directly to the new division.

An Bord Pleanála will also replace the Minister for Transport as the consenting authority for Railway Orders. The effect of this is that proposals for rail infrastructure, which are subject to the Railway Order procedure, will be submitted directly to the Board.

The Act also provides for a number of significant improvements to the consent process for strategic infrastructure, including further provisions regulating judicial review; the removal of the obligation to hold an oral hearing in all cases; pre-application and pre-approval actions by An Bord Pleanála and the requirement on the Board to have regard to the national interest. These improvements will apply, inter alia, to strategic transport infrastructure projects, thereby ensuring their delivery as quickly as possible consistent with good planning and environmental assessment.

Commencement of the relevant provisions of the 2006 Act, is a matter for the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government.

*Question No. 145 answered with Question No. 63.*

*Question No. 146 answered with Question No. 47.*

#### Road Traffic Offences.

147. **Mr. Gilmore** asked the Minister for Transport the arrangements in place to ensure that the numbers for each of the penalty point offence categories are routinely published; the arrangements that are in place to ensure that his Department is routinely informed of the latest data and trends; and if he will provide this Deputy and the Houses of the Oireachtas with the latest figures provided to him on the number of penalty point offences by offence category. [41618/06]

271. **Mr. Durkan** asked the Minister for Transport the number of motorists who have to date received penalty points; the number who have been given the maximum number of points; the number who have lost their licence on foot of same; the number to whom licences have been restored after achieving maximum loss of points; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42018/06]

**Minister for Transport (Mr. Cullen):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 147 and 271 together.

Under the Road Safety Authority Act 2006 (Conferral of Functions) Order 2006 (S.I. No. 477 of 2006) the Road Safety Authority has responsibility for ensuring that penalty points are endorsed on a licence record. Data in relation to

penalty points is held on the National Driver File, which is administered by the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government. Data on penalty points is compiled by that Department and made available to the Road Safety Authority. I have asked the RSA to forward the most up to date data to the Department when available.

#### Public Transport.

148. **Ms C. Murphy** asked the Minister for Transport the way he will include private bus operators with licences approved by him under the 1932 Act in the integrated ticketing system; the way and when he will do this; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41510/06]

**Minister for Transport (Mr. Cullen):** Last July, I established an Integrated Ticketing Project Board with responsibility for delivering the project and a representative of licensed private bus operators is a member of the Board and is participating in its work.

As part of the phased introduction of smart-card based integrated ticketing, Morton's Coaches, a licensed private bus operator, successfully launched smartcards as a 'proof of concept' on its services in April 2004. Morton's Coaches continues to participate in the integrated ticketing project and is represented on the Project Board through the licensed private bus operator representative.

#### National Lottery Funding.

149. **Aengus Ó Snodaigh** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform if he will give a breakdown per constituency for the past five years of projects funded by the national lottery moneys through his Department. [41829/06]

**Tánaiste and Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform (Mr. McDowell):** I can inform the Deputy that there were no projects funded by National Lottery monies through my Department in the past five years.

#### Garda Stations.

150. **Mr. English** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform for the number of non-Garda clerical staff for each station in the Louth Meath division and by way of comparison for Naas, Longford, Athlone, and Cavan Garda stations; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41834/06]

**Tánaiste and Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform (Mr. McDowell):** The number of non-Garda clerical staff in Garda Stations in the Louth/Meath Division as of 30 November 2006 is set out in a table.

Station	Number of clerical staff
Drogheda	11
Dundalk	4
Kells	3
Trim	3
Ashbourne	2
Dunboyne	1
Balbriggan	3
Skerries	1
Navan	4

The number of non-Garda clerical staff in Naas, Longford, Athlone and Cavan Garda Stations as at 30 November 2006 is set out in the table.

Station	Number of clerical staff
Naas	8
Longford	4
Athlone	5
Cavan	3

### Garda Deployment.

151. **Mr. English** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform the number of gardaí assigned to each station in the Louth Meath Division in 2006, 2002, 1996 and by way of comparison for Naas, Longford, Athlone, and Cavan Garda stations; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41835/06]

**Tánaiste and 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 personnel strength (all ranks) of An Garda Síochána increased to a record 13,000 on Thursday, 16 November, 2006, following the attestation of 299 new members. This compares with a total strength of 10,702 (all ranks) as at 30 June, 1997 and represents an increase of 2,298 (or 21.5%) in the personnel strength of the Force during that period. The induction of 280 new Garda recruits to the Garda College on 6 November, 2006 resulted in a combined strength, of both attested Gardaí and recruits in training, of 14,137. The Garda Budget now stands at €1.3 billion, a 13% increase on 2005 and an 85% increase since 1997 in real terms.

I have been further informed by the Garda authorities that the personnel strength (all ranks) of each Garda Station in the Louth/Meath Division as at 4 December, 2006, 31 December, 2002 and 31 December, 1997 was as set out in the table.

Station	4/12/06	31/12/02	31/12/97
Drogheda	92	89	82
Castlebellingham	4	4	1
Clougherhead	2	3	1
Dunleer	4	4	2
Laytown	10	7	6
Dundalk	108	96	90
Carlingford	3	3	3
Hackballscross	10	14	13
Dromad	7	13	15
Omeath	8	14	11
Louth	2	1	2
Blackrock	5	4	3
Kells	37	31	30
Crossakeel	0	1	2
Athboy	6	6	4
Oldcastle	4	4	3
Nobber	3	3	3
Trim	25	24	25
Kilmessan	0	1	1
Summerhill	2	2	2
Longwood	1	0	0
Enfield	14	16	20
Ballivor	2	2	2
Ashbourne	49	37	23
Dunboyne	14	15	15
Dunshaughlin	8	11	12
Kilcock	5	6	6
Balbriggan	33	35	31
Skerries	11	10	8
Lusk	4	4	4
Rush	7	4	5
Garristown	3	3	3
Navan	48	47	52
Ardee	10	9	9
Collon	2	2	2
Duleek	3	3	4
Slane	3	4	3
Total	549	532	498

The personnel strengths (all ranks) of Naas, Longford, Athlone and Cavan Garda Stations as at 4 December, 2006, 31 December, 2002 and 31 December, 1997 was as set out in the table.

Station	4/12/06	31/12/02	31/12/97
Naas	92	78	69
Longford	52	40	39
Athlone	55	46	42
Cavan	67	57	42

The Garda personnel strengths for 1996 are not readily available.

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I should add that it is the responsibility of Garda management to allocate personnel to and within Divisions. These personnel allocations are determined by a number of factors including demographics, crime trends, administrative functions and other operational policing needs. Such allocations are continually monitored and reviewed along with overall policing arrangements and operational strategy. This ensures that optimum use is made of Garda resources, and that the best possible service is provided to the public.

### **Garda Training.**

152. **Mr. English** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform his plans to enhance Garda training in order that additional members of An Garda Síochána will be trained in the use of firearms; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41836/06]

153. **Mr. English** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform the number of gardaí that have completed training in the use of firearms, with a breakdown for each Garda division; if he is satisfied with these numbers; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41837/06]

158. **Mr. J. O’Keeffe** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform when dedicated firearms training facilities will be made available to members of An Garda Síochána holding firearms certificates. [41851/06]

**Tánaiste and Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform (Mr. McDowell):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 152, 153 and 158 together.

I have been informed by Garda authorities that the total number of Gardaí that have completed training in the use of firearms, as at the 4th December, 2006 was 2942 (all ranks). Garda management state that they are satisfied that the members trained meet their current operational needs.

I have been further informed by the Garda Authorities that a Garda Working Group on Firearms Training, recommended that not more than 10% of the uniformed divisional strength, in addition to the detective branch, should be authorised/trained in firearms. Any consideration to increase the number of trained members in any Division takes account of the recommendation of the Assistant Commissioner for the Region concerned.

A number of avenues are currently being pursued in order to provide An Garda Síochána with dedicated firearms training facilities. These include:

- Replacement of the existing firearms range at Garda Headquarters in Phoenix Park, Dublin, with a new underground facility,
- Development of Firearms Training capabilities at the recently purchased Dromard House near the Garda Training College at Templemore, and
- Examination by OPW of Garda proposals to develop a facility which would serve the wider needs of the Dublin Metropolitan Region and Eastern Seaboard.

The timescale for the delivery of these initiatives has yet to be determined. In the interim, military ranges are being utilised to provide the requisite training for Garda personnel.

Garda management inform me that the refurbishment of two rooms at the firing range at Garda Headquarters, as a temporary measure, to accommodate the Virtual Firearms Automated Training Systems (FATS) and the delivery of the Virtual Firearms Automated Training Systems are both scheduled for this month.

### **Crime Levels.**

154. **Mr. English** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform the detection rates for each Garda station in the Louth Meath division, and by way of comparison for the Naas, Longford, Athlone, and Cavan Garda stations. [41838/06]

**Tánaiste and Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform (Mr. McDowell):** The figures for headline offences detected for each Garda Division are available in the relevant Garda Annual Reports, copies of which are available in the Oireachtas library.

### **Garda Strength.**

155. **Mr. English** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform the ratio of the number of gardaí to the number of reported incidents for each Garda division; the same ratio for each Garda station in the Louth Meath division, and by way of comparison for Store Street, Naas, Longford, Athlone, and Cavan Garda stations; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41839/06]

**Tánaiste and Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform (Mr. McDowell):** Detailed statistics in relation to headline and non headline offences are contained in the annual reports of An Garda Síochána which are available in the Oireachtas library. These figures include analysis on the basis of Garda Divisions with comparisons per 1000 of population. The analysis sought by the Deputy of reported incidents by comparisons to garda numbers in the stations referred to is not available. I refer the Deputy to his Parliamentary Question No. 151 of 6 December, 2006, which

contains the number of Gardaí assigned to each station in the Louth Meath Division and Naas, Longford, Athlone, and Cavan Garda Stations.

### **Garda Security Escorts.**

156. **Mr. English** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform if, in view of the fact that we live in peaceful times in the State, it is still necessary for gardaí to escort the transportation of commercial explosives; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41840/06]

**Tánaiste and Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform (Mr. McDowell):** Any person wishing to move explosives within the State must, in accordance with Statutory Instrument 115 of 1995, obtain the prior approval of the Garda Síochána. When granting such approval, the Garda Síochána may impose conditions on the transportation of the explosives which they consider necessary in the interests of safety and security.

I have been informed by the Commissioner that Garda escorts are provided for explosives in transport to prevent theft by criminal and subversive elements and that the current security assessment indicates that some criminal and subversive elements still pose a threat. However, the policy of providing such escorts is kept under regular review with a view to reducing Garda commitments where feasible.

### **Judicial Appointments.**

157. **Mr. J. O’Keeffe** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform if he has proposals to change the way judges are nominated and appointed. [41850/06]

**Tánaiste and Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform (Mr. McDowell):** The Judicial Appointments Advisory Board was established pursuant to the Courts and Court Officers Act 1995. The purpose of the Board is to identify persons and inform the Government of the suitability of those persons for judicial office.

The Board consists of the Chief Justice, the Presidents of the High Court, Circuit Court and District Court, the Attorney General, nominated representatives of the Bar Council and the Law Society and three persons nominated by the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform.

Section 16 of the Act provides that the Government, when advising the President in relation to the appointment of a person to a judicial office, must first consider persons who have been recommended by the Board. It is important to note that the Board cannot submit nor recommend the name of a person unless that person meets the eligibility requirements set out by law in relation to the post in question. Furthermore, the Board cannot recommend the name of any person

unless in the opinion of the Board the person concerned has displayed in his/her practice as a solicitor or barrister a degree of competence and a degree of probity appropriate to and consistent with the appointment concerned, is suitable on grounds of character and temperament, is otherwise suitable and complies with section 19 of the Act (this section provides that a person who wishes to be considered for appointment to judicial office must undertake in writing his or her agreement, if appointed to judicial office, to take such training as may be required by the Chief Justice or the President of the Court to which the person concerned is appointed).

Section 17 of the Act provides that the procedures do not apply where the Government proposes to advise the President to appoint to judicial office a person who is already a judge or, subject to certain conditions, holds certain European or international judicial offices as set out in section 5 of the Courts (Supplemental Provisions) Act 1961 as amended.

The Standards in Public Office Act 2001 requires applicants to certify that their tax affairs are in order. Section 22(1) of the Act prohibits the Board from recommending a person for judicial office unless the person has furnished to the Board a tax clearance certificate and a statutory declaration that his/her tax affairs are in order.

While the ultimate decision as to who should be recommended to the President for appointment to judicial office still rests with the Government, the practice has been, since the establishment of the Board, to recommend only persons who have been recommended as suitable for appointment to judicial office by the Board, in other words, a person whom the Board considers, in addition to having the necessary legal qualifications and experience, has displayed competence in his/her profession, is suitable on grounds of character and temperament and is otherwise suitable.

I have no plans to alter the way in which judges are nominated or appointed. However, the operation of the law continues to be kept under review in my Department.

*Question No. 158 answered with Question No. 152.*

### **Garda Investigations.**

159. **Mr. Cuffe** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform if he will request An Garda Síochána to investigate the mystery illness of former Russian premier Yegor Gaidar on his visit here, in view of the fact that news of his illness comes after a series of mysterious incidents involving Russian public figures over the past month; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41867/06]

**Tánaiste and Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform (Mr. McDowell):** I am informed by the Garda authorities that enquiries are being conducted under the supervision of a Detective Chief Superintendent into reports on this matter in order to trace the movements of the person in question and to establish the facts. I am further informed that these enquiries are ongoing.

#### Citizenship Applications.

160. **Mr. McGuinness** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform the status of an application for citizenship by a person (details supplied) in Dublin 7; if he will expedite a response to the application; the time-frame for such applications; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41879/06]

**Tánaiste and Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform (Mr. McDowell):** An application for naturalisation from the individual in question was received in the Citizenship Division of my Department on 9 September 2004.

I am advised that a decision on this application will be communicated to the person concerned in the coming days.

#### Missing Persons.

161. **Mr. Deenihan** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform if the Irish Missing Person's Helpline received funding from his Department in 1999 to 2000; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41880/06]

**Tánaiste and Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform (Mr. McDowell):** My Department did not provide funding to the Irish Missing Person's Helpline in 1999 and 2000.

However, funding of €110,000 in respect of a National Missing Persons Helpline was made available by my Department in 2002 and 2003. It was channelled through the Victim Support organisation, and was in addition to the ongoing funding that organisation received for the provision of services to victims of crime. This funding of €110,000 was provided subject to the conditions that no funding beyond the year 2003 should be implied, and audited accounts should be provided to my Department on a calendar year basis. To date no audited accounts have been received in my Department.

In March 2005, it was decided that continued funding of the Victim Support organisation could no longer be justified due to serious concerns in relation to governance, accountability for public funds and poor service levels, after a lengthy period of instability within the organisation. I understand that Victim Support closed down its headquarters operation during 2005 and that a number of staff were made redundant, including the person employed to operate the Missing Per-

sons Helpline. My Department had no role in the decision of Victim Support to make a number of its staff redundant, other than to insist that statutory requirements (notice, holiday pay, etc.) be met and that the interests of the staff be protected.

#### Garda Deployment.

162. **Mr. Kenny** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform the number of community gardaí based in areas (details supplied) for each of the years 2000 for date in 2006; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41890/06]

**Tánaiste and 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 personnel strength (all ranks) of An Garda Síochána increased to a record 13,000 on Thursday, 16 November, 2006, following the attestation of 299 new members. This compares with a total strength of 10,702 (all ranks) as at 30 June, 1997 and represents an increase of 2,298 (or 21.5%) in the personnel strength of the Force during that period. The induction of 280 new Garda recruits to the Garda College on 6 November, 2006 resulted in a combined strength, of both attested Gardaí and recruits in training, of 14,137. The Garda Budget now stands at €1.3 billion, a 13% increase on 2005 and an 85% increase since 1997 in real terms.

I have been further informed by the Garda authorities that the personnel strength (all ranks) of the Community Policing unit at Lucan, Clondalkin and Rathcoole Garda Stations as at 31 December, 2000 to 2005 and as at 31 October, 2006 was as set out in the table.

Date	Lucan	Clondalkin	Rathcoole
31/12/00	5	9	0
31/12/01	8	10	0
31/12/02	4	9	0
31/12/03	5	10	0
31/12/04	5	12	1
31/12/05	7	15	1
31/10/06	7	11	1

I should add that it is the responsibility of Garda management to allocate personnel to and within Divisions. These personnel allocations are determined by a number of factors including demographics, crime trends, administrative functions and other operational policing needs. Such allocations are continually monitored and reviewed along with overall policing arrangements and operational strategy. This ensures that optimum use is made of Garda resources, and that the best possible service is provided to the public.

163. **Mr. Gregory** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform the number of community gardaí in the Bridewell Garda station; the number of gardaí trained there for the use of mountain bikes; the number of mountain bikes available in the station; and when the required number of bikes will be available. [41953/06]

**Tánaiste and 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 personnel strength (all ranks) of An Garda Síochána increased to a record 13,000 on Thursday, 16 November, 2006, following the attestation of 299 new members. This compares with a total strength of 10,702 (all ranks) as at 30 June, 1997 and represents an increase of 2,298 (or 21.5%) in the personnel strength of the Force during that period. The induction of 280 new Garda recruits to the Garda College on 6 November, 2006 resulted in a combined strength, of both attested Gardaí and recruits in training, of 14,137. The Garda Budget now stands at €1.3 billion, a 13% increase on 2005 and an 85% increase since 1997 in real terms.

I have also been informed by the Garda authorities that the personnel strength of the Community Policing Unit at the Bridewell Garda Station as at 4 December 2006 was 2 Sergeants and 14 Gardaí. I have been further informed by the Garda authorities that the number of Gardaí at the Bridewell Garda Station trained in the use of mountain bikes as at 4 December, 2006 was 9 (all ranks).

Local Garda Management report that there are currently two mountain bikes available for use at the Bridewell Garda Station. One further mountain bike has been allocated to the Bridewell Garda Station and will be delivered in the coming weeks. Available Mountain Bikes are shared among the trained members, who would, in the normal course, find themselves rostered for duty at different times.

I should add that it is the responsibility of Garda management to allocate personnel to and within Divisions. These personnel allocations are determined by a number of factors including demographics, crime trends, administrative functions and other operational policing needs. Such allocations are continually monitored and reviewed along with overall policing arrangements and operational strategy. This ensures that optimum use is made of Garda resources, and that the best possible service is provided to the public.

#### **Gaming Legislation.**

164. **Mr. Gregory** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform further to Parliamentary Question Nos. 207 and 209 on

the 21 November 2006, if steps will be taken to ensure that the law is enforced if betting shops proceed to introduce gambling slot machines in betting shops in January 2007; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41956/06]

**Tánaiste and Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform (Mr. McDowell):** In the event that betting shops introduce new gaming technologies to their premises, it is likely that, without any legislative change, there may be offences under betting legislation and gaming legislation. In such circumstances, the Deputy can be confident that the matter will be investigated by the Gardaí.

#### **Crime Levels.**

165. **Mr. Gregory** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform the number of incidents of vandalism and anti-social behaviour reported to the Bridewell Garda station, Dublin 7 over the weekend of 17 to 19 November 2006; the number of persons apprehended and the number charged for those incidents; if Garda patrols have been increased at weekends to cover this area; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41957/06]

**Tánaiste and Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform (Mr. McDowell):** I am informed by the Garda authorities that a total of twenty incidents of criminal damage were reported in respect of the district in question on the dates mentioned. Fourteen of these incidents arose over a period of time on the 19 November, 2006 and refer to damage to vehicles. Two suspects were arrested in relation to these fourteen incidents and were released without charge, pending further investigation.

Seven public order incidents were reported for the same period with eight persons arrested and charged with various offences under the Criminal Justice (Public Order) Act. These incidents of public order are not connected to the incidents of criminal damage.

I am informed by the Garda authorities that the area referred to is regularly patrolled by uniform and plain clothes Gardaí with a view to ensuring a concentrated and visible Garda presence in the area. Local mobile and foot patrols have been increased in the area in addition to patrols being performed under Operation Anvil.

I am further informed by the Garda authorities that current policing plans in the area are predicated on the prevention of anti-social and public order offences; the prevention of crime including crimes of violence against persons and property and the maintenance of an environment conducive to the improvement of quality of life of the residents. This strategy will continue to be central to the delivery of a policing service to the area.



### Garda Operations.

166. **Mr. Gregory** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform the assets seized and paid over by the Criminal Assets Bureau during 2005 and to date in 2006; the amount of funds or property in each case; the criminal activity involved in each case; and the general location of the activity in each case. [41958/06]

**Tánaiste and Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform (Mr. McDowell):** I am informed by

	€	Stg£	\$
Interim orders under Section 2	5,860,335	0	314,619.54
Interlocutory Orders under Section 3	1,200,525.57	26,760.00	130,000.00
Disposal Orders under Section 4 A	2,002,738.41	N/A	N/A
Receivership Orders under Section 7	5,180,485.00	21,040.00	130,000.00

Action by officials of the Revenue Commissioners attached to CAB have resulted in a total of €16,376,599.00 tax being collected. Action by officials of the Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs have resulted in savings of €216,054 to the Exchequer. Figures for the year 2006 will be provided in the report for that year when it is completed.

I am advised that, for operational reasons, it is not appropriate for the Bureau to categorise proceedings as being linked to particular criminal activity. However, I am informed that the majority of applications brought before the Courts over the last five years under legislation governing the proceeds of crime have, in general, been drug related. It is not the policy of the Bureau to specify locations for a number of reasons including the fact that many of the ongoing proceeds of crime applications are protected by “in camera” rules.

### Public Service Vehicle Licences.

167. **Mr. Deasy** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform if his attention has been drawn to the fact that inspections for public service vehicle licences can take up to six months from time of application in County Waterford; his views on whether this is causing great difficulty for bus operators in County Waterford who wish to submit an application to the Department of Transport for a passenger licence; if he will hold discussions with Garda management with a view to securing additional resources to carry out inspections in respect of PSV licences in County Waterford; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41970/06]

**Tánaiste and Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform (Mr. McDowell):** I am informed by

An Garda Síochána that the details of the activities of the Criminal Assets Bureau since its establishment in 1996 are contained in the Annual Reports of the Criminal Assets Bureau. These reports are quite comprehensive and include details of the number of cases commenced, money frozen under the Proceeds of Crime Act and details of money collected by the Bureau under the provisions of Revenue and Social Welfare legislation. Copies of the Annual Reports are available from the Oireachtas library.

Statistics in relation to monies seized by the Criminal Assets Bureau during 2005 are set out in the table.

the Garda authorities that the general timeframe for inspections of large PSV vehicles is between 4 to 6 weeks from the time of receipt of application. Delays in Waterford County only arise if certain matters require further attention as a result of the initial inspection.

I am also informed that once the inspection has been completed and matters are in order the licence is issued forthwith.

I am further informed that this timeframe should not cause difficulty for bus operators in County Waterford who wish to submit an application to the Department of Transport for a passenger licence. Garda management is satisfied that there are currently enough resources allocated to this particular area.

### Residency Permits.

168. **Ms C. Murphy** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform the stage the application of a person (details supplied) in County Kildare is at; when a decision will be made on this application; if the passports of the individuals concerned will be returned to them prior to 14 December 2006; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41971/06]

**Tánaiste and Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform (Mr. McDowell):** I understand from the Immigration Division of my Department that the application for residence in respect of the person concerned has been approved and that the passports have been returned.

169. **Aengus Ó Snodaigh** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform the status of the residency application of a person (details supplied); and if a decision will be reached soon, in view of the fact that the per-

son's current residency permit is due to expire soon. [41973/06]

**Tánaiste and Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform (Mr. McDowell):** I understand that the Immigration Division of my Department has recently been in contact with the legal representative of the person concerned informing them of the decision regarding his application for permission to remain in the State.

#### Visa Applications.

170. **Mr. P. Breen** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform the status of a visa application for persons (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41974/06]

**Tánaiste and Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform (Mr. McDowell):** The applications referred to by the Deputy were received in the Dublin Visa Office on 1 December, 2006. A decision in respect of the applications in question will be made in the coming weeks.

171. **Mr. Howlin** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform if his attention has been drawn to the fact that a holiday visa has been refused in the case of a person (details supplied); if he will review the decision made in this case; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41992/06]

**Tánaiste and Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform (Mr. McDowell):** There is no current visa application for the said person with my Department. The person in question was refused a holiday visa by my Department on 22 July 2004. No appeal of this decision was received.

The period allowed to make an appeal is now passed. If the person concerned still wishes to travel to Ireland a fresh application for a visa must be lodged.

*Question No. 172 withdrawn.*

#### Residency Permits.

173. **Mr. Durkan** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform his views on granting extended residency in the case of a person (details supplied) in Dublin 8; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42010/06]

**Tánaiste and Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform (Mr. McDowell):** I refer the Deputy to Parliamentary Question No. 158 of Thursday, 11 May, 2006 (ref: 17811/06) and the written reply to that Question. The position is unchanged.

#### Road Traffic Offences.

174. **Mr. Durkan** asked the Tánaiste and Mini-

ster for Justice, Equality and Law Reform the revenue accrued in each of the past two years to date from penalty points and parking fees; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42030/06]

**Tánaiste and Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform (Mr. McDowell):** Information on revenue accruing on foot of payments from fixed charge notices and parking fees is not readily available and could only be obtained by the expenditure of a disproportionate amount of staff time and resources. I have no responsibility in relation to revenue accruing from clamping carried out by or on behalf of local authorities.

I can inform the Deputy that €15.258 million was collected through the Garda Vote in 2004 under the Road Traffic Acts and in 2005 €14.283 million was collected. These amounts are in respect of all offences under the Road Traffic Acts for which monies were collected inclusive of fixed charges, clamping and parking fees. The amount collected this year to date under the Garda Vote is €15.197 million. This figure is provisional.

The revenue accruing to the Courts Vote in 2004 was €8.810 million under the Road Traffic Acts and in 2005 €7.526 million was collected. This also covers revenue in respect of all offences under the Road Traffic Acts inclusive of fixed charges, clamping and parking fees. The amount collected this year to date under the Courts Vote is €14.8 million.

All revenue received is surrendered to the Exchequer as extra exchequer receipts and are accounted for in the Appropriation Accounts.

#### Judicial Appointments.

175. **Mr. Stanton** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform the retirement ages for judges in the various courts; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42047/06]

**Tánaiste and Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform (Mr. McDowell):** In accordance with section 47 of the Courts and Court Officers Act, 1995, the retirement age for judges of the High and Supreme Courts is 70 years if appointed on or after 15 December, 1995 and 72 years if appointed before 15 December, 1995. Judges of the Circuit Court retire at 70 years, in accordance with section 18 of the Courts (Supplemental Provisions) Act, 1961.

Retirement age is set at 65 years for judges of the District Court in accordance with section 30(1) of the Courts (Supplemental Provisions) Act, 1961. These judges may, however, be continued in office on a yearly basis up to age 70 under section 2 of the Courts of Justice (District Court) Act, 1949.

### Crime Levels.

176. **Mr. Stanton** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform the breakdown of the number of recorded incidents of the various categories of headline and non-headline crime in Youghal, County Cork over the past five years respectively; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42048/06]

**Tánaiste and Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform (Mr. McDowell):** The figures for headline offences recorded for each Garda Division are available in the relevant Garda Annual Reports, copies of which are available in the Oireachtas library.

### Missing Persons.

177. **Mr. J. O’Keeffe** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform the number of children under the care of the Health Service Executive who have been reported missing to An Garda Síochána; the number of times that each has been reported missing; the number of crimes committed by such children; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42053/06]

178. **Mr. J. O’Keeffe** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform the number of crimes that have been committed against children under the care of the Health Service Executive who have been reported missing to An Garda Síochána; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42054/06]

**Tánaiste and Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform (Mr. McDowell):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 177 and 178 together.

I am informed by the Garda authorities that statistics on the number of missing children in the care of the Health Service Executive are not readily available. However, analysis carried out at the Garda Missing Persons Bureau earlier this year indicated that 372 children in care were reported missing on 3,715 occasions between October 1999 and February 2005. The frequency with which children were reported missing is shown in the table.

No. of Children	No. of Times Reported Missing
70	One time
147	2 to 5 times
55	6 to 9 times
45	10 to 19 times
25	20 to 29 times
9	30 to 39 times
10	40 to 49 times
1	50 times
1	51 times

No. of Children	No. of Times Reported Missing
2	59 times
1	61 times
1	70 times
1	77 times
1	81 times
1	99 times
1	151 times
1	169 times

I am further informed that the research also indicated that 45 of the 372 children were the victims of criminal offences. Some 158 of the 372 children were recorded as offenders.

The analysis was conducted as part of a review of the Garda missing persons policy. On foot of the analysis An Garda Síochána commenced working with the Health Service Executive to develop a protocol to deal with children in care who are reported missing. The purpose of the protocol is to reduce the number of children in care reported missing and to minimise the risk of harm to children when they are missing.

### Garda Investigations.

179. **Mr. J. O’Keeffe** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform the status of the investigation into the death of a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42055/06]

**Tánaiste and Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform (Mr. McDowell):** A Detective Superintendent from outside the relevant Garda Division was appointed immediately after the incident to carry out a detailed investigation into all the circumstances surrounding the person in question’s arrest, detention and removal to hospital. The Garda authorities submitted a file to the Director of Public Prosecutions on the matter and furnished a copy to me also. The Director issued instructions that no prosecution should ensue.

An inquest into this tragic death is ongoing at present. An inquest is an independent inquiry to ascertain the cause of death and the Coroner has statutory duties and powers, including the power to call witnesses. The Coroner cannot consider questions of civil or criminal liability. When the inquest has been completed and a verdict returned I will consider the matter further.

180. **Mr. J. O’Keeffe** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform if he will commence section 16(1)(b) of the Criminal Evidence Act 1992; and if so, when he will do so. [42056/06]

**Tánaiste and Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform (Mr. McDowell):** Section 16 of the

Criminal Evidence Act, 1992, as amended, makes provision for the video recording of any evidence given, in relation to a sexual offence or an act involving violence, by a person under 17 years of age through a live television link in proceedings relating to indictable offences. The relevant subsection — (1)(a) — was commenced in 1993. It will be noted that this subsection covers persons under 14 years of age also.

Section 16 also makes provision — in subsection (1)(b) — for the video recording of a statement made by a person under 14 years of age (in respect of whom a sexual offence or an offence involving violence is alleged to have been committed) during an interview with a member of the Garda Síochána or any other person who is competent for the purpose. It provides that such a video recording shall be admissible at a trial as evidence, provided that the person whose statement was video recorded is available at the trial for cross examination.

A committee established by my predecessor as Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform has drawn up Good Practice Guidelines, covering a number of areas. In addition, the committee made a number of recommendations, including recommendations that:

- there should be sufficient suitable facilities available for video recording evidential interviews;
- there should be a joint national programme in place for training interviewers, which should be regularly reviewed. In tandem with this, there will be a need for a national training programme for all professionals who are likely to have reference to the Guidelines.

I wish to assure the Deputy that I attach the highest importance to the setting up of these facilities. Officials from my Department are actively working on setting up these facilities in conjunction with An Garda Síochána, the Health Service Executive and the Office of Public Works. My Department plans to have a network of suitable facilities available to An Garda Síochána to video record evidential interviews established at a number of locations throughout the country early in 2007. Officials from my Department accompanied by members of An Garda Síochána have visited a similar facility in this jurisdiction which is used for therapeutic purposes and also a facility in Northern Ireland, and received briefing on training and advice on other relevant service issues such as equipment and fitting out. A specification for the facilities has now been drawn up, on the basis of which my Department is identifying and evaluating accommodation available with a view to securing suitable accommodation. Work will then commence on fitting out and equipping the facilities.

The Garda Síochána is arranging for the training of a number of selected officers to enable

them to conduct such interviews in accordance with good practice. It is expected that this training will be completed in January.

I intend to commence subsection (1)(b) as a matter of priority once the necessary arrangements are in place.

#### **Garda Equipment.**

181. **Mr. J. O’Keeffe** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform when the necessary equipment for the implementation of digital recording of Garda interviews will be in place; the estimated cost of the equipment; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42057/06]

**Tánaiste and Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform (Mr. McDowell):** The current analogue system is in accordance with recommendations contained in the third report of the Steering Committee on Audio and Audio/Video Recording of Garda Questioning of Detained Persons. Garda authorities inform me that consequently, there is no proposal at present to purchase digital equipment for the recording of Garda interviews.

With regard to future and additional requirements the Department has recently approved Garda proposals for the provision of additional systems and fit-out of further interview rooms and a procurement exercise for this work is currently under way.

Where a Garda station is not equipped with an audio/video system, a person to be interviewed in accordance with the Regulations will be taken to the nearest Garda station with such equipment. The provision of additional facilities will reduce the need to transport persons away from the investigating Station for the purposes of recording interviews.

#### **Garda Deployment.**

182. **Mr. J. O’Keeffe** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform the number of gardaí used as standing posts outside embassies, consulates and other buildings of foreign diplomatic missions; the ranks of those gardaí; the estimated cost to An Garda Síochána; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42058/06]

183. **Mr. J. O’Keeffe** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform the number of gardaí used as standing posts outside Irish official buildings; the ranks of those gardaí; the estimated cost to An Garda Síochána; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42059/06]

**Tánaiste and Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform (Mr. McDowell):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 182 and 183 together.

I am informed by the Garda authorities, who are responsible for the detailed allocation of personnel and resources, that the Garda Síochána provide security at various locations including embassies, consulates and buildings occupied by foreign diplomatic missions based on an assessment of the threat levels involved. I am further informed that it is not the practice of the Garda Síochána to provide details of members engaged on such duties for operational and security reasons.

#### **Sexual Offences.**

184. **Mr. J. O’Keefe** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform if he will amend section 10 of the Sex Offenders Act 2001 to require persons convicted of a sexual offence under section 3 of the Act to register with An Garda Síochána within three days; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42060/06]

185. **Mr. J. O’Keefe** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform if he will amend section 10(8)(a) of the Sex Offenders Act 2001 to require persons convicted of a sexual offence under section 3 of the Act to register with An Garda Síochána in the Garda district in which they propose to reside; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42061/06]

186. **Mr. J. O’Keefe** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform if he will amend section 10(8)(b) of the Sex Offenders Act 2001 to require persons convicted of a sexual offence under section 3 of the Act to register with An Garda Síochána in person; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42062/06]

**Tánaiste and Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform (Mr. McDowell):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 184 to 186, inclusive, together.

The Criminal Law (Trafficking in Persons and Sexual Offences) Act 2006, which has been approved by Government and is at present being drafted, contains several amendments to the Sex Offenders Act 2001. I am now examining further amendments to the Act, in particular to harmonise our laws more closely with those in our neighbouring jurisdictions and to ensure that we can deal further with sex offenders who might come here from abroad. I will seek Government approval to include any such amendments in the Bill at present being drafted.

187. **Mr. J. O’Keefe** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform his plans to establish a register of sex offenders here; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42063/06]

**Tánaiste and Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform (Mr. McDowell):** The Sex Offenders Act, 2001 which commenced on 27 September 2001 sets out the notification obligations on persons convicted of a range of sexual offences against both children and adults. A convicted sex offender must notify his/her name(s), date of birth and current home address to the Garda Síochána within seven days of the conviction for the sexual offence concerned or, where the offender is sentenced to imprisonment, from the date of full release from prison.

Thereafter, the offender must notify the Gardaí of any change of name or address within seven days of that change. Notification of any address where the offender spends either as much as seven days or two or more periods amounting to seven days in any twelve month period must also be given to the Gardaí.

If the offender intends to leave the State for a period of seven days or more s/he must inform the Gardaí of this fact and the address at which s/he intends to stay and also notify the Gardaí of his/her return. If s/he did not intend to stay away for more than seven days but did, s/he must inform the Gardaí within a further seven days.

The provisions of the Act extend to any sex offenders entering this jurisdiction from abroad who have an obligation to register in their own countries or who have been convicted abroad of an offence comparable to one covered by the Act.

Part 4 of the Sex Offenders Act 2001 provides that it is an offence for convicted sex offenders to apply for, or to accept, work or to offer services, a necessary and regular part of which consists mainly of unsupervised access to, or contact with, children or mentally impaired persons, without informing the employer or organisation of his/her conviction for a qualifying sexual offence.

It is an offence to fail to comply with the notification requirements. The penalty is imprisonment for up to 12 months or a fine of €1,900 or both.

The courts can also sentence an offender who has been found guilty of an offence under the schedule of offences in the Act to a period of statutory supervision under the Probation and Welfare Service on their release from prison. Before an offender is released from prison, the Prison Service must inform him/her that they are subject to the notification requirement of the Act. Ten days before the date of release, the Prison Service must inform the Garda Síochána that s/he is being released.

The Garda Síochána has in place a system for the monitoring of persons subject to these requirements. The Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault Unit monitor and manage the notification provisions. The information on persons who are subject to the requirements of the Sex Offenders Act, 2001 is maintained at a central location. Only specified nominated Garda personnel have access to this information.

There are nominated Garda Inspectors in each Garda Division who are notified by the Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault Unit when a sex offender, who is subject to the requirements of the Act, is resident in their Division. These inspectors are responsible for the monitoring of such offenders.

The Garda authorities are currently preparing to computerise the system for recording persons subject to the requirements of the Act and integrate it into the PULSE system.

188. **Mr. J. O’Keeffe** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform the steps he has taken to establish a pan-European Union register of sex offenders that would be accessible by nominated members of the law enforcement community in each member state; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42064/06]

**Tánaiste and Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform (Mr. McDowell):** On 27 November I signed a Memorandum of Understanding on information sharing arrangements between Ireland and the UK relating to sex offenders.

The MOU was negotiated between my Department and the Home Office, with input from the Northern Ireland Office. It relates to information about persons travelling between Ireland and the UK and who are subject to sex offender notification requirements in their own jurisdiction. This covers sex offenders travelling between any of the legal jurisdictions in these islands. The rationale for the Memorandum is that such information will be shared between police forces for the purposes of protecting the public from the risks presented by sex offenders — whether paedophile or otherwise — and investigating serious sexual offences. The transmission of any information necessary to achieve these purposes is covered.

As a result of the MOU, the exchange of such information between the Garda Síochána and British police forces, which of course has already been taking place for some time, is now being put on a formal footing. The information will now be shared as a matter of course.

This Memorandum of Understanding is another example of the close relationship between Ireland and the UK and in particular between the two parts of this island. It is also the most recent example of the benefits which accrue to both sides through cooperation and coordination in the areas of criminal justice and law enforcement.

As the MOU provides, its use and effectiveness will be kept under review, and I am confident that full use will be made of its potential by the police forces of all our jurisdictions.

A Registered Sex Offender Advisory Group has been established consisting of representatives of An Garda Síochána, the Police Service of

Northern Ireland, the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform and the Northern Ireland Office. As part of its work, this Group evaluates the potential for sharing information, examining the registration criteria in both jurisdictions for sex offenders and identifying areas for further co-operation.

The provisions of the Sex Offenders Act 2001 are kept under constant review by my Department with a view to ensuring the Act is operating in an efficient and effective manner.

Discussions have commenced, at Working Group level within the Council of the European Union, on a proposal for a Council Framework Decision on the organisation and content of the exchange of information extracted from criminal records between Member States. These discussions follow the adoption in 2005 by the Council of a Council Decision on the exchange of information extracted from the criminal record, which supplements the relevant provisions of the Council of Europe 1959 European Convention on Mutual Assistance in Criminal Matters.

#### **Asylum Support Services.**

189. **Mr. Stanton** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform the role of his Department in ensuring that asylum seekers do not suffer poverty; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37623/06]

**Tánaiste and Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform (Mr. McDowell):** Asylum seekers who apply to the Irish State for recognition as a refugee under the Geneva Convention are provided with all basic needs to ensure that they do not suffer poverty.

The Reception and Integration Agency (RIA) of my Department is charged with responsibility to provide accommodation for asylum seekers while their asylum application is being processed. In discharging this task, the RIA ensures that no asylum seeker residing in their accommodation centres suffers from poverty. Contractual arrangements provide for the day to day needs of asylum seekers, some of which are listed below:

- Asylum seekers residing in RIA accommodation centres have household bills in relation to the following:
  - Rent
  - heating (maintained at 20 degrees Celsius),
  - electricity,
  - lighting or
  - food (including baby food, where required, and school lunches), provided to the resident free of charge under the contract.
- Asylum seekers are provided with packs containing personal toiletries (soap, sham-

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poo, toothpaste, toilet paper, etc), which are replenished and replaced as and when required — free of charge.

- Asylum seekers also receive cleaning materials such as washing detergent and general household cleaners if they wish to clean their own rooms / bathrooms — free of charge.
- Where an asylum seeker chooses not to clean his/her room themselves, a cleaning service is provided by the accommodation centre — free of charge.
- A laundry service is available to residents at all accommodation centres — free of charge.
- Towels and bed linen are provided; replaced when required (but at least on a weekly basis); and laundered for asylum seekers — free of charge.
- All bedrooms are provided with televisions, which receive, as a minimum, RTE 1; Network 2; TV3; TG4; BBC 1; BBC 2; ITV and Channel 4 — free of charge.
- Crèche facilities are available at a number of accommodation centres, which enable residents to avail of language and other classes — free of charge.

Medical and educational services are accessed by asylum seekers on the same basis as the indigenous population. However, all asylum seekers are automatically registered for receipt of a medical card and this ensures that there is no medical expenditure falling on the asylum seeker and their families.

Exceptional needs payments such as payments in respect of school uniforms and for any needs arising from the birth of a new baby (i.e., prams/buggies, etc) are generally provided through the Community Welfare Officer (CWO).

In addition, asylum seekers also receive a weekly amount of €19.10 per adult and €9.60 per child, also through the CWO.

#### **Tribunals of Inquiry.**

190. **Mr. Sargent** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform if he or Ministers of State at his Department have been contacted by the Moriarty tribunal in the course of 2006; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37089/06]

**Tánaiste and Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform (Mr. McDowell):** Neither I nor Ministers of State at my Department have not been contacted by the Moriarty Tribunal.

#### **Visa Applications.**

191. **Aengus Ó Snodaigh** asked the Tánaiste

and Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform if the Government is planning to make adjustments to policy regarding family reunification or is planning to appeal the recent High Court decision regarding family reunification; the number of visitor visas that have been granted to family members of individuals given residency based on parents of an Irish born child; and if there is a policy of not granting requests for visitor visas to family members in such circumstances. [42050/06]

**Tánaiste and Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform (Mr. McDowell):** I presume the Deputy is referring to the recent High Court judgements delivered on 14 November 2006 on test case proceedings taken in relation to the IBC/05 Scheme. The IBC/05 scheme was initiated to provide non-EU national parents of Irish citizen children, who were born in the State prior to 1 January 2005, an opportunity to apply for permission to remain in the State on that basis.

One of the conditions of the IBC/05 scheme was that applicants were required to sign a Statutory Declaration, as provided for under the Statutory Declarations Act 1938, to accept and agree that the granting of permission to remain in the State under the IBC/05 Scheme does not confer any entitlement or legitimate expectation on any other person, whether related to the applicant or not, to enter the State. This aspect of the IBC/05 scheme forms the basis in determining visa applications in this category. However, as with all visa applications, each case is examined on its own merits. Statistical data in the manner requested by the Deputy is not currently maintained by my Department.

I am currently considering an appeal to the Supreme Court on the High Court judgements delivered on 14 November 2006. As the outcome of such an appeal is inextricably linked to any policy related to the IBC/05 scheme I am unable to comment further until those proceedings, if any, have been determined.

#### **Stardust Tragedy.**

192. **Aengus Ó Snodaigh** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform the action he will take in response to the report presented to him entitled The Stardust Fire Disaster Nothing but the Truth the Case for a New Public Inquiry on behalf of the Stardust Victims Committee; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41166/06]

**Tánaiste and Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform (Mr. McDowell):** I can inform the Deputy that the position remains as set out in my response to Parliamentary Question No. 128 on this subject of Wednesday, 22 November (39279/06).

### **Prisoner Rehabilitation.**

193. **Mr. Crowe** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform further to the recent approval of €500,000 from the Dormant Accounts Fund to provide addiction counselling and employment supports for prisoners and ex-prisoners and his stated objective of maximising the employment opportunities for prisoners and Ireland's responsibilities as a society, to actively try to help them fully reintegrate into society, his views on whether more needs to be done at a community level to achieve these objectives; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37066/06]

**Tánaiste and Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform (Mr. McDowell):** I can advise the Deputy that €0.5 million was made available from the Dormant Accounts Fund in 2006 under the Economic and Social Disadvantage Category for projects supporting Prisoners / Ex Prisoners. The funding has been equally divided between addiction counselling and employability services for prisoners: €250,000 for addiction counsellors and €250,000 for employability services.

Applications for funding were sought primarily from community and voluntary groups who had experience of working with these target groups and who could deliver on actions relating to Addiction Counselling or Employment Supports. On 23 October, 2006, the Government announced approval of an allocation of €250,000 to four community organisations to provide addiction counselling services for prisoners in Dublin prisons and a further €250,000 to two projects to provide employment supports for prisoners in the Mountjoy and Midland campuses as well as in Castlereagh and Cork prisons.

I believe that these initiatives are worthy contributions toward helping prisoners adopt law-abiding lives on release. Not only will these grants support innovative initiatives delivering services to prisoners, they will serve also to support the work of community groups in bridging the gap between prison and the community. Helping prisoners address their addictions and providing them with supports in relation to employability, both of which are important strands of Irish Prison Service strategy, benefits both the prisoners and the public safety of the community they will return to. The Irish Prison Service is endeavouring to intensify its engagement with community based agencies, both in the statutory and the community and voluntary sectors, with a view to achieving greater integration and coordination of the delivery of a range of support services to prisoners.

I also wish to advise the Deputy that my Department, through the Probation Service, provides funding to 66 Community Based Bodies which provide a range of services to offenders in local communities, e.g. pre-industrial training and education, offender management programmes,

residential accommodation, drug and alcohol abuse treatment / intervention / awareness programmes etc.

I am pleased to tell the Deputy that I have secured funding of €24.096 million in 2007 by way of financial assistance for these Voluntary Community Bodies, which is a 19% increase on the 2006 allocation of €20.227 million.

### **Tax Code.**

194. **Mr. Allen** asked the Minister for Finance his views on a VAT compensation scheme for Irish charities in view of the VAT compensation scheme introduced in Denmark for registered charities there. [41813/06]

**Minister for Finance (Mr. Cowen):** The position is that charities and non-profit groups engaged in non-commercial activity are exempt from VAT under the EU Sixth VAT Directive, with which Irish VAT law must comply. This means they do not charge VAT on the services they provide and cannot recover VAT incurred on goods and services that they purchase. Essentially only VAT registered businesses which charge VAT are able to recover VAT.

The Irish Charities Tax Reform Group (ICTRG) appears to accept that charities can not be granted VAT refunds through the tax system. However, they are still seeking the introduction of a grant or subsidy in lieu of the VAT charities pay on their business inputs and estimate that this would cost €18 million per annum. In this regard, I am aware that the Danish equivalent to the ICTRG has made proposals to the Danish Finance Ministry. I understand that a very limited scheme has been introduced.

I would add that the 140 bodies represented by the ICTRG already acknowledge that they receive €8.6 million in funding either directly or indirectly from the Exchequer. However, there are currently 7,000 charities registered with the Revenue Commissioners. It is therefore likely that the introduction of a scheme along the lines proposed by the ICTRG would cost the Exchequer significantly more than the €18 million they have estimated. The ICTRG will argue that they represent the largest charities but that is not the case as many educational and sporting organisations are also registered with the Revenue Commissioners as charitable or not-for-profit organisations. Therefore, the introduction of grant in lieu of VAT paid by registered charities would undoubtedly lead to other exempt bodies such as schools, hospitals and sporting, many of which are already registered as charities, seeking to benefit from such a system of refunds. These exempt bodies are already receiving considerable Exchequer funding.

Charities are exempt from Income Tax, DIRT, Stamp duty, Capital taxes and donations to charities are tax relieved. These are of substantial benefit to charities.



### National Lottery Funding.

195. **Aengus Ó Snodaigh** asked the Minister for Finance the amount of revenue generated by the national lottery for the Exchequer each year for the past five years; and the way it was decided to distribute the moneys. [41819/06]

**Minister for Finance (Mr. Cowen):** The amount of revenue generated for the Exchequer by the National Lottery in each of the years 2001 to 2005 is as follows:

Year	€m
2001	174.884
2002	171.263
2003	185.263
2004	187.069
2005	202.815

The Government decides on an annual basis how the surplus from the National Lottery is to be allocated in the context of the overall Estimates process. I refer the Deputy to Appendix I of the “Revised Estimates for Public Services” for the years 2002 to 2006 for details of the outturn on the National Lottery allocations by Vote and Subhead for the years 2001 to 2005.

### Tax Code.

196. **Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin** asked the Minister for Finance the estimated annual cost of making the unused part of employee tax credits refundable to those low income earners who do not benefit from the credit. [41820/06]

**Minister for Finance (Mr. Cowen):** I am advised by the Revenue Commissioners that the most recent estimated cost of making the main personal tax credits refundable when they are unused is broadly in the region of €2.1 billion annually. The main category of refund would relate to the employee credit where the annual cost of refunding the unused portion of the credit to income earners with insufficient income to fully absorb it would amount to €1.1 billion approximately. The next categories of refund in order of scale would be the basic personal credit — single, married and widowed — costing €1 billion approximately.

The estimate of €2.1 billion relates only to the cost of extending refundable tax credits to all those on Revenue’s tax files. If a refundable tax credit system were to be introduced, one would have to consider those who are not on the tax files, for example, those who are of employable age but not working, including those in social welfare. This would increase the cost significantly. Apart from the issue of cost, there would be a range of other policy and practical difficulties arising in introducing such a system. I have no

plans to introduce refundable tax credits at the present time.

### Financial Services Regulation.

197. **Mr. J. O’Keeffe** asked the Minister for Finance if he is satisfied that present arrangements in relation to investor compensation are adequate to cover the collapse of brokers holding client funds or other property; the arrangements in place; and his proposals in this regard to more adequately protect the position of investors. [41848/06]

**Minister for Finance (Mr. Cowen):** Firstly, I might explain that the present arrangements for investor compensation were introduced in 1998 on foot of an EU Directive. The Directive was transposed into Irish law by the Investor Compensation Act 1998, which established the Investor Compensation Company Ltd (ICCL) to ensure that clients of a failed investment firm receive compensation within the parameters set down in the Act. The amount of compensation payable to each eligible investor is limited to 90% of the amount lost, subject to a maximum payment of €20,000.

Following the W&R Morrogh Stockbrokers failure, a Working Group, representative of all stakeholders, was established by the Minister for Finance on 30 March 2004 to see what lessons could be learned from the failure and what steps needed to be taken to address issues that arose. On 1 November last, following an extensive review, the Final Report of the Morrogh Working Group was published and it is available on my Department’s website. The Report makes a number of recommendations with regard to legislative and regulatory issues and investor compensation funding in the event of a failure of an investment firm.

Responsibility for the implementation of the Report’s recommendations rests primarily with my Department, the Financial Regulator and the Investor Compensation Company Ltd. It is intended that a review of the implementation of the recommendations will take place during 2007. I am satisfied that the implementation of the Group’s recommendations will strengthen the framework for investor compensation in Ireland. Clearly, any policy initiatives pursued in Ireland must remain consistent with the framework for investor compensation at EU level.

### Radiation Levels.

198. **Dr. Upton** asked the Minister for Health and Children if tests for presence of abnormal radioactivity here have been carried out subsequent to the apparently mysterious ailment that struck down former Russian Prime Minister Yegor Gaidar apparently after eating breakfast in an Irish hotel on 24 November 2006; when, the location and the way such tests have been carried

out; the number of substances and the substances that were tested for; the results of such tests; and if no such tests have been carried out, the reason they have not been and when will they be carried out; the efforts that have been made to contact those who might have been in close proximity to Mr. Gaidar during his time here; if these people have been tested; if not the reason they have not been tested and when such testing will take place. [41821/06]

**Minister for Health and Children (Ms Harney):**

I am advised that there is no evidence that the illness in question was attributable to radiation. Initially, there were concerns in regard to the possible involvement of radiation and the Gardaí and the relevant hospital (the Connolly Memorial Hospital) asked the Radiological Protection Institute of Ireland (RPII) to undertake monitoring of locations in the hospital and in the NUI, Maynooth in order to provide reassurance to the public. The RPII undertook the necessary monitoring on 1 December 2006. The results of the monitoring did not show any abnormal radiation levels. This information was conveyed to the hospital and the Gardaí by the RPII.

**Child Care Services.**

199. **Ms Burton** asked the Minister for Health and Children the number of childminders availing of the tax break for childminders introduced in budget 2006, the number in total and the breakdown by county; the explanation she received for the relatively low level of take up; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [41866/06]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health and Children (Mr. B. Lenihan):** To apply for the Childcare Services Relief, Childminders are obliged to make an annual tax return of their child minding income to the Revenue Commissioners. For tax exemption purposes, Childminders must also provide evidence that they have notified their local City/County Childcare Committee (CCC), through the local Child minding Advisory Officer that they are providing a child minding service.

The number of voluntary notifications made by Childminders to the CCCs since the introduction of the Childcare Services Relief in December 2005 has been monitored by my Office on a regular basis. The latest figures available as of 1 September 2006 are summarised in the table. Figures for the period to 1 December 2006 are being collated and are expected to be available shortly.

The first tax year for which this Relief applies is 2006 and tax returns for 2006 must be made by the end of October 2007. Until that time, the final take-up of this initiative cannot be fully established.

Voluntary Notifications to CCCs

Child Care Committee	September 2006
Carlow	2
Cavan	7
Clare*	9
Cork City	0
Cork County	0
Dún Laoghaire/Rathdown	2
Donegal	0
Dublin City	1
Fingal	38
Galway	11
Kerry**	70
Kildare*	16
Kilkenny	2
Laois*	4
Leitrim**	24
Limerick City*	1
Limerick County*	5
Longford*	1
Louth	0
Mayo	0
Meath	16
Monaghan	7
North Tipperary*	2
Offaly*	6
Roscommon	0
Sligo	0
South Dublin	19
South Tipperary	3
Waterford City	17
Waterford County	11
Westmeath*	12
Wexford	0
Wicklow	32
Total	318

\*Figures for these areas are held by and provided by the Health Service Executive via the CCC.

\*\*Figure is provisional and pending finalisation.

**Adoption Services.**

200. **Mr. Neville** asked the Minister for Health and Children the position regarding adoptions between Ireland and Belarus. [41904/06]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health and Children (Mr. B. Lenihan):** The examination of the draft protocol agreement with Belarus has raised a number of constitutional and legal concerns. The Department is currently attempting to find ways to resolve these issues with the mutual agreement of both parties.

The difficulties in attempting to satisfy both the Belorussian authorities requirements and the legal and constitutional imperatives that apply in

[Mr. B. Lenihan.]

this jurisdiction are currently being worked through. It is very difficult to be specific regarding a timescale for the conclusion of these negotiations but I can confirm that the Department is treating this matter as a priority.

#### Health Services.

201. **Mr. F. McGrath** asked the Minister for Health and Children if a long-term care plan will be put in place for a person (details supplied) in Dublin 5; and if their home help hours will be increased as a matter of priority. [42342/06]

219. **Mr. F. McGrath** asked the Minister for Health and Children if a home care plan will be put in place for a person (details supplied); and if she will make this a priority case. [42002/06]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health and Children (Mr. S. Power):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 201 and 219 together.

Operational responsibility for the management and delivery of health and personal social services was assigned to the Health Service Executive under the Health Act 2004 and funding for all health services has been provided as part of its overall vote. Therefore, the Executive is the appropriate body to consider the particular case raised by the Deputy. My Department has requested the Parliamentary Affairs Division of the Executive to arrange to have the matter investigated and to have a reply issued directly to the Deputy.

202. **Mr. F. McGrath** asked the Minister for Health and Children if she will work with persons (details supplied) in Dublin 5 in planning a long-term care package for their son with an intellectual disability; and if she will work with the local council on this matter. [42343/06]

216. **Mr. F. McGrath** asked the Minister for Health and Children if she will put in a long-term care plan for a person (details supplied) in Dublin 5 with a disability; and if she will work with the family on this matter. [41968/06]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health and Children (Mr. T. O'Malley):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 202 and 216 together.

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.

#### Medical Cards.

203. **Ms C. Murphy** asked the Minister for Health and Children the number of doctor only medical cards by county that have been applied for; the number of applications that have resulted in the issuance of such a card; the average time taken for application to issue; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [41814/06]

**Minister for Health and Children (Ms Harney):** The most recent information provided by the Health Service Executive (HSE) to my Department shows that 48,761 GP visit cards had been issued as at 29th November, 2006. More detailed statistical data provided by the HSE to my Department and correct as of 1st November, 2006 contains county-by-county figures for the number of GP visit cards and this information is attached.

As the Health Service Executive has the operational and funding responsibility for this benefit, it is the appropriate body to provide the other information sought by the Deputy. My Department has therefore requested the Parliamentary Affairs Division of the Executive to arrange to address the matter and to have a reply issued directly to the Deputy.

HSE — Shared Services

Primary Care Reimbursement Service

Position regarding medical cards as at 1st November 2006

Regions	Number of Family Units as at 1st November 2006	Number of Eligible Persons on Medical Cards as at 1st November 2006	Number of Eligible Persons on GP Visit Cards as at 1st November 2006	Number of Eligible Persons as at 1st November 2006 as % of Population (2006 Census)	Number of Eligible Persons 1st October 2006 as % of Population (2002 Census)	Population
<i>Eastern Region</i>				%	%	
Dublin	198,621	288,636	4,502	24.71	24.40	1,186,159
Kildare	26,581	40,597	967	22.34	21.97	186,075
Wicklow	20,470	29,588	945	24.17	23.74	126,330
Total	245,672	358,821	6,414	24.37	24.04	1,498,564

Regions	Number of Family Units as at 1st November 2006	Number of Eligible Persons on Medical Cards as at 1st November 2006	Number of Eligible Persons on GP Visit Cards as at 1st November 2006	Number of Eligible Persons as at 1st November 2006 as % of Population (2006 Census)	Number of Eligible Persons 1st October 2006 as % of Population (2002 Census)	Population
<i>Midland</i>				%	%	
Laois	12,233	17,980	942	28.24	28.00	67,012
Longford	8,988	12,988	577	39.48	39.29	34,361
Offaly	14,149	20,525	1,021	30.52	30.42	70,604
Westmeath	15,094	22,176	948	29.12	28.77	79,403
Total	50,464	73,669	3,488	30.69	30.47	251,380
<i>Mid-Western</i>						
Clare	22,225	33,152	841	30.68	30.57	110,800
Limerick	37,219	53,537	1,216	29.78	29.55	183,863
Tipperary NR	14,515	20,909	575	32.56	32.16	65,988
Total	73,959	107,598	2,632	30.56	30.34	360,651
<i>North Eastern</i>						
Cavan	13,573	20,580	971	33.69	32.84	63,961
Louth	24,449	37,710	1,635	35.48	34.65	110,894
Meath	21,866	32,086	1,733	20.80	20.25	162,621
Monaghan	11,140	16,352	766	30.67	30.63	55,816
Total	71,028	106,728	5,105	28.44	27.83	393,292
<i>North Western</i>						
Donegal	43,078	70,940	2,832	50.20	49.75	146,956
Leitrim	7,797	11,681	457	42.09	41.62	28,837
Sligo	13,870	19,716	878	33.84	33.31	60,863
Total	64,745	102,337	4,167	45.00	44.53	236,656
<i>South Eastern</i>						
Carlow	11,055	16,939	1,085	35.71	35.10	50,471
Kilkenny	14,831	20,952	1,096	25.23	25.00	87,394
Tipperary SR	21,013	29,696	1,468	37.52	37.02	83,052
Waterford	25,923	37,955	1,239	36.31	36.12	107,942
Wexford	28,045	42,766	1,743	33.82	33.62	131,615
Total	100,867	148,308	6,631	33.65	33.34	460,474
<i>Southern</i>						
Cork	99,798	137,820	6,118	29.93	29.73	480,909
Kerry	30,539	42,325	1,752	31.57	31.67	139,616
Total	130,337	180,145	7,870	30.30	30.17	620,525
<i>Western</i>						
Galway	47,542	68,739	2,950	31.03	30.83	231,035
Mayo	33,507	48,735	1,884	40.94	40.75	123,648
Roscommon	14,788	21,264	885	37.73	37.19	58,700
Total	95,837	138,738	5,719	34.95	34.70	413,383
Grand Total	832,909	1,216,344	42,026	29.71	29.41	4,234,925

The population figures for each area and nationally above, are taken from the 2006 census.

### National Lottery Funding.

204. **Aengus Ó Snodaigh** asked the Minister for Health and Children if she will give a breakdown per constituency for the past five years of projects funded by the national lottery moneys through her Department. [41827/06]

**Minister for Health and Children (Ms Harney):** My Department does not record awards made from the National Lottery Discretionary Fund by constituency. However, details of each project awarded funding over the past five years are set out in the attached table. Organisations can also apply directly to the Health Service Executive for grants under National Lottery funding. 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.

### Ambulance Service.

205. **Mr. Connaughton** asked the Minister for Health and Children the reason there has been a delay in introducing modern satellite technology to allow ambulances to locate accident victims and seriously ill patients on time; if her attention has been drawn to the fact that there has been almost ten years of planning a computer aided centralised navigation system for ambulances in the west which has not been implemented; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [41844/06]

**Minister for Health and Children (Ms Harney):** Operational responsibility for the management and delivery of health and personal social services was assigned to the Health Service Executive under the Health Act 2004 and funding for all health services has been provided as part of its overall vote. Therefore, the Executive is the appropriate body to consider the particular issue raised by the Deputy. My Department has requested the Parliamentary Affairs Division of the Executive to arrange to have the matter investigated and to have a reply issued directly to the Deputy.

### Medical Aids and Appliances.

206. **Mr. Bruton** asked the Minister for Health and Children when she last answered a parliamentary question on the introduction of digital hearing aids; her views on whether since she ceased playing a role in reporting progress to the Houses of the Oireachtas on this project, greater progress has been achieved by the Health Service Executive in delivering this technology; and the role she and her Department should play in relation to setting targets or monitoring progress on behalf of the HSE in respect of this project. [41845/06]

**Minister for Health and Children (Ms Harney):** I refer the Deputy to the reply I gave him in

relation to digital hearing aids on the 24th March, 2005. 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 Services.

207. **Mr. Kehoe** asked the Minister for Health and Children the qualifying conditions for children to obtain braces, for example, age and size of gap between teeth; and when a person (details supplied) in County Carlow will be seen by an orthodontist. [41849/06]

**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. Kenny** asked the Minister for Health and Children if the health centre planned for an area (details supplied) in County Dublin will be a public venture, private venture or a public private partnership; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [41886/06]

**Minister for Health and Children (Ms Harney):** The Primary Care Strategy aims to develop services in the community to give people direct access to integrated multi-disciplinary teams of general practitioners, nurses, health care assistants, home helps, occupational therapists and others.

It has been estimated that up to 95% of people's health and social services needs can be properly met within a primary care setting and the establishment of new Primary Care Teams can contribute greatly to enhancing community based health services in these areas. The provision of the appropriate infrastructure for the effective functioning of the teams is being considered by the HSE, having regard to a number of factors. These include the type and configuration of the services involved, the mixed public/private nature of our health system, the suitability of existing infrastructure and the capital requirements of the health services generally over the coming years.

As the Health Service Executive has the operational and funding responsibility for Primary Care services, it is the appropriate body to consider the particular matter raised by the Deputy. 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. Kenny** asked the Minister for Health and Children her plans for a methadone clinic in an area (details supplied) in County Dublin; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [41887/06]

**Minister for Health and Children (Ms Harney):**

The 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.

210. **Mr. Kenny** asked the Minister for Health and Children the number of methadone clinics being planned in the Dublin area; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [41888/06]

**Minister for Health and Children (Ms Harney):**

The 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.

211. **Mr. Kenny** asked the Minister for Health and Children the considerations that apply when selecting sites for methadone clinics; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [41889/06]

**Minister for Health and Children (Ms Harney):**

The 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.

212. **Mr. Ring** asked the Minister for Health and Children when a person (details supplied) in County Mayo will be called for an appointment. [41901/06]

**Minister for Health and Children (Ms Harney):**

Operational responsibility for the management and delivery of health and personal social services was assigned to the Health Service Executive under the Health Act 2004 and funding for all health services has been provided as part of its overall vote. Therefore, the Executive is the appropriate body to consider the particular case raised by the Deputy. My Department has requested the Parliamentary Affairs Division of the Executive to arrange to have this case investi-

gated and to have a reply issued directly to the Deputy.

**Hospital Services.**

213. **Mr. O'Shea** asked the Minister for Health and Children the present status of the national radiotherapy guidelines which were prepared for her; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [41950/06]

**Minister for Health and Children (Ms Harney):**

Quality standards for the provision of radiation oncology services for public patients have been prepared by an expert group established on foot of a Government decision in January 2004. The Health Service Executive has advised my Department that it is applying these standards to radiation oncology services that it provides or arranges to have provided.

**Health Services.**

214. **Mr. O'Connor** asked the Minister for Health and Children the action she will take with the Health Service Executive to ensure that there is no further delay with the long awaited redevelopment of a health centre (details supplied) in Dublin 24; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [41951/06]

**Minister for Health and Children (Ms Harney):**

The Primary Care Strategy aims to develop services in the community to give people direct access to integrated multi-disciplinary teams of general practitioners, nurses, health care assistants, home helps, occupational therapists and others.

It has been estimated that up to 95% of people's health and social services needs can be properly met within a primary care setting and the establishment of new Primary Care Teams can contribute greatly to enhancing community based health services in these areas.

The provision of the appropriate infrastructure for the effective functioning of the teams is being considered by the HSE, having regard to a number of factors. These include the type and configuration of the services involved, the mixed public/private nature of our health system, the suitability of existing infrastructure and the capital requirements of the health services generally over the coming years.

As the Health Service Executive has the operational and funding responsibility for Primary Care services, it is the appropriate body to consider the particular matter raised by the Deputy. 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.

**General Practitioner Co-operatives.**

215. **Mr. O'Connor** asked the Minister for Health and Children if progress is being made in

[Mr. O'Connor.]

respect of the need for an out of hours general practitioner service in the Tallaght, Dublin 24 region; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [41952/06]

**Minister for Health and Children (Ms Harney):**

Out of hours co-operatives allow general practitioners to put in place arrangements to provide services to their patients, while their surgeries are closed in the evenings, on weekends and bank holidays. The development of GP co-operatives is in line with the overall health service policy of strengthening primary care services and ensuring that to the greatest extent possible, people's care needs are met in the primary care setting.

Out of hours co-operatives are now in place in all Health Service Executive (HSE) areas, providing coverage in all or in part of all counties. Between 2000 and 2005 approximately €105 million was allocated to the HSE for out of hours GP co-operatives and in 2006 almost €34 million is available to the Executive for these services.

As the Health Service Executive has the operational and funding responsibility for this service, it is the appropriate body to consider the particular issue raised in the Deputy's question. 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. 216 answered with Question No. 202.*

**Services for People with Disabilities.**

217. **Ms McManus** asked the Minister for Health and Children her views on the funding deficit and staffing shortage in a service (details supplied) in County Kildare; her plans to address same; if her attention has been drawn to the fact that some services provided are in crisis and unless adequate resources are made available they will be forced to reduce services; her response to these funding difficulties and the impact this has on people with intellectual and associated disabilities; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [41969/06]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health and Children (Mr. T. O'Malley):**

As the Deputy may be aware, €10m was made available in the 2006 Budget to the Health Service Executive, to address core under funding and core staffing issues in services for people with disabilities provided by the voluntary sector. My Department understands that this funding has been allocated by the Health Service Executive.

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.

**Medical Records.**

218. **Ms Lynch** asked the Minister for Health and Children the reason the medical records of patients in the Cork area dating from 1950 to the late 1970s were destroyed; the number of records that were destroyed; the difficulties that this has created for people such as those affected by the hepatitis C case in accessing information; if there is a method currently in place to electronically store records to avoid a similar destruction in the future; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [41993/06]

**Minister for Health and Children (Ms Harney):**

Operational responsibility for the management and delivery of health and personal social services was assigned to the Health Service Executive under the Health Act, 2004. Therefore the Executive is the appropriate body to consider the particular matter raised by the Deputy. My Department has requested the Parliamentary Affairs Division of the Executive to arrange to have the matter investigated and to have a reply issued directly to the Deputy. I might add that the Hepatitis C and HIV Compensation Tribunal has made awards to approximately 2,000 people in relation to infection with Hepatitis C/HIV through the administration within the State of blood and blood products. The non-availability of records has not prevented the Tribunal from making determinations in relevant cases.

*Question No. 219 answered with Question No. 201.*

**Health Service Allowances.**

220. **Mr. F. McGrath** asked the Minister for Health and Children if she will review an application for domiciliary care allowance for a person (details supplied) in Dublin 5; and if she will support the family on this matter. [42005/06]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health and Children (Mr. T. O'Malley):**

Operational responsibility for the management and delivery of health and personal social services was assigned to the Health Service Executive under the Health Act 2004. Therefore, the Executive is the appropriate body to consider the particular case raised by the Deputy. My Department has requested the Parliamentary Affairs Division of the Executive to arrange to have the matter investigated and to have a reply issued directly to the Deputy.

**Hospital Waiting Lists.**

221. **Mr. Penrose** asked the Minister for Health and Children the number of people, in County Westmeath, who are waiting to be assessed by an

audiologist for hearing tests; the number on the waiting list at Midland Regional Hospital Mullingar for the fitting of hearing aids; if she will confirm that the waiting list extends to a 12 month period; if in this context, she will take steps to have a consultant audiologist ENT specialist appointed to Mullingar to enable persons who have been approved for hearing aids to have same fitted; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [42067/06]

**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.

**Inter-Country Adoptions.**

222. **Mr. Penrose** asked the Minister for Health and Children if, for the purpose of adoption there is a bilateral agreement in place between Ireland and Russia; if not, the position regarding the ratification of the Hague Convention by Russia; if this means that Russia will be closed to Irish applicants who wish to adopt in that country; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [42068/06]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health and Children (Mr. B. Lenihan):** The Adoption Board currently has bi-lateral adoption agreements with China, Belarus, Romania, Vietnam, Thailand and The Philippines. Belarus and Romania have, however, ceased inter-country adoption. I am not aware of the position regarding the ratification of the Hague Convention by Russia.

The legislation which will ratify the Hague Convention, bringing it into force under Irish law, is currently being drafted. If the Russian authorities have not ratified the Convention by the time it comes into force under Irish law, or if the Adoption Board does not have a bi-lateral Agreement with the Russian authorities, Irish applicants will no longer be able to adopt in Russia.

**Health Repayment Scheme.**

223. **Mr. Penrose** asked the Minister for Health and Children the persons who can apply for repayment under the health repayment scheme; if in relation to a person who was in a nursing home and died in 1993 and who had been wrongly charged the estate of this person can make a claim for such repayment; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [42069/06]

**Minister for Health and Children (Ms Harney):** The Health (Repayment Scheme) Act 2006 came

into effect on 30 June 2006. The repayment scheme was launched publicly by the Health Service Executive (HSE) and the scheme administrator KPMG/McCann Fitzgerald on 14 August 2006. A national advertising campaign and a helpline also commenced on this date.

Under the scheme all those fully eligible persons who were wrongly charged and are alive will have their charges repaid in full. The estates of all those fully eligible persons, who were wrongly charged and died since 9 December 1998 will have the charges repaid in full. The scheme does not allow for repayments to the estates of those who died prior to that date.

The decision to limit repayments to the estates of those who died in the six years prior to 9 December 2004 reflects the reference in the Supreme Court judgement to the statute of Limitations — “the state has available to it the Statute of Limitations i.e. a six year limit”. The Government has a responsibility to have regard to what the Supreme Court said, in order to limit the scale of total repayments which today's taxpayer would otherwise have to fund. The scheme strikes a fair balance in this regard.

**Infectious Diseases.**

224. **Mr. Ferris** asked the Minister for Health and Children if she will confirm that a person in the advanced stages of the AIDS virus was admitted to the psychiatric wing of Kerry General Hospital on 22 November 2006, having previously worked in another hospital; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [42070/06]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health and Children (Mr. T. O'Malley):** Operational responsibility for the management and delivery of health and personal social services was assigned to the Health Service Executive under the Health Act 2004. Therefore, the Executive is the appropriate body to consider the particular case raised by the Deputy. My Department has requested the Parliamentary Affairs Division of the Executive to arrange to have the matter investigated and to have a reply issued directly to the Deputy.

**Gas Prices.**

225. **Mr. Crowe** asked the Minister for Communications, Marine and Natural Resources if his attention has been drawn to the situation in which Bord Gáis customers are being charged VAT on units of unused gas; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41818/06]

**Minister for Communications, Marine and Natural Resources (Mr. N. Dempsey):** I am satisfied that Bord Gais Éireann (BGÉ) complies with existing legislation and with Regulations and Orders made by the Revenue Commissioners relating to VAT. The collection of VAT charges



[Mr. N. Dempsey.]

on supplies of natural gas is a matter for BGE and the Revenue Commissioners.

I understand that BGE does offer a special package to customers who contract to use a stipulated amount (minimum take) of gas in a 12-month period. If all of the contracted gas is not used, however, the customers are advised that they will be billed for the difference between the contracted amount and actual usage. The Revenue Commissioners regard the Minimum Take Adjustment as gas related and liable to VAT at the rate applicable to natural gas, currently 13.5%.

#### National Lottery Funding.

226. **Aengus Ó Snodaigh** asked the Minister for Communications, Marine and Natural Resources if he will give a breakdown per constituency for the past five years of projects funded by the national lottery moneys through his Department. [41826/06]

**Minister for Communications, Marine and Natural Resources (Mr. N. Dempsey):** No projects have been funded by National Lottery moneys through my Department in the last five years.

#### Fishing Vessel Licences.

227. **Mr. Howlin** asked the Minister for Communications, Marine and Natural Resources if his Department received applications for registry of a ship (details supplied); if his attention has been drawn to the fact and if he will explain the reason a certificate of registry was not issued from 1999 when the current owners purchased the vessel, thereby making legal fishing impossible; the basis on which the provisions of S.I. No. 245 of 2005 and S.I. No. 464 of 2005 were not applied in relation to registration of this vessel; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41870/06]

**Minister of State at the Department of Communications, Marine and Natural Resources (Mr. Browne):** All matters relating to the Licensing of individual Sea Fishing vessels are a matter for the independent Sea Fishing Boat Licensing Authority established under the Sea Fisheries (Amendment) Act 2003. However, I have been informed by the Authority that their records show that the individuals concerned applied to have their vessel registered in May 2000 and a Certificate of Registry issued to them in July of that year. A second Certificate was issued to the individuals in 2005 as a result of a re-measurement of the vessel.

#### Electricity Generation.

228. **Mr. N. O'Keefe** asked the Minister for Communications, Marine and Natural Resources

the details of the development of a new power station at Aghada, County Cork based on the recent announcement of 30 November 2006; and if he will confirm the capacity of the power station and the persons who will fund this development. [41895/06]

**Minister for Communications, Marine and Natural Resources (Mr. N. Dempsey):** Any decision to grant shareholder approval for ESB investment in a new power generation plant at Aghada would be conditional on agreement on a strategy to address the company's dominance and market power, particularly with regard to mid-merit price-setting plant, along the lines agreed with the Commission for Energy Regulation (CER). Any such approval would also be strictly contingent on compliance with all terms and conditions which accompany the authorisation of 30th November by the CER.

The funding mechanism for the development of approximately 400MW is a matter for the ESB and would be addressed as part of the shareholder approval process.

#### Harbours and Piers.

229. **Mr. Perry** asked the Minister for Communications, Marine and Natural Resources when works will begin on a harbour development project (details supplied) which has all preparatory works in place through the local authority; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42007/06]

**Minister of State at the Department of Communications, Marine and Natural Resources (Mr. Browne):** The harbour at Greencastle is owned by Donegal County Council and responsibility for its maintenance and development rests with the local authority in the first instance. In 2006 the Department allocated funding of €2.4 million towards the commencement of the first phase of a development project for Greencastle Harbour under the Fishery Harbours Development Programme. Under that Programme the Department provides 75% funding and the Local Authority pays the balance of 25%. The proposed development at Greencastle has received full planning permission.

The first phase is the construction of a rock breakwater. The second phase involves the construction of 100 metres of berthage for mussel dredger boats. The third and final phase would be the construction of a 250m long deepwater pier. The Department is currently awaiting confirmation from Donegal County Council that they will contribute the 25% funding to the development.

The question of providing further funding to the project in future years depends on the amount of Exchequer funding available for fishery harbours and overall national priorities.

### Forbairt na Gaeilge.

230. D'fhiafraigh **Mr. Sargent** den Aire Gnóthaí Eachtracha an bhfuil an Rialtas ag cloí leis an socrú a rinneadh ag Cill Rímhinn i dtaobh Achta Teanga ó thuaidh. [41822/06]

**Minister for Foreign Affairs (Mr. D. Ahern):** Leagann Aguisín B le Comhaontú Chill Rímhinn amach gealltanais Rialtas na Breataine i leith cearta daonna, comhionannais, íobartaigh, agus ábhair eile. I measc na hábhair seo, tá gealltanais ar leith tugtha go leagfaí faoi bhráid na Parlaiminte Acht Teanga do Thuaisceart na hÉireann, agus go ndéanfaí comh-oibriú leis an bhFeidhmiúchán nua le forbairt na Gaeilge a chosaint agus a chur chun cinn.

Mar aon leis an ngealltanais seo, cuireann Acht Thuaisceart na hÉireann (Comhaontú Chill Rímhinn) 2006 a achtaíodh i Westminster ar an 22 Samhain 2006, iallach ar an bhFeidhmiúchán nua straitéis a bhunú a dhéanann cur síos ar an slí ina mbeartaíonn sé forbairt na teanga a chur chun cinn agus a chosaint.

Déanfaidh mé an chur chuige atá beartaithe ag Rialtas na Breataine i leith na reachtaíochta a bhaineann leis an nGaeilge a phlé leis an Rúnaí Stáit, Peter Hain, nuair a bhuailfidh mé leis ag an gcéad chruinniú eile den gComhdháil Idir-Rialtasach na Breataine-na hÉireann an tseachtain seo chugainn.

### Emigrant Welfare.

231. **Mr. O'Connor** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the progress of the Irish abroad initiative; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41945/06]

**Minister for Foreign Affairs (Mr. D. Ahern):** Maintaining and strengthening links with our communities abroad is a key priority of my Department. Officials in our diplomatic missions and in the Irish Abroad Unit are very active in this regard and work closely with Irish community organisations across a wide range of issues.

The strong commitment of the Government to support our community abroad is reflected in the unprecedented level of funding secured for emigrant services. This year, €12 million is being disbursed to assist our communities abroad, an increase of 45% on 2005. The allocation for next year is €15.2 million, 27% more than this year. Overall, this represents a massive fifteen-fold increase since 1997.

While the needs of the vulnerable members of our community in Britain remain a particular area of concern, I am pleased that increased funding has enabled us to support a much wider range of initiatives than was possible in the past. Government funding is now supporting a number of capital projects, as well as initiatives that help to sustain Irish community networks. Another important area relates to initiatives that support

homeless Irish people. The Simon Community in London estimates that the number of homeless Irish in central London has fallen from over 600 in 1999 to under 100 this year. I was pleased to note that Simon credits Irish Government funding with having played a key role in this.

The interests of the Irish in the United States are an important priority for the Government with the issue of the undocumented Irish being an area of particular concern. In all of our dealings with key figures in the US Administration and Legislature, we emphasise our strong support for measures that would enable the undocumented Irish to regularise their status and have open to them a path to permanent residence.

The Government is also working very closely with Irish community organisations that assist the Irish in the United States. I am happy to support them in their important work and have approved funding to them of over €1 million this year.

The Government has also supported Irish community groups in Australia and Canada, as well as a number of organisations in Ireland that are engaged in activities of benefit to Irish people abroad. In addition, this year I was happy to approve funding for the first time to Irish community organisations in Argentina, South Africa and Zimbabwe.

We will continue to support, and maintain very close contact with, organisations that do invaluable work for our community abroad. In this way, we will ensure that our response to identified needs is effective, and is developed further in the period ahead.

232. **Mr. O'Connor** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if he will report on contacts with the incoming congressional leadership in Washington DC in respect of undocumented Irish in the United States of America; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41946/06]

**Minister for Foreign Affairs (Mr. D. Ahern):** The welfare of the undocumented Irish in the United States is an issue of the highest priority for the Government. I raise our concerns in all of my dealings with key figures in the US Congress and Administration. In particular, I emphasise our strong support for measures that would enable the undocumented to regularise their status and have open to them a path to permanent residency.

Since the mid-term Congressional elections, I have written to senior US legislators to congratulate them on their re-election. In doing so, I have taken the opportunity to emphasise again the Government's deep commitment on the issue of the undocumented. Our Ambassador in Washington is also very active in highlighting our concerns in his on-going contacts with the incoming Congressional leadership, as are officials of our Consulates across the United States.

[Mr. D. Ahern.]

We are also maintaining very close contact with our community in the United States. I had another meeting in New York on 10 November with the Irish Lobby for Immigration Reform, an organisation that is proving highly effective in communicating the Irish dimension to this issue on Capitol Hill and elsewhere.

I greatly appreciate and welcome the renewed commitment of Senators Kennedy and McCain to the advancement in the new Congress of their comprehensive approach to immigration reform. In cooperation with them, I look forward to a further intensification of the Government's efforts on behalf of the undocumented, in particular when the incoming Congress is convened in the New Year.

### Overseas Development Aid.

233. **Mr. O'Connor** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the position regarding Ireland's relationship with the Kingdom of Lesotho. [41947/06]

**Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs (Mr. C. Lenihan):** Lesotho has a special place in the history of Ireland's official development assistance. The Lesotho aid programme, established in 1975, was our first and for many years our largest development cooperation programme.

Lesotho is one of the world's poorest countries, ranked 149 on the UN Human Development Index (HDI). Half the population lives below the poverty line with an income of less than \$1 a day. Over 30% of the adult population are living with HIV/AIDS, which is one of the highest rates of infection in the world.

Ireland's aid programme in Lesotho has expanded significantly in recent years, with the budget increasing from €6 million in 1999 to €9.2 million in 2006. Our aid is primarily directed at rural communities located in the remote mountain districts where poverty is deepest, with a clear focus on health and education. Irish Aid also assists in the improvement of basic infrastructure in rural areas — roads, footbridges, water supplies and sanitation facilities.

Tackling HIV/AIDS continues to be a high priority for Irish Aid in Lesotho. The approach is a comprehensive one, which places equal emphasis on preventing the spread of the pandemic and on the care and treatment of those who have fallen victim to the virus. This year almost €1 million has been allocated to HIV/AIDS-related initiatives under the bilateral country programme.

In addition, in September 2006, Ireland extended its partnership with the Clinton Foundation to include Lesotho. Under this new agreement, Irish funding for the Foundation's work in Lesotho will reach €10 million over the next five years. The focus of the partnership is support to

the national responses of Lesotho to the HIV/AIDS pandemic, particularly in the areas of testing and counselling, the provision of anti-retroviral treatments and critical support for the national health systems.

234. **Mr. O'Connor** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the assistance Ireland is giving to fight AIDS in Africa under the global campaign Unite for Children, Unite against AIDS. [41948/06]

**Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs (Mr. C. Lenihan):** The HIV/AIDS pandemic presents a major challenge to developing countries, especially in Africa.

Children are severely affected. In sub-Saharan Africa 12 million children under the age of 17 have lost one or both parents to AIDS and it is estimated that the figure will rise to over 15 million by 2010. Children account for 14% of new global HIV infections and 18% of AIDS related deaths.

In response to the increasing vulnerability of children infected and affected by HIV, UNICEF launched a Global Campaign 'Unite for Children, Unite against AIDS' in late 2005. The Campaign works with partners to provide and mobilise support for child-focused comprehensive national AIDS programmes that are fully integrated within reproductive, child and adolescent health, education and social welfare programmes. It seeks to address four key needs of children infected and affected by HIV: preventing the transmission of HIV from mother to child during birth; providing paediatric treatment for those infected; preventing infection among adolescents, and protecting and providing support for children affected by HIV including orphans.

Speaking at the launch of UNICEF's Global Campaign in Ireland, the Taoiseach announced that up to 20% of additional Irish Aid funding for HIV and other communicable diseases would be allocated to interventions that benefit children. This commitment was reiterated in the Government's recently published White Paper on Irish Aid. The Government is honouring its commitment through Irish Aid's work at global, regional and country levels with a range of partners including governments, multilateral organisations and non-governmental partners. International agencies including the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, TB and Malaria provide funding for programmes to meet the needs of children. Ireland is a strong supporter of the Global Fund and to date €60 million in funding has been released to that organisation.

The recently signed agreement with the Clinton Foundation will support the provision of paediatric treatment and the prevention of mother to children transmission of HIV-AIDS in Mozambique and Lesotho. On World AIDS Day the Clinton Foundation announced a major

breakthrough in securing reduced prices for paediatric anti-HIV drugs. Direct support to orphans and vulnerable children for school assistance, health, nutrition and psycho-social care is a key component of our bilateral assistance programmes in Zambia and Uganda and our regional AIDS programme. Irish Aid supports research related to school-based HIV prevention in Zambia and Tanzania. Our support to Ghana's national HIV response specifically focuses on children through the work of UNICEF.

This year, funding of over €8 million has been approved for UNICEF to implement two programmes in direct support of their Global Campaign. The first, in Ghana, focuses on the four components of the Campaign with a particular emphasis on empowering young boys and girls to protect themselves from HIV infection. The second, in Eastern Europe and Central Asia, focuses on six countries in the region which are experiencing the fastest growth in HIV infection rates and provides a package of services for adolescents who are most at risk of HIV infection.

235. **Mr. O'Connor** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs what countries are being assisted by Irish Aid; and if he will make a statement detailing the budget in each case. [41949/06]

**Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs (Mr. C. Lenihan):** While Irish Aid provides assistance through different partners in over ninety countries worldwide, the primary focus of the bilateral aid programme is on eight programme countries, six of which are in Africa and two in Asia. These are Ethiopia, Lesotho, Mozambique, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia, Timor Leste and Vietnam. The approximate budgets for each country in 2006 are as follows:

	€million
<i>Africa:</i>	
Ethiopia	30
Lesotho	9.2
Mozambique	29
Tanzania	26
Uganda	32
Zambia	19.4
<i>Asia:</i>	
Timor Leste	4.8
Vietnam	7

Details of funding to other countries can be found in the Irish Aid Annual Reports which are available for download on the Irish Aid website: [www.irishaid.gov.ie](http://www.irishaid.gov.ie)

In the recently launched White Paper on Irish Aid, the Government announced that in the medium term the number of programme countries will increase from eight to ten. Malawi is to

be the ninth Irish Aid programme country. In addition, Irish Aid will increase its support to fragile states, with a specific focus on Liberia and Sierra Leone in West Africa.

### Passport Applications.

236. **Mr. Kehoe** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the number of passports being replaced annually due to them being lost or stolen; and the figures for each of the past ten years. [42066/06]

### Minister for Foreign Affairs (Mr. D. Ahern):

The number of Irish passports reported as lost or stolen has generally remained consistent at between 3.5% and 4.5% of those issued each year. The table shows the relevant figures for the years 2000 to 2005. The figures for the earlier years requested are not immediately to hand but, I understand, that the percentage of lost/stolen passports during that period also remained consistent in the 3.5% to 4.5% bracket.

Year	Lost	Stolen
2000	12,734	1,413
2001	18,587	4,893
2002	17,170	1,763
2003	19,041	2,774
2004	20,075	2,243
2005	22,160	2,841

The Government has invested heavily (€34M) in passport development in recent years. As a result, the Irish passport now contains a range of sophisticated anti-fraud elements. It is widely regarded as among the best and most secure in the world.

The most recent upgrade (€6.6M) in October this year involved the introduction of the ePassport which includes the addition of facial imaging as a biometric marker. The new ePassport will help ensure that lost or stolen passports cannot be used for impersonation purposes, as any attempt to substitute the original photo will be readily detectable.

### National Lottery Funding.

237. **Aengus Ó Snodaigh** asked the Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism if he will give a breakdown per constituency for the past five years of projects funded by the national lottery moneys through his Department. [41824/06]

### Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism (Mr. O'Donoghue):

The total amount of National Lottery funding provided by my Department to projects for the last five years is €396,762,203 in respect of sports capital funding. However, as statistics are not retained in my Department on the basis of constituencies, it is not possible to provide the information as requested by the Deputy. Details of allocations for the sports capital programme on a county basis are contained in

[Mr. O'Donoghue.]

the Annual Reports of my Department, copies of which are available in the Oireachtas Library.

### Sports Capital Programme.

238. **Mr. O'Connor** asked the Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism the schedule being followed in respect of the capital sports grants programme. [41940/06]

**Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism (Mr. O'Donoghue):** The sports capital programme, which is administered by my Department, allocates funding to sporting and community organisations at local, regional and national level throughout the country. The programme is advertised on an annual basis.

The 2007 round of the sports capital programme was advertised on 15th and 16th October last. The closing date for receipt of applications was November 24th last. All of the applications received before the deadline will be evaluated against the programme's detailed assessment criteria, which are outlined in the guidelines, terms and conditions of the programme. I intend to announce the grant allocations for the programme as soon as possible after the assessment process has been completed.

### Job Losses.

239. **Mr. Deasy** asked the Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment if he will

detail each notification of redundancies to his Department by companies in Waterford city and county in each year from the beginning of 2002 up to 30 November, 2006; the name of the company and the number of redundancies involved in each case; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41967/06]

**Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Mr. Killeen):** The number of collective redundancies notified to this Department from the beginning of 2002 to 30th November 2006 for Waterford City and County was 2077. A yearly breakdown is shown in the table.

A collective redundancy occurs where the minimum number of employees employed in a company would be greater than 20 and the number of employees it is proposed to make redundant within that workforce would be at least 5 and the organisation is thereby obliged to notify the Department of the collective redundancy.

The number of actual redundancies that occurred in Waterford City and County from the beginning of 2002 up to 30th November 2006 amounts to 3801. A yearly breakdown is in the table.

It would be impractical to compile a list of individual names of the companies and the number of redundancies involved. If the Deputy wishes to put forward the names of specific companies, the relevant information will be provided.

County Waterford Redundancies 2002-November 2006

	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	Total
Collective Redundancy Notifications	271	535	406	695	170	2,077
Actual Redundancies*	636	652	885	998	630	3,801

\*Footnote: For the period 2002-2004 inclusive, these figures relate to individual dismissal notices. From 2005 onwards the figures relate to actual redundancies.

### Social Welfare Code.

240. **Mr. Penrose** asked the Minister for Social and Family Affairs if he will take steps to increase the living alone allowance as same has not been increased for a number of years; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41852/06]

**Minister for Social and Family Affairs (Mr. Brennan):** The living alone increase is an additional payment of €7.70 per week made to people aged 66 years or over who are in receipt of certain social welfare payments and who are living alone. It is also available to people who are under 66 years of age who are living alone and who receive payments under one of a number of invalidity type schemes. The increase is intended as a contribution towards the additional costs people face when they live alone.

The policy in relation to support for pensioners has been, for many years, to give priority to increasing the personal rates of pension, as demonstrated in significant increases. Rather than focusing on payments such as the living alone increase. This approach ensures that resources are used to improve the position of all pensioners and is subject to regular review. That review did take place this year as usual and it was decided to continue with the policy of a significant increase in the personal rate.

### Social Welfare Benefits.

241. **Mr. Deenihan** asked the Minister for Social and Family Affairs if rent allowance will be awarded to a person (details supplied) in County Kerry; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41881/06]

**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. The Executive has advised, that while it has received a rent supplement application from the person concerned, it has requested additional information together with supporting documentation in order that a decision can be made. The Executive has further advised that it has not yet received the documentation requested.

242. **Mr. Kenny** asked the Minister for Social and Family Affairs if he will delineate the amount of supplementary rent allowance being paid in Dublin and the rest of the country; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41891/06]

243. **Mr. Kenny** asked the Minister for Social and Family Affairs the amount of supplementary rent allowance paid in each of the years 2000 to date in 2006; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41892/06]

**Minister for Social and Family Affairs (Mr. Brennan):** I propose to take Question Nos. 242 and 243 together.

The supplementary welfare allowance scheme, which includes rent supplement, is administered on my behalf by the Community Welfare division of the Health Service Executive. The purpose of the scheme is to provide short-term income support, in the form of a weekly or monthly payment, to eligible people living in private rented accommodation whose means are insufficient to meet their accommodation costs and who do not have accommodation available to them from any other source.

Details of the expenditure on rent supplement on a county by county basis are not available; however, the tables provide details of the expenditure on rent supplement for each of the former Health Board Areas for 2006. Details of expenditure on the rent supplement scheme nationwide from 2000 to 2006 are also outlined.

Expenditure on Rent Supplement by former Health Board Area for 2006 up to the end of October.

Former H.B. Area	€000
Eastern	178,622
Midland	9,899
Mid-Western	18,057
North Eastern	12,700
North Western	10,830
South Eastern	28,701
Southern	38,483
Western	26,374
Total	323,666

<sup>(1)</sup> End October.

Expenditure on Rent Supplement from 2000 to 2005.

Year	Expenditure
	€000
2000	150,590
2001	179,438
2002	252,340
2003	331,470
2004	353,760
2005	368,705

### Social Welfare Code.

244. **Mr. Kenny** asked the Minister for Social and Family Affairs if in relation to landlord regulations and supplementary rent allowance, he will introduce a policy that checks if landlords, to which the supplementary rent allowance is paid, are registered with the Private Residential Tenancies Board; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41893/06]

**Minister for Social and Family Affairs (Mr. Brennan):** The supplementary welfare allowance scheme, which is administered on my behalf by the community welfare division of the Health Service Executive, provides for the payment of a rent supplement to assist eligible people who are unable to provide for their immediate accommodation needs from their own resources and who do not have accommodation available to them from any other source.

Under the Residential Tenancies Act 2004, landlords are legally obliged to register tenancies with the Private Residential Tenancies Board (PRTB). My Department is committed to working closely with the PRTB to ensure that tenancies that come within the area of rent supplementation comply with the statutory system of tenancy regulation and safeguards. To that end, my Department provides details of rent supplement payments to the PRTB to enable them to identify tenancies that are not registered and to take any follow-up action necessary.

### Social Welfare Benefits.

245. **Mr. Ring** asked the Minister for Social and Family Affairs the reason a person (details supplied) in County Mayo is not receiving the living alone allowance. [41894/06]

**Minister for Social and Family Affairs (Mr. Brennan):** In order to receive Living Alone Increase a person must be living alone and, if over 66, must be in receipt of one of the following Social Welfare payments: State Pension (Contributory or Non-contributory), State Pension (Transition). As the person concerned is not in receipt of any payment from my Department she cannot avail of the Living Alone Increase.

246. **Mr. F. McGrath** asked the Minister for Social and Family Affairs the reason people on disability benefit do not receive the Christmas bonus; and if he will change this situation. [42001/06]

**Minister for Social and Family Affairs (Mr. Brennan):** The Christmas Bonus has again been paid this year to all recipients of long-term social welfare payments, at a rate equivalent to 100% of the person's normal weekly payment, subject to a minimum payment of €30. This measure costs an estimated €157 million this year and benefited some 1.25 million persons comprising 855,000 recipients and 394,000 dependants.

The focus of the bonus has always been on persons who rely on the social welfare system for financial support over the long term. These include recipients of State Pension (Transition), State Pension (Contributory and Non-contributory), Widow's, Widower's and Invalidity Pensions, One-parent Family Payment, Carer's Allowance, Disability Allowance, long-term Job-seeker's Allowance, Farm Assist and people in receipt of employment support payments.

As Carer's Benefit is now payable for up to 2 years, the bonus was, for the first time this year, paid to recipients of this benefit. The bonus is also payable to participants in the Rural Social Scheme, which was introduced in 2004, and operates under the aegis of the Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs.

Any extension of entitlement to the bonus payment to short-term schemes would have significant cost implications. In relation to illness benefit, it is open to persons who have been in receipt of illness benefit for at least a year to apply for Invalidity Pension, and, if they qualify for the pension, they would also qualify for the Christmas Bonus payment.

#### **Social Welfare Code.**

247. **Mr. Stanton** asked the Minister for Social and Family Affairs if, in cases of joint custody, it is his Department's policy and practice to assess both parents in the same manner when applying for rent supplement. [42046/06]

**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. The purpose of the scheme is to provide short-term income support, in the form of a weekly or monthly payment, to eligible people living in private rented accommodation whose means are insufficient to meet their accommodation costs and who do not have accommodation available to them from any other source.

Every claim for rent supplement is determined having regard to the particular circumstances of the applicant. Any person seeking a rent supplement must first satisfy the Executive that they have a housing need that they are unable to meet from their own resources. In addition, the Executive must be satisfied that the residence is reasonably suited to the residential and other needs of the claimant. The Executive must also be satisfied that the rent payable is reasonable having regard to the nature, character and location of the residence.

In a case where parents have joint custody of a child, the needs of both parents to have adequate accommodation to look after the child are taken into account when an application for a rent supplement is being determined. In such cases, documentation is normally required showing the joint custody arrangement before a decision can be made. The fact that the one parent is in receipt of rent supplement would not in itself preclude the other parent from being entitled to assistance towards their rent.

#### **Road Safety.**

248. **Mr. Gregory** asked the Minister for Transport if steps will be taken to advise the motoring public on the length of time for alcohol retention in their bloodstream in view of the apparent Garda strategy of breath testing people on their way to work in the morning; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41954/06]

**Minister for Transport (Mr. Cullen):** The Road Safety Authority, which has responsibility for road safety advertising and promotion, recently launched its Christmas Drink Driving Campaign. One of the key messages of that campaign reminds motorists that the morning after is also a dangerous time to drive if they have been drinking the night before.

#### **Road Signage.**

249. **Mr. Gregory** asked the Minister for Transport if steps will be taken to ensure that all road signs are bilingual; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41955/06]

**Minister for Transport (Mr. Cullen):** Statutory responsibility for the provision of traffic signs, both regulatory and non-regulatory signs, and responsibility to comply with the statutory format laid down for such signs, rests with each road authority.

The statutory directions that the Minister for Transport has given to road authorities in relation to the display of text on traffic signs are set out in the Traffic Signs Manual (a copy of which is available in the Oireachtas library) and in particular chapters 1 and 5 thereof.

### Fisheries Regulations.

250. **Mr. Perry** asked the Minister for Transport if he has issued a SI order prohibiting fishing vessels from towing operations other than fishing nets, with reference to Maritime Safety Act 2005, section 47 safety regulations — passenger boats, fishing vessels and pleasure craft (19)-(2) (g) and the 1992 Act as amended by section 44 of the 2000 Act as amended by No. 11/2005 of the Maritime Safety Act 2005; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42006/06]

**Minister for Transport (Mr. Cullen):** I have not made any regulations prohibiting the towing of anything (other than fishing nets) by or from fishing vessels nor do I have any plans to do so currently.

### Road Network.

251. **Ms Shortall** asked the Minister for Transport the progress to date in the renegotiation of the West-Link toll agreement; the details of the Government strategy in this regard; and the time-scale for the finalisation of those negotiations. [41995/06]

**Minister for Transport (Mr. Cullen):** At the outset, I should explain that overall responsibility for the planning, design and implementation of national road improvement projects, including the M50, is a matter for the National Roads Authority (NRA) and the local authorities concerned. I have no function in relation to the day-to-day operation of these projects.

In addition, the statutory power to levy tolls on national roads, to make toll bye-laws and to enter into toll agreements with private investors in respect of national roads, including the M50, is vested in the National Roads Authority (NRA) under Part V of the Roads Act 1993 (as amended by the Planning and Development Act 2000).

As the Deputy is aware, last January, for commercial and strategic reasons, the National Roads Authority (NRA) decided to end the arrangement with National Toll Roads (NTR) that has been in place under an agreement entered into in 1987 for the collection of tolls at West Link up to 2020.

Instead, I understand that the NRA is separately procuring a single point barrier free toll system which will become operational in quarter 3 of 2008. This will coincide with the completion of Phase 1 of the upgrade of the M50 — the section between the N4 and the Ballymount interchanges. NTR will be compensated in accordance with the 1987 Agreement.

The exact details of the arrangements, including compensation, are being finalised at present between NRA and NTR. The arrangements under consideration provide for the complete termination as of Quarter 3, 2008 of the West-

Link agreement which relates to NTR's contractual right to charge tolls on the N3 to N4 section of the M50. NTR do not own the West-Link bridge section — they hold the concession to charge tolls on that particular section of the M50.

As the proposed termination will not take effect until 2008, NTR will continue to operate in accordance with the existing concession until that time.

As I mentioned, the NRA/NTR discussions are in the process of being finalised at present. Until those discussions are concluded, it would be inappropriate for me to comment on their likely outcome. My Department is continuing to monitor the situation.

### Public Transport.

252. **Ms Shortall** asked the Minister for Transport the amount of subvention in each case he will provide to Bus Éireann, Dublin Bus and Iarnród Éireann in 2007; the amount in each case actually applied for; the way the agreed figure is arrived at; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41997/06]

**Minister for Transport (Mr. Cullen):** A provision of €306.363m has been included in the 2007 Estimates for compensation to be paid to the CIE companies in respect of their public service obligations. While this provision is less than the €311.45m sought by the companies it nevertheless represents an 8% increase on the expected 2006 outturn of €285m. This substantial increase of 8% takes account of the additional operating costs associated with the additional buses for which funding was approved in September last. The increased provision for 2007 maintains the policy pursued in recent years of an annual increase in the compensation to CIE.

Over the period since 2001 the annual compensation has grown from €222.296m in 2001 to €306.363m in 2007 — an increase of almost 38%. The total amount paid in the period 2001 to date in 2006 is €1.5bn. The allocation of the 2007 provision between the three companies has yet to be finalised by my Department in consultation with CIE.

### Airport Development Projects.

253. **Ms O. Mitchell** asked the Minister for Transport if he is satisfied with the increase in costs for the proposed second terminal for Dublin Airport since its announcement; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42000/06]

**Minister for Transport (Mr. Cullen):** Following a wide-ranging consultation process involving users, statutory authorities and other interested parties, last August the Dublin Airport Authority (DAA) published its proposals for a second terminal at Dublin Airport (T2). The planning appli-



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ation for the proposed new terminal was approved, with conditions, by Fingal County Council in October last. Subject to the outcome of the planning appeal process, construction of the new terminal will begin in summer 2007.

The DAA has informed me that as part of this consultation process it was made aware of the updated expansion of some of the key airlines operating out of Dublin Airport. To accommodate this growth the DAA decided to develop a 75,000 sq. metre terminal instead of the initially planned 50,000 metre facility.

I would also point out that the consultants appointed by my Department to verify the specification and cost of the second terminal concluded that the methodology, approach and execution of the planning objectives and considerations for passengers adopted by the DAA accords with best practice. They also found that the estimated cost of the new terminal is within industry norms for this type of project in a European capital city. A copy of the report is available on my Departments website ([www.transport.ie](http://www.transport.ie)).

#### Marine Safety.

254. **Cecilia Keaveney** asked the Minister for Transport his plans for upgrading a station (details supplied) in County Donegal. [41823/06]

**Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Mr. Gallagher):** Proposals to develop the Malin Head Station are being considered as part of the future development of the Marine Emergency co-ordination services of the Irish Coast Guard. This process is on going and will be completed as quickly as possible.

#### Road Network.

255. **Mr. Dennehy** asked the Minister for Transport if comparisons have been made regarding the cost of road building in the UK and here; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41853/06]

**Minister for Transport (Mr. Cullen):** At the outset, I should explain that the planning, design and implementation of national road improvement projects is a matter for the National Roads Authority (NRA) and the local authorities concerned.

I understand that the NRA is currently carrying out an analysis to establish the comparative cost of road construction in other European countries. This work is currently ongoing and information is being sought from the various representative organisations of the countries involved. However, my Department is informed by the NRA that on the basis of the information received to date the cost of the motorway road projects carried out in Ireland do compare

favourably with the costs of such projects in the UK. Further information and analysis by the NRA is required before final conclusions can be drawn.

#### Road Safety.

256. **Mr. Callely** asked the Minister for Transport the progress made on the maximum speed limit for certain categories of large vehicles; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41854/06]

**Minister for Transport (Mr. Cullen):** The Road Traffic (Ordinary Speed Limits — Certain Vehicles) Regulations 2005 (S.I. No. 9 of 2005) sets out the maximum ordinary speed limit at which specified classes of vehicles can be driven on any public road except where a lower maximum road speed limit applies. A review of these vehicle related maximum speed limits, known in law as ordinary speed limits, is underway at present in my Department.

*Question No. 257 answered with Question No. 47.*

#### Road Traffic Accidents.

258. **Mr. Callely** asked the Minister for Transport the number of road traffic accident deaths recorded in 2006; the comparison figures for 1990, 1996 and 2000; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41856/06]

**Minister for Transport (Mr. Cullen):** The number of fatalities as a result of road traffic collisions to date (as of 4 December) in 2006 is 340. The number of fatalities for 1990, 1996 and 2000 are 478, 453 and 415 respectively.

#### Public Transport.

259. **Mr. Callely** asked the Minister for Transport the number of Dublin Bus vehicles and their seat capacity that are on commuting services routes to the city centre on a daily basis; the number of additional vehicles that Dublin Bus have identified for such services; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41857/06]

**Minister for Transport (Mr. Cullen):** I am informed by Dublin Bus that it currently has a fleet of 1082 buses with a total seating capacity of 77,130 providing services in the Dublin area. Dublin Bus will introduce an additional 100 buses over the coming 6 months.

#### EU Directives.

260. **Mr. Callely** asked the Minister for Transport the progress with regard to the EU regulation 3820/85; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41858/06]

**Minister for Transport (Mr. Cullen):** EC Regulation No. 3820/85 is being repealed and replaced by Regulation No. 561/2006 on the harmonisation of certain social legislation relating to road transport.

Regulation No. 561/2006 which has automatic legal effect in the State comes into force from 11th April 2007 with the exception of certain provisions relating to the fitment of digital tachographs, obligations in relation to record sheets and printouts and the downloading of data from digital tachograph units and driver cards which came into effect from 1 May 2006.

### Public Transport.

261. **Mr. Calley** asked the Minister for Transport the additional funding available to Dublin Bus to increase Dublin Bus capacity over the past ten years; the comparison figures for DART services; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41859/06]

**Minister for Transport (Mr. Cullen):** Over the period 1997-2006, Exchequer capital grants totalling over €70m have been paid to Dublin Bus in respect of bus purchases and over €240m to Iarnród Éireann in respect of DART Upgrade works. The funding to Dublin Bus is in addition to the funding provided by the Company from its own resources for the purchase of buses.

### Public Service Vehicle Licences.

262. **Mr. Deasy** asked the Minister for Transport if his attention has been drawn to the fact that inspections for public service vehicle licences can take up to six months from time of application in County Waterford; his views on whether this is causing great difficulty for bus operators in County Waterford who wish to submit an application to his Department for a passenger licence; if he will hold discussions with the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform with a view to securing additional Garda resources to carry out inspections in respect of PSV licences in County Waterford; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41978/06]

**Minister for Transport (Mr. Cullen):** The grant of large public service vehicle licences is a matter for the Garda Authorities who are also responsible for the administration of the vehicle licensing and associated vehicle testing process. I have no function in this matter or in the deployment of additional Garda resources in the Waterford area.

### Parking Regulations.

263. **Ms C. Murphy** asked the Minister for Transport the measures he is considering or are available to him to introduce a national policy or

legislation specifically aimed at setting out the criteria by which areas here may be designated specifically as residents only parking; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41979/06]

**Minister for Transport (Mr. Cullen):** I am aware that parking problems arise on the roads in the environs of stadia such as Croke Park on match and other event days when a large influx of motorists from outside the area park on residential roads for the duration of the events. Last summer, I met with a deputation from local residents associations from the Croke Park environs and some local public representatives to hear their case.

On match and event days, the Garda Authorities put in place extensive traffic management plans. This includes a Garda cordon area for crowd safety controls and to regulate access. This has been put in place for many years now in respect of the streets in the immediate vicinity of Croke Park and Lansdowne Road when matches or other major events are held there. Divisional Garda Traffic Corps Units also patrol the outlying areas prior to and subsequent to any event ensuring the traffic flow is maintained.

Vehicle owners who reside within the Garda cordon area may apply for an annual permit to allow that vehicle to enter and exit through the cordon barriers. The regulation of access and residents permits measures are implemented and administered by the Garda Síochána, as are other traffic management and parking prohibitions that are applied in the greater Stadium area on event dates.

The issue being raised now is that residents on roads that lie outside of the existing cordon areas are seeking that parking be reserved on a Residents Only basis in their areas on match and event days and that vehicle permits and a visitors permit be issued in respect of each premises. This proposal, if accepted, would effectively prohibit or exclude the general public from parking on a public road.

The issue of reserving parking on public roads to local residents is very complex and is much broader than in the context of match days at Croke Park or Lansdowne Road stadia. The discussion and debate on this issue has also drawn attention to the fact that inconvenience can also be experienced by residents where parking congestion can arise on a daily basis on public roads in residential areas in other circumstances countrywide.

At some locations throughout the country, parking on residential roads is now taken up on a daily basis, and not just on periodic match or event dates, by motorists, who use the location to park if working nearby or to use the location as a 'park and ride facility' while they commute onwards by bus, rail or tram to work and collect their vehicle later that day on return. Legal

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advice on the matter has been sought from the Attorney General and the matter will be considered further when advice is received.

#### **Rail Network.**

264. **Mr. Durkan** asked the Minister for Transport if consideration has been given to the provision of a rail spur from Sallins to Naas with particular reference to the need to encourage the use of commuter rail services; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42011/06]

275. **Mr. Durkan** asked the Minister for Transport if consideration has been given or is expected to be given to extending rail spurs, where possible, to commuter belt areas currently lacking rail services; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42024/06]

**Minister for Transport (Mr. Cullen):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 264 and 275 together.

Transport 21 sets out the investments to take place in extending the rail network to enhance the range of railway services available to commuters in the period up to 2015. While there will be significant developments on the Kildare line, a rail link to Naas does not form part of the investment programme.

#### **Rail Services.**

265. **Mr. Durkan** asked the Minister for Transport the car parking available for commuters at Sallins rail station, Sallins, County Kildare; the plans to increase this capacity in order to encourage the use of rail transport; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42012/06]

266. **Mr. Durkan** asked the Minister for Transport the car parking available for commuters at Confey rail station, Leixlip, County Kildare; the plans to increase this capacity in order to encourage the use of rail transport; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42013/06]

267. **Mr. Durkan** asked the Minister for Transport the car parking available for commuters at Leixlip rail station, County Kildare; the plans to increase this capacity in order to encourage the use of rail transport; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42014/06]

268. **Mr. Durkan** asked the Minister for Transport the car parking available for commuters at Maynooth rail station, Maynooth, County Kildare; the plans to increase this capacity in order to encourage the use of rail transport; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42015/06]

269. **Mr. Durkan** asked the Minister for Transport the car parking available for commuters at Kilcock rail station, Kilcock, County Kildare; the plans to increase this capacity in order to encourage the use of rail transport; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42016/06]

270. **Mr. Durkan** asked the Minister for Transport the car parking available for commuters at Hazelhatch rail station, Celbridge, County Kildare; the plans to increase this capacity in order to encourage the use of rail transport; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42017/06]

276. **Mr. Durkan** asked the Minister for Transport his plans to provide free parking in the vicinity of commuter rail stations in order to encourage the use of rail services by commuters; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42025/06]

**Minister for Transport (Mr. Cullen):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 265 to 270, inclusive, and 276 together.

The provision of car parking at railway stations is a matter for Iarnród Éireann in conjunction, where appropriate, with the relevant local authority. My Department will consider applications from Iarnród Éireann for funding of such measures. The imposition of parking fees for such parking is a matter for the Company.

My Department has asked Iarnród Éireann to forward details of car parking available and planned at railway stations in Co. Kildare to the Deputy.

*Question No. 271 answered with Question No. 147.*

#### **Public Transport.**

272. **Mr. Durkan** asked the Minister for Transport the extent to which extra commuters are expected to be carried by bus in each of the next five years; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42021/06]

274. **Mr. Durkan** asked the Minister for Transport the extent to which calculations has been made to attract more passengers off the road towards the rail services with particular reference to the commuter belt areas in the next five years; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42023/06]

**Minister for Transport (Mr. Cullen):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 272 and 274 together.

A fundamental objective of the public transport investment programme under Transport 21 is to increase the use of public transport use by providing fast, convenient and safe alternatives to the private car. Investment under the programme

in recent years has funded a major expansion in the capacity of commuter rail, including light rail, and bus services. Capacity on the Maynooth railway line, for example, has already more than trebled in the last five years. Dublin Bus capacity has increased by approximately 30% since 1999, while LUAS has carried over 50 million passengers since its inception in mid-2004. The success of these investments is reflected in the increase in passenger carryings on these services, particularly at peak times.

Investment in heavy and light rail and in bus services will be maintained at a high level under Transport 21. It provides for a total investment of approximately €16 billion in public transport throughout the country, including approximately €770 million for upgrading bus services. Over the next five years, commuters can expect a significant increase in capacity and improvements in services on the bus, rail and Luas networks.

### **Traffic Management.**

273. **Mr. Durkan** asked the Minister for Transport if traffic freeflow management will be extended throughout the year; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42022/06]

**Minister for Transport (Mr. Cullen):** Operation Freeflow, the traffic management initiative for Dublin for the Christmas and New Year period, is now in its eleventh year. There are several reasons why this initiative is not continued around the year.

First, in the period around Christmas and New Year there are different patterns of travel in the city. In particular, far more people are travelling later in the evening, with a great increase in late-night shopping. The additional late-night public transport services provided during Operation Freeflow would not be matched by take-up by the public at other times of the year. The ban on road works, which plays such an important role in Operation Freeflow, would also not be a viable option year-round.

Finally, Freeflow involves putting a large number of extra probationary Gardaí on the streets. As you will appreciate, Garda resources are in demand across a variety of enforcement functions — the retention of so many Gardaí on Freeflow-type duty after traffic volumes revert to normal levels and patterns would be questionable. However, I anticipate that the resourcing situation year-round on traffic duties (including road safety, checkpoints, lane enforcements etc.) will strengthen as the traffic corps grows.

Apart from Operation Freeflow, Transport 21 will make a substantial impact on congestion as the various major investments in traffic management, public transport and roads are rolled out over the coming years.

*Question No. 274 answered with Question No. 272.*

*Question No. 275 answered with Question No. 264.*

*Question No. 276 answered with Question No. 265.*

277. **Mr. Durkan** asked the Minister for Transport the way it is intended to co-ordinate traffic management in the greater Dublin area in the next five years in view of the limited routes to and from the port tunnel and the high growing volumes of traffic; the extent to which commuters are expected to be facilitated by road, rail and bus with a view to minimising delays and increasing the availability of public transport as an attractive alternative to motor car use and with specific reference to the way potential commuters can get quick and easy access to rail stations; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42026/06]

**Minister for Transport (Mr. Cullen):** The report of the Dublin Transport Authority Establishment Team made a number of recommendations in respect of traffic management. The Team concluded that there needed to be an integrated policy approach to traffic management across the Greater Dublin Area (GDA), based on international best practice. They recommended that the Dublin Transport Authority should be obliged to prepare a strategic traffic management plan for the Greater Dublin Area. The Dublin Transport Authority should also be responsible for coordinating the traffic management arrangements during the construction phase of Transport 21.

Traffic management functions should continue to be discharged by local authorities but, in exercising their functions, they would be obliged to comply with the strategic traffic management plan of the Authority. However, the report also recommended that the Dublin Transport Authority should be given power to decide to perform certain traffic management functions itself or through a third party where it considered this to be more effective. It further proposed that the Authority should be empowered to issue policy guidelines and mandatory directions to local authorities in respect of its traffic management functions.

I share the views of the Establishment Team in relation to the need for an integrated approach to traffic management in the Greater Dublin Area. I am also of the view that the range of powers for a Dublin Transport Authority in respect of traffic management proposed by the Team would deliver such an integrated approach. These powers would also enable the Authority to ensure the effective management of any disruption to

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traffic caused by construction works during the delivery of key infrastructure projects under Transport 21.

The drafting of legislation to give effect to these recommendations is at an advanced stage in the Office of the Parliamentary Counsel.

A fundamental aim of Transport 21 is to transform the public transport system in the Greater Dublin Area in order to cater for increased demands for services in the Area and to provide an attractive alternative for commuters to the private car. A total of €14 billion has been provided under Transport 21 to develop two Metro lines, seven Luas lines and an expanded DART and suburban rail system. The number of buses in the GDA will be increased significantly and the Quality Bus Corridor network will be doubled. A key element of Transport 21 will be to put in place an integrated system that provides easy access and optimal interchange possibilities for commuters.

*Question No. 278 answered with Question No. 101.*

#### **Rural Transport Services.**

279. **Mr. Stanton** asked the Minister for Transport his progress with regard to the mainstreaming and extension of the rural transport initiative; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42045/06]

**Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Mr. Gallagher):** The Rural Transport Initiative (RTI) was launched on a pilot basis in 2002. Under this scheme, thirty-four community transport groups throughout the country are being funded to address the particular transport needs of their rural areas. Pobal administers the scheme on behalf of my Department.

The pilot phase of the Initiative will conclude at the end of this year and in line with Government announcements in the matter, preparations are now being made to mainstream the provision of rural transport from 2007 onwards. This work is based on the experience with the pilot RTI and the outcome of a recent public consultation process in the matter. I expect to make an announcement on the matter shortly.

In line with commitments in Towards 2016 and in parallel with the implementation of Transport 21, Euro 9 million is being provided for the RTI in 2007, compared with €5.1 million in 2005.

In making specific allocations to the individual RTI project groups from this funding, I expect Pobal to work closely with the existing groups to maximise the impact of the funding through, among other things, increased service provision and wider area coverage as well as ensuring continued value for money.

#### **National Lottery Funding.**

280. **Aengus Ó Snodaigh** asked the Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs if he will give a breakdown per constituency for the past five years of projects funded by the national lottery moneys through his Department. [41828/06]

**Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs (Éamon Ó Cuív):** My Department does not keep records on a constituency-by-constituency basis.

Lottery Funding is provided in 2006 and preceding years in respect of expenditure by my Department under three subheads: Ciste na Gaeilge; Grants for Community and Voluntary Services; and Local and Community Development.

Details of all payments in excess of €6,350 made under these programmes are included in the published Appropriation Accounts, copies of which are available in the Dáil Library. The Deputy may also wish to note that details of payments made under the Community Development Programme are provided to the Dáil Library each year.

I trust that this information is of assistance to the Deputy.

#### **Cursaí Pleanála.**

281. D'fhiafraigh **Mr. McGinley** den Aire Gnóthaí Pobail, Tuaithe agus Gaeltachta cad é an dul chun cinn atá déanta maidir le teidil talaimh a réiteach le haghaidh aerstráice ar Oileán Thoráí. [41842/06]

**Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs (Éamon Ó Cuív):** Faoi mar is eol don Teachta, tá obair réamh-phleanála i gcomhair aerstráice a thógáil ar Oileán Thoráí idir lámha ag Údarás na Gaeltachta le cúpla bliain anuas. Ag eascairt ón obair seo, fuarthas cead pleanála don fhorbairt ó Chomhairle Chontae Dhún na nGall i 2004.

Tá aontaithe ag Comhairle Chontae Dhún na nGall Orduithe Ceannacháin Éigeantaigh a chur i bhfeidhm ar an talamh a theastaíonn don togra agus, i láthair na huaire, tá socruithe á ndéanamh maidir le húinéirí an talaimh sin a aithint.

#### **Calafóirt agus Céanna.**

282. D'fhiafraigh **Mr. McGinley** den Aire Gnóthaí Pobail, Tuaithe agus Gaeltachta an bhfuil iarratas faighte ag a Roinn ar dheontas do Chéidh Inis Bó Finne, Dún na nGall; cad é an obair atá beartaithe; cad é costas measta na hoibre agus an bhfuil deontas á cheadú. [41861/06]

**Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs (Éamon Ó Cuív):** Níos luaithe i mbliana, fuair mo Roinn iarratas ó Chomhairle Chontae

Dhún na nGall ar chúnamh le haghaidh oibreacha feabhsúcháin a chur i gcrích ar Ché Inis Bó Finne ar chostas measta de €300,000. Iarradh ar an gComhairle Chontae, ag an am sin, tairiscintí a lorg don obair ionas go mbeifí in ann an t-iarratas ar chúnamh a mheas bunaithe ar chostas cruinn, seachas costas measta.

Tuigtear go bhfuil na tairiscintí a fuarthas i gcomhair an togra seo á meas ag an gComhairle Chontae faoi láthair agus go bhfuil i gceist iarratas nua a dhéanamh le mo Roinnse go luath. Ach an t-iarratas sin bheith faighte, déanfar é a mheas i gcomhthéacs an airgid a bheidh ar fáil dom le caitheamh ar fhorbairt oileán agus na n-éileamh éagsúil ar an airgead sin.

#### Fostaíocht Gaeltachta.

283. D'fhiafraigh **Mr. McGinley** den Aire Gnóthaí Pobail, Tuaithe agus Gaeltachta cad iad na pleananna le breis fostaíochta a chur ar fáil i gCeantar na Gaeltachta Láir Dhún na nGall; agus an ndéanfaidh sé ráiteas ina thaobh. [41862/06]

**Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs (Éamon Ó Cuív):** Dírím aird an Teachta ar an bhfreagra a thug mé ar Cheist Dála Uimh. 351 den 28 Feabhra 2006 inar míníodh go raibh iarrachtaí leanúnacha ar siúl ag Údarás na Gaeltachta chun tionscnaimh bhreise a aimsiú don Ghaeltacht Láir i gContae Dhún na nGall. Sa chomhthéacs sin, tuigtear dom go bhfuil dhá ionad (spás c.1,300m<sup>2</sup> agus c.300m<sup>2</sup>) ar fáil ag an Údarás do thograí sa cheantar. Ní miste a lua freisin go bhfuil scéimeanna fostaíochta pobail á reáchtáil go háitiúil faoi choimirce an Údaráis, mar aon le scéimeanna sóisialta tuaithe atá á maoiniú ag mo Roinn féin.

Mar thoradh ar na gníomhaíochtaí leanúnacha atá ar bun ag an Údarás, ag mo Roinn féin agus ag an Stát i gcoitinne i ndáil le hinfrastruchtúr agus seirbhísí, tá tionchar dearfach á imirt ar chúrsaí fostaíochta, eacnamaíochta agus sóisialta araon. I measc tionscadal áitiúla den chineál sin, áirím Ionad Cholmille (ionad lae, ionad sláinte agus naíonra) i mBaile na Finne, Comhlacht Traenach na Gaeltachta Láir Teo., agus Ionad Sláinte agus Lae i nGleann Fhinne.

#### Community Development.

284. **Mr. M. Higgins** asked the Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs his Department's expenditure in community development in Galway city over the past year. [41896/06]

285. **Mr. M. Higgins** asked the Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs his Department's expenditure in community development in Galway city over his term in office as Minister. [41897/06]

286. **Mr. M. Higgins** asked the Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs his Department's expenditure in community development in the Doughiska area of Galway over the past year and over his term in office as Minister. [41898/06]

**Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs (Éamon Ó Cuív):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 284 to 286, inclusive, together.

I regret that in the time available it has not been possible to collate all of the information sought. I will write to the Deputy as soon as possible enclosing that information.

#### Grant Payments.

287. **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. [41807/06]

**Minister for Agriculture and Food (Mary Coughlan):** The position is that an application for the Transfer of Entitlements under the 2006 Single Payment Scheme from the first person named to the joint names of the two persons named was submitted on the 27th of October 2006. The application was accepted even though the closing date for receipt of completed applications to transfer entitlements was 16 May 2006. This application has now been fully processed and payment in respect of 76.25 transferred entitlements will issue shortly.

288. **Mr. Connaughton** asked the Minister for Agriculture and Food the reason the area based payment has not been awarded to a person (details supplied) in County Galway. [41808/06]

**Minister for Agriculture and Food (Mary Coughlan):** An application under the 2006 Single Payment Scheme/Disadvantaged Areas Scheme was received from the person named on 25 April 2006. The processing of this application is being finalised by my Department and it is expected that payment will issue shortly.

289. **Mr. Walsh** asked the Minister for Agriculture and Food if arrangements will be made to have payment of the single farm payment made to a person (details supplied) in County Cork. [41809/06]

**Minister for Agriculture and Food (Mary Coughlan):** An application under the 2006 Single Payment Scheme was received from the person named on 28 April 2006. Following processing of the application, it was found that part of the land included by the person named on her SPS application was also the subject of a claim under the 2006 Scheme by another applicant. Following correspondence with both parties, it was confirmed

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that the person named was not entitled to claim the land in question. The regulatory penalty was applied, which resulted in a 100% penalty under the 2006 Scheme. The person named has been advised of this and of her right to appeal this decision to the Agriculture Appeals Office.

290. **Mr. Ring** asked the Minister for Agriculture and Food the number of farmers who have qualified for the single farm payment in County Mayo; the number who have been awarded to date; and the number outstanding. [41817/06]

**Minister for Agriculture and Food (Mary Coughlan):** Applications were received from 13,069 Mayo herd owners under the 2006 Single Payment Scheme and, to date, payment has issued to approximately 89% of these applicants.

Delays in processing can be caused by many factors, including incomplete application forms, errors on applications and discrepancies highlighted following computer validation, which must be resolved via correspondence with the applicant. The majority of those cases, which have yet to receive payment, are where applicants did not submit an application to transfer the Single Payment entitlements, with lands, by way of inheritance, gift, lease or purchase.

My Department will continue to issue payments to farmers, as outstanding problems are resolved.

291. **Mr. Connaughton** asked the Minister for Agriculture and Food the allocation from the national reserve that has been allocated to a person (details supplied) in County Galway. [41841/06]

**Minister for Agriculture and Food (Mary Coughlan):** The person named submitted an application for an allocation of entitlements from the 2005 Single Payment Scheme National Reserve under Category B.

Category B caters for farmers who made an investment in production capacity in a farming sector for which a direct payment under Livestock Premia and/or Arable Aid schemes would have been payable during the reference period 2000-2002. Investments can include purchase or long term lease of land, purchase of suckler and/or ewe quota or other investments. The person named applied under Category B(ii) in relation to the purchase of suckler quota and has been deemed successful.

A formal letter outlining my Department's decision on the National Reserve has issued to the person named and payment will issue shortly.

### Milk Quota.

292. **Mr. Neville** asked the Minister for Agriculture and Food the position on the review of the regulations for temporary milk quota leasing for the year 2007 to 2008. [41860/06]

**Minister for Agriculture and Food (Mary Coughlan):** Under the Milk Quota Regulations a producer who has delivered some milk in the current quota year can offer the undelivered part of a milk quota into the Temporary Leasing Scheme.

Up until the 2005/06 quota year a rule applied whereby, if a producer delivered less than 70% of their quota in two consecutive years, the undelivered part could be added to the National Reserve. This rule was changed with effect from the current 2006/07 quota year, and the 70% minimum level of deliveries does not now apply.

The Milk Quota Review Group is a group comprised of representatives of the farm organisations, the processing sector, technical advisors, and my Department, which advises me on matters relating to the management of Ireland's milk quota. In general, changes to quota schemes are made following consultation with the Milk Quota Review Group. The 70% rule change, and the details of the 2007/08 Temporary Leasing Scheme will be reviewed at the next meeting of the Group in the new year.

### International Agreements.

293. **Mr. Morgan** asked the Minister for Agriculture and Food if she will sign or ratify the European Convention on Protection of Pet Animals; the reason this convention has not been ratified to date; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [41960/06]

**Minister for Agriculture and Food (Mary Coughlan):** My Department has statutory responsibility for the welfare and protection of animals kept for farming purposes only and it does not extend to animals kept as pets. I understand that the matters relating to ratification of Council of Europe Conventions and the responsibility of Departments in that regard are still under consideration.

### Grant Payments.

294. **Mr. Hayes** asked the Minister for Agriculture and Food when payment will issue to a person (details supplied) in County Tipperary under the single farm payment scheme. [41988/06]

**Minister for Agriculture and Food (Mary Coughlan):** The position is that an application for the Transfer of Entitlements under the 2006 Single Payment Scheme from the person named to the joint names of the person named and another

person was submitted on the 2nd of November 2006. The application was accepted even though the closing date for receipt of completed applications to transfer entitlements was 16 May 2006.

This application has now been fully processed and payment in respect of 25.40 transferred entitlements will issue shortly.

#### Departmental Correspondence.

295. **Mr. Ring** asked the Minister for Education and Science when she will sign a document (details supplied). [41810/06]

**Minister for Education and Science (Ms Hanafin):** The document referred to by the Deputy has been executed on my behalf and has been returned to the Chief State Solicitor's Office.

#### National Lottery Funding.

296. **Aengus Ó Snodaigh** asked the Minister for Education and Science if she will give a breakdown per constituency for the past five years of projects funded by the national lottery moneys through her Department. [41825/06]

**Minister for Education and Science (Ms Hanafin):** Data relating to expenditure by my Department is not maintained on a constituency basis and it would take an inordinate amount of time to collate the information sought by the Deputy.

Details of the organisations funded by the National Lottery through my Department's Vote are contained in the Appropriation Accounts published annually. If there is a specific project in which the Deputy has a particular interest I would be glad to provide additional information.

#### Youth Services.

297. **Mr. McGinley** asked the Minister for Education and Science if an application for funding has been received from an organisation (details supplied) in County Donegal; when it was received; if a decision has been made; and if a grant will be approved. [41843/06]

**Minister of State at the Department of Education and Science (Miss de Valera):** The Youth Affairs Section of my Department provides support for a number of schemes and initiatives designed to ensure the provision of non-formal educational opportunities for young people throughout the country. This consists mainly of grant-aid assistance for national and major regional youth organisations under the Youth Service Grant Scheme, special projects for disadvantaged young people under the Special Projects for Youth Scheme and the Young People's Facilities and Services Fund which targets those young people at risk from substance misuse.

I understand that an application for funding has not been received on behalf of the organisation referred to by the Deputy under any of these schemes. I am arranging for further information on the schemes and programmes administered by Youth Affairs Section to be forwarded separately to the Deputy.

#### Site Acquisitions.

298. **Mr. Dennehy** asked the Minister for Education and Science if, in view of the long delay in providing a school building site at a location (details supplied) in County Cork, she will consider requesting the Office of Public Works to use a compulsory purchase order; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [41846/06]

**Minister for Education and Science (Ms Hanafin):** I am advised by the Property Management Section of the Office of Public Works (OPW), who act on behalf of my Department in relation to site acquisitions generally, that a suitable site has been identified for the provision of a new school referred to by the Deputy. The site comprises of three parcels of land. The up-to-date position on the acquisition of these lands is as follows:

Plot 1 — At conveyancing

Plot 2 — Awaiting contracts

Plot 3 — Agreement on price reached, subject to contract.

Contracts awaited — the OPW understand that the receipt from the vendor of contracts may be delayed depending on other planning matters being resolved in the first instance. I am further advised by the OPW that there is no provision for its Office to acquire lands compulsorily. On completion of the acquisition of the site, the project can then be considered in the context of the School Building and Modernisation Programme 2006-2010.

#### Riachtanais Speisialta Oideachais.

299. D'fhiafraigh **Mr. McGinley** den Aire Oideachais agus Eolaíochta an gcáilíonn cúntóirí riachtanais speisialta i ranganna bunscoileanna do liúntas na Gaeltachta a íoctar le gnáthmhúinteoirí bunscoile. [41863/06]

**Minister for Education and Science (Ms Hanafin):** Is é an chaoi a bhfuil an scéal ná nach n-íocann mo Roinnse liúntas Gaeltachta do chúntóirí riachtanas speisialta a fhostaítear i mbunscoileanna i limistéir Gaeltachta.

#### Early School Leavers.

300. **Ms Burton** asked the Minister for Education and Science the rate of retention in sec-



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ondary school from 1997 to date in respect of schools in the greater Dublin area; the school with the highest retention rate; the school with the lowest retention rate; if she has information on the relative retention rates as between boys and girls at secondary school; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [41865/06]

**Minister for Education and Science (Ms Hanafin):** The latest data published by my Department on retention rates in second-level schools relate to the cohort of entrants to the first year of junior cycle in 1996. (Students in this cohort would have sat the Leaving Certificate in either 2002 or 2003, depending on whether they took the Transition Year Programme). The published data for the 1996 cohort indicate an average “unadjusted” retention rate to Leaving Certificate of 72.1 for the Dublin area (combining the four Local Authority areas) as compared with a national average figure of 77.8%. The term “unadjusted” relates to the fact that the figures cited have not been adjusted to allow for factors such as emigration, death or cases of departure to privately aided second level colleges. The national adjusted Leaving Certificate retention rate for the 1996 cohort was 81.3%. The ‘unadjusted’ rate of retention for males in Dublin was 67.1 compared to 77.5% for females in Dublin. The corresponding national averages were 72.1 and 83.8%, respectively.

Retention data on individual schools or on schools in a particular local area are not made available separately by my Department due to my concerns about the way such information might be used to create school league tables with a detrimental effect on educational equality and a balanced approach to all dimensions of learning. It should be noted that just considering the level at which young people left the state-aided school system does not give an full picture of their educational attainment. Aside from those who transfer to private non-aided schools, many other young people go on to pursue other educational opportunities such as in Youthreach centres and on apprenticeship training courses.

With regard to those who leave school without completing the Leaving Certificate, the available statistical evidence indicates that the increasing range of further education and training opportunities available for these students is having a positive impact. CSO data show that the educational profile of 20-24 year olds in Ireland has improved steadily over the last five years, as increasing opportunities have been made available in the further education and training sector. By 2005, 87% of 20-24 year olds had attained upper second-level education (or equivalent), up from 82% in 2000. This compares with an EU average of 77% in 2005. This indicates both that there has been an increase in the proportion of

young people in Ireland with at least the Leaving Certificate or equivalent, and that the attainment of our young people compares very well with their EU counterparts.

Nonetheless, we are determined to make further progress by continuing to pursue a dual strategy of both encouraging more young people to finish school and ensuring much greater second chance and further education opportunities for those who left school early. This kind of strategy ensures that young people are empowered to achieve their full potential, be that by sitting the Leaving Certificate or by pursuing qualifications through other pathways such as Youthreach or FÁS apprenticeships which may be more appropriate to their individual interests. Thus, it is important that the Deputy appreciates that looking at just the level of retention in the formal school system is not a fair assessment of the educational attainment of our young people.

This Government has prioritised a wide variety of measures for tackling educational disadvantage and social exclusion range from pre-school interventions, supports for tackling children’s literacy problems, smaller class sizes, increased capitation grants, measures to tackle early school leaving and strengthen ties between the school, the family and the community. With regard to curriculum, we have worked to widen the educational experience available to students by expanding funding for programmes such as the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP), Vocational Preparation Training (VPT) and the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA).

The School Completion Programme was established to directly target those in danger of dropping out of the education system and is a key component of my Department’s strategy to discriminate positively in favour of children and young people who are at risk of early school leaving. In line with current thinking, the Programme favours an integrated cross-community and cross-sectoral approach based on the development of local strategies to ensure maximum participation levels in the education process. It entails targeting individual young people aged 4-18, both in and out of school, and arranging supports to address inequalities in educational access, participation and outcomes.

The Home School Community Liaison (HSCL) Scheme is a key intervention to improve the educational outcomes of children from disadvantaged areas by promoting active cooperation between their parents and teachers and encouraging community involvement. Through their work with parents, HSCL officers seek to raise parents’ awareness of the need to encourage their children to work hard at school and to help parents to improve their own capacities to enhance their children’s educational progress and to assist them in developing relevant skills.

The Education Welfare Act and the establishment of the National Educational Welfare Board is also an important plank in the campaign to keep students at school and will provide a comprehensive framework for promoting regular school attendance and tackling the problems of absenteeism and early school leaving. As the Deputy will be aware, enhancing attendance, progression, retention and attainment are central to DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) the action plan for educational inclusion, which is being implemented at present. The action plan represents a shift in emphasis away from individual initiatives, each addressing a particular aspect of the problem, with the new plan adopting a multifaceted and more integrated approach. This is the first time that an integrated educational inclusion strategy has been developed for 3-18 year olds in this country.

The plan provides for a standardised system for identifying levels of disadvantage and a new integrated School Support Programme (SSP) which will bring together and build upon, a number of existing interventions for schools with a concentrated level of disadvantage. 670 primary schools, comprising 338 urban/town and 332 rural and 203 second-level schools, have been included in the School Support Programme. Many extra supports have been put in place under the DEIS Plan over the past year, while the 2007 Estimates will allow for further significant improvements next year. The key principle of early intervention underpins both the early childhood education measure and many of the literacy and numeracy measures being adopted under the new action plan.

The DEIS plan places a renewed emphasis on the involvement of parents and families in children's education in schools, with HSCL services being provided to all DEIS schools. The School Completion Programme will also be integrated into the new School Support Programme under the action plan.

Progression from primary to second-level is recognised as a crucial transition period in a child's education. Under the action plan, a continuing emphasis will be placed on the development of effective transfer programmes by building on the existing work of the Home School Community Liaison Scheme and the School Completion Programme. Other areas such as extending access to Schools' Business Partnerships, school meals, guidance counselling and student councils will also be facilitated through the action plan. In addition, increased integration will be promoted between the work of second-level schools and centres catering for young early school leavers, particularly Youthreach centres and Senior Traveller Training Centres. Also central to the success of the action plan will be an increased emphasis on planning at school and school cluster level, target-setting and measurement of progress and outcomes to ensure that the

increased investment is matched by an improvement in educational outcomes for the children and young people concerned. So, through a variety of measures, this Government has worked hard to encourage more young people to finish school and to provide greater opportunities for those who left school early. We will continue to prioritise this area. To that end, the Deputy will be pleased to know that the total provision in the 2007 Estimates for educational inclusion programmes at all levels is €730 million — an increase of €95 million, or 15% on the 2006 figure. The 2007 provision includes a 20% increase in funding for the NEWB.

### Special Educational Needs.

301. **Ms Harkin** asked the Minister for Education and Science the provision being made for school leavers with significant intellectual disability to continue their education in third level centres in the Health Service Executive west area supported by the appropriate statutory partners; in view of the Government's commitment to inclusion of people with disabilities and its obligation through the Disability Act 2005; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [41871/06]

**Minister for Education and Science (Ms Hanafin):** The participation rate of students with a disability in third level education has improved significantly over the past ten years. In 1994, there were just 400 students with a disability in the sector (about 0.5% of full-time undergraduates), while recent indications from the Association for Higher Education Access and Disability (AHEAD) are that there are now over 2,700 students with a disability in higher education (about 2.4% of full-time undergraduates). Key measures which have contributed to this increase in participation have been the allocation by my Department through the HEA of dedicated strategic and core funding for the development of access and disability support services to higher education institutions. In addition, funding is allocated to a range of student supports and services through the Fund for Students with a Disability. In 2005/6, €1,631,979 was allocated to 408 students with a disability in 10 third level institutions in the HSE West area.

Figures from the National Office for Equity of Access to Third Level Education and AHEAD indicate that, on average, over half (52%) of all students with a disability in higher education have a specific learning disability (for example, dyslexia), about 16% of students have a mobility disability, 8% have mental health difficulties, 7% are deaf or hard of hearing, 5% are blind or visually impaired and 12% have other disabilities, including, I understand, a small number of students with intellectual disabilities.

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Support structures across the education system, in particular systems of needs assessment and educational planning, are also being progressed by the National Council for Special Education, which was established on a statutory basis following the enactment of the Education for Persons with Special Needs Act 2004. The plan of work of the NCSE will ensure that the needs of young people with a disability in primary and secondary education are being met from the very earliest stages of their education. Under the Disability Act, 2005, the Council, in conjunction with the Health Service Executive, has a key role in supporting young people and adults with a disability in progressing their studies beyond school into further and higher education, the legislation also places important obligations on education providers in accommodating the needs of students with a disability. With improved systems of assessment and support for students in first and second level education, combined with the continuity of support provided for under the Disability Act 2005, I am confident that we will see more students with a disability, including those with an intellectual disability, progressing to further and higher education in the years to come.

#### **Schools Building Projects.**

302. **Ms Burton** asked the Minister for Education and Science the position in relation to the promised second level school in Castaheany; when it will open its doors to students; if the site has been acquired; the cost or estimated cost and the size of the site; the number of pupils the school will cater for; when enrolments will commence; if a principal has been appointed; and when these appointments will take place. [41872/06]

**Minister for Education and Science (Ms Hanafin):** The new post-primary school for Phibblestown has taken longer than expected due to difficulties in acquiring the site. I am pleased to inform the Deputy that as part of my Department's partnership with Fingal County Council the site purchase can now be concluded. The site is almost 8.5 acres in size and the legalities on the site purchase will be completed by County Dublin Vocational Education Committee. Due to the commercial sensitivities, I do not intend to comment on the agreed price at this time. The completion of the site purchase enables progress to be made on the delivery of the new school which will be as part of a design and build contract. It is too early at this stage to give a precise time-frame on when the school will be completed. However, a Principal Teacher will be appointed some months before the school is due to open to ensure efficient planning and organisation can take place, and a decision on the enrolling of

students will be taken by the school management authority at that stage.

#### **School Accommodation.**

303. **Mr. Kenny** asked the Minister for Education and Science the measures she is taking to increase secondary school places in an area (details supplied) in County Dublin; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [41882/06]

**Minister for Education and Science (Ms Hanafin):** The Department has already responded to the demand for additional school places in the area referred to by the Deputy by approving building projects at three Post Primary providers in the area. St. Joseph's College, received an extension to cater for 725 pupils. An extension project of 2,200 m<sup>2</sup> was also provided for Coláiste Pádraig. The provision of this additional accommodation will enable the school to cater for 875 pupils. In addition a new school building of 4,565 m<sup>2</sup> was recently completed for the Gaelcholáiste to cater for 600 pupils. My recent announcement regarding 80 schools with projects to progress to the appointment of a design team for additional accommodation included the local Community College. This school is to receive additional accommodation to cater for 1000 pupils. I am satisfied that a combination of all the measures outlined above will satisfy the demand for Post-Primary school places in that area. However, the Department will continue to monitor developments in the area to ensure that any emerging additional demands are addressed as expeditiously as possible.

#### **Site Acquisitions.**

304. **Mr. Kenny** asked the Minister for Education and Science the progress made in acquiring a site for a school in Newcastle, County Dublin; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [41883/06]

**Minister for Education and Science (Ms Hanafin):** The Department has examined the long term accommodation needs of the Newcastle area of County Dublin and has determined that additional provision will be required to meet demand emanating from current and planned housing developments in the area. The matter of how best this additional accommodation should be provided having regard to existing accommodation and the alternative options available is currently under consideration. A decision in this regard will be made as soon as possible.

305. **Mr. Kenny** asked the Minister for Education and Science the progress made in acquiring a site for a school (details supplied) in Dublin 22; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [41884/06]

**Minister for Education and Science (Ms Hanafin):** The Department is acutely aware of the situation in the school referred to by the Deputy and the need for a permanent solution to its long term accommodation needs. It is in discussion with the Local Authority regarding issues on access to a proposed site. When these issues have been resolved, I will be in a position to provide details of the proposed site.

306. **Mr. Kenny** asked the Minister for Education and Science the situation regarding a site for a school (details supplied) in County Dublin; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [41885/06]

**Minister for Education and Science (Ms Hanafin):** The Property Management Section of the Office of Public Works (OPW), which acts on behalf of my Department in relation to site acquisitions generally, has been requested to source a site for the school referred to by the Deputy. The requirement for a site has been advertised and a technical assessment of the sites on offer has been completed. The matter is now with their Valuation Unit. In due course, a report on the OPW's findings will be provided to the Department. Once a suitable site has been secured, the project will then be considered in the context of the School Building and Modernisation Programme 2006-2010.

#### **Physical Education Facilities.**

307. **Mr. O'Connor** asked the Minister for Education and Science the position in relation to the actions being pursued to ensure that the new physical education hall at a school (details supplied) in Dublin 24 is open to the local community; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [41941/06]

**Minister for Education and Science (Ms Hanafin):** My Department has provided funding in excess of €34m for the construction of nine dual use halls with enhanced facilities, attached to post-primary schools. Eight of the halls, including the hall referred to by the Deputy, are in Dublin and one is in Cork. The halls in question have been built as part of a joint programme to develop community sports facilities in drugs task force areas. As the halls are of a much greater magnitude than the average school PE hall, issues relating to the funding, management structure and staffing of the halls have had to be considered.

My Department has now given approval to County Dublin VEC to initiate the recruitment process to provide staff for the hall in question.

#### **Language Support Staff.**

308. **Mr. O'Connor** asked the Minister for Edu-

cation and Science the contacts she has had with a school (details supplied) in Dublin 24 in respect of the challenges faced by the school regarding their international community; the assistance being offered; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [41942/06]

**Minister for Education and Science (Ms Hanafin):** Staff from my Department visited the area earlier this year and met with the Principals of both the Junior and Senior schools. At that time international enrolment in the Junior school was 182 pupils out of a total enrolment of 517. The corresponding figures for the Senior school were 188 out of a total enrolment of 521. The principals gave a presentation on the administrative and educational challenges facing the schools arising from the increase in newcomer pupils. The Department undertook to consider the schools' requests for additional language support teachers in the short term and for other additional resources in the longer term. In this connection, the Department conveyed approval to the Principal of the Senior School on 20 June, 2006 for the appointment of a third fulltime temporary teaching post provisionally for the 2006/2007 school year. As the Junior school already has three language support teacher posts sanctioned by the Department — the maximum allowed under current arrangements — no additional supports could be granted in the short term.

Between extra language support posts and grant aid, the level of support provided to schools to meet the needs of children whose first language is not English has increased dramatically in recent years. Nonetheless I am very conscious of the pressures on schools, including the school referred to by the Deputy, that have large numbers of non-English speaking children enrolled. I am determined to provide greater support for these schools. To that end, provision has been made in the 2007 Estimates for an extra 200 language support teachers in 2007. A further 350 posts will be provided under the Towards 2016 partnership agreement between 2008 and 2009. These extra posts will allow the current cap of 2 teachers per school to be reformed.

While details as to the precise number of posts to be allocated at both levels in the current school year and the schools to which the posts will be allocated have yet to be finalised I can assure the Deputy that I will be anxious to ensure that the additional resources are properly targeted at those areas where they are most needed.

A comprehensive strategy is currently being finalised which will ensure that the extra investment in this area is being used to the best effect, and that it is underpinned by the right support and training for teachers.

### School Staffing.

309. **Ms C. Murphy** asked the Minister for Education and Science the number of teachers, resource or remedial teachers and special needs assistants, employed either on a permanent or temporary basis by schools (details supplied); the number of pupils registered in each school; the number of pupils seeking a place for September 2007 at each school; the number of classrooms in place at each school; the locations where new buildings or extensions are planned; the band within which each such school is classified; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [41965/06]

**Minister for Education and Science (Ms Hanafin):** The information requested by the Deputy is not readily available in my Department. The compilation of this information would involve an inordinate amount of staff time.

### Site Acquisitions.

310. **Mr. Noonan** asked the Minister for Education and Science the position on the acquisition of a suitable site and the provision of a permanent school building for a school (details supplied) in County Limerick; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [41966/06]

**Minister for Education and Science (Ms Hanafin):** The Commissioners of Public Works in Ireland act as agents for my Department in the acquisition of sites for schools. I have been advised by the OPW that negotiations to acquire a suitable site for a new school referred to by the Deputy are ongoing. However, it would be inappropriate to reveal the precise details at this point as it may prejudice ongoing negotiations.

On completion of the site acquisition, the project will be considered in the context of the School Building and Modernisation Programme 2006-2010.

### Vetting of Personnel.

311. **Ms C. Murphy** asked the Minister for Education and Science the safeguards in place in locations where both primary education and adult education are located in the same school, and required to be in place regarding the screening of those adults with access to the facilities and the protection of children; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [41989/06]

**Minister for Education and Science (Ms Hanafin):** Ensuring the protection, health and welfare of children is a key concern for the Government, for parents, for agencies that work with children and for society generally. I can assure the Deputy that the Government is determined to do all that we can to keep our children

and vulnerable adults safe. I am pleased to inform the Deputy that all new teachers have been vetted and the process of vetting non-teaching staff is underway.

My Department has had discussions with the relevant interests — school management authorities, unions, the Teaching Council and the Garda Central Vetting Unit — on the procedures and processes which will apply in relation to the vetting of all persons in the education sector. I'm sure the Deputy will appreciate that the number and range of persons who have access to pupils is very wide. With regard to the issue of vetting of all adults with access to children in the education sector, in my view, the determining factor in deciding whether or not such persons should be vetted is the extent to which they have unsupervised access to children or vulnerable adults. As the expansion of the service provided by the Garda Central Vetting Unit is rolled out, I envisage that any individual who may have unsupervised access to children would be included in this category.

The critical issue here is whether the access to children is unsupervised. By unsupervised access I mean where a member of the school staff or a parent or guardian of the child is not present at all times when the person concerned has access to children.

### Schools Recognition.

312. **Mr. Durkan** asked the Minister for Education and Science her Department's policy towards a second level gaelscoil in County Kildare, currently located on a temporary basis at the Curragh, County Kildare, in view of the number and location of gaelscoileanna in the county; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [42008/06]

**Minister for Education and Science (Ms Hanafin):** Two all-Irish schools currently serve the needs of County Kildare at post primary level. Coláiste Cois Life in Lucan and Gaelcholáiste Chill Dara in Newbridge. The latter commenced operation in September 2004 having received temporary recognition from my Department for a three year period. In addition, Co Kildare VEC recently applied for the establishment of a separate all Irish post-primary school in Maynooth. This application is currently being examined by officials in the School Planning Section of the Department. A decision will be conveyed to the VEC as soon as it is made.

### Water and Sewerage Schemes.

313. **Mr. Deenihan** asked the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government when the preliminary report of Castle Island stage II will be approved by his Department; and

if he will make a statement on the matter. [41812/06]

**Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government (Mr. Roche):** Stage 2 of the Castleisland Sewerage Scheme is included in my Department's Water Services Investment Programme 2005-2007 as a scheme to commence construction in 2007 at a cost of €5.5m. Kerry County Council's Preliminary Report for the scheme is under examination in my Department and a decision will issue shortly.

#### House Prices.

314. **Mr. Dennehy** asked the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government if there has been progress made regarding efforts to phase out staged payments in relation to house building; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41847/06]

**Minister of State at the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government (Mr. N. Ahern):** I announced last June that the Irish Home Builders Association (IHBA) had agreed to pursue the voluntary phasing out of stage payments and to enter into discussions with my Department with a view to bringing this about within a relatively short timeframe. Following on this commitment, my Department has been in consultation with the IHBA and substantial progress has been made regarding arrangements for the ending of the practice at an early date. Some details remain to be concluded and I hope to be in a position to make an announcement on the matter shortly.

#### Radiation Levels.

315. **Mr. Cuffe** asked the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government if he will request the Radiological Protection Institute of Ireland to investigate the mystery illness of former Russian Premier Yegor Gaidar on his Irish visit, in view of the fact that news of his illness comes after a series of mysterious incidents involving Russian public figures over the past month; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41873/06]

**Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government (Mr. Roche):** The functions of the Radiological Protection Institute of Ireland, as set out in law, include advising "the Government, the Minister (for the Environment Heritage and Local Government), and other Ministers of the Government and the public, on measures for the protection of individuals in the State from radiological hazards".

In the case referred to in this Question, there was no evidence, as far as the RPII was aware, that linked Mr. Gaidar's illness to radiation poi-

soning. Connolly Memorial Hospital and the Garda, who were investigating the illness, adopted a precautionary approach despite neither having any evidence of radiation being involved. Accordingly, they requested the RPII to undertake monitoring of locations in the hospital and in the NUI, Maynooth in order to provide reassurance to the public. The RPII undertook the necessary monitoring on 1 December 2006. The results of the monitoring did not show any abnormal radiation levels. This information was conveyed to the hospital and the Gardaí by the RPII.

#### Genetically Modified Organisms.

316. **Mr. Sargent** asked the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government if he will put in place a moratorium on trials of genetically modified organisms; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41899/06]

**Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government (Mr. Roche):** A company who wishes to carry out a field trial of a genetically modified organism (GMO) in an EU member state must apply for approval to the relevant national competent authority designated under Part B of EU Directive 2001/18/EC. Member states are obliged to transpose the Directive, including the procedure for assessment of, and decisions on, applications for field trials of GMOs.

Directive 2001/18/EC has been transposed into Irish law by the Genetically Modified Organisms (Deliberate Release) Regulations 2003. These regulations assign the function of evaluating applications under Part B of the Directive to the Environmental Protection Agency.

#### Environmental Policy.

317. **Dr. Cowley** asked the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government if his attention has been drawn to the growing fury in the farming community over measures set down in the nitrates good agricultural practice statutory instrument, S.I. No. 378, which empowers forcible entry to the homes of farm families through court order where entry is otherwise refused, the searching of dwellings and the removal of records, including computers, from the premises and domestic sheds within the curtilage of dwellings in view of the fact that such measures are being viewed as oppressive; his views on this Government's assault on the natural and constitutional rights of farm families, and the gross abuse of their privacy and enjoyment of the family home; his further views on removing the measures from the statutory instrument and the similar provision as set out in the Water Services Bill 2003 which he is currently piloting through

[Dr. Cowley.]

Dáil Éireann; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41900/06]

**Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government (Mr. Roche):** The European Communities (Good Agricultural Practice for Protection of Waters) Regulations 2006 contain appropriate and necessary provisions to allow for verification by the relevant authorities of compliance with the Regulations. These largely standard provisions allow for matters such as the entry to premises by an authorised person with the consent of the occupier or, for example, where there is a significant immediate risk to the environment, by court order; the inspection of premises; the taking of samples and other matters considered essential to ensure compliance with, and to support implementation of, the Regulations. Similar provisions are to be found in environmental legislation generally.

#### Register of Electors.

318. **Mr. O'Connor** asked the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government the action he has taken to deal with the concerns regarding the 2007 voting register; if he will report on his contacts with South Dublin County Council in the matter; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41943/06]

**Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government (Mr. Roche):** In law, the preparation of the Register of Electors is a matter for each local registration authority. It is their duty to ensure, as far as possible and with the cooperation of the public, the accuracy and comprehensiveness of the Register. In April 2006, I announced a package of measures to assist local authorities in their work on preparing the 2007/8 Register.

This included: a commitment of up to €6m in new funding from the Exchequer to ensure a comprehensive and well resourced Register campaign; an initial allocation of €171,000 was made available to South Dublin County Council in July; a €1m national media campaign involving TV, radio, the print media and billboards; new IT based arrangements so that the names of people that have died are automatically notified to local authorities for deletion from the Register; all local authority websites to facilitate voters in checking that their names are on the register; and a central website [www.checktheregister.ie](http://www.checktheregister.ie) (which went live on 1 November) giving direct links to each local authority's eReg enquiry screen.

My Department also worked with a group of local authority managers and senior officials to put in place an enhanced programme for improving the 2007/2008 Register. Detailed procedures for the carrying out of registration fieldwork were

finalised and issued to local authorities in early July. The procedures included provision for ensuring that each household was visited and provided with forms and information at least twice, if necessary. In the event that this process did not satisfactorily register the household, written notification would then be given cautioning of the danger of being omitted from the Register. Local authorities were also requested to cross check with other data that they might have (e.g. council housing lists).

I am satisfied that local authorities have carried out the most extensive registration campaign in decades for the Draft Register 2007/8. The campaign has involved some 1,500 fieldworkers visiting some 1.2 million households; many of these were visited more than once so as to ensure a more accurate Register. As a result of the extensive activity at local level, combined with a strong media-based national awareness campaign, public interest in the registration process and its fundamental importance to democratic participation is now at a very high level.

The process is not finished. The Draft Register has been published by each local authority. I received requests from 3 local authorities to provide additional time to complete their work. Rather than confine the extension to the 3 councils, I decided to provide more time to all councils to complete their work on the register up to 2 January. I have also decided to give additional time to members of the public for submitting corrections to their council up until 9 December. These changes were provided for by way of an amendment to the Electoral (Amendment) Bill 2006 which has now been passed by both Houses of the Oireachtas. The Draft Register can be checked up to 9 December in: Council offices, Public libraries, Post offices, Garda stations, and On-line on each local authority website and through the central site [www.checktheregister.ie](http://www.checktheregister.ie)

People aged 18 and over who are not registered, or whose details are not correctly registered, may apply to their city or county council for registration or correction as appropriate; a form for this purpose can be downloaded from [www.checktheregister.ie](http://www.checktheregister.ie). Valid registration applications will be reflected in the final Register which will be published in February 2007.

In relation to the period after 9 December, it will be open to eligible persons still not included on the Register to secure their registration through inclusion in the Supplementary Register; applications for this purpose may be made up to 15 days before polling day.

#### Nuclear Safety.

319. **Mr. O'Connor** asked the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government if he will report on his efforts to deal with public

concerns regarding Sellafeld; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41944/06]

**Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government (Mr. Roche):** I refer to the reply to Question No. 22 of 8 November 2006. The position remains unchanged.

#### Social and Affordable Housing.

320. **Ms C. Murphy** asked the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government the income in mortgage payments by local authority in the AFS for 2004 and 2005; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41990/06]

**Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government (Mr. Roche):** The mortgage payments made by borrowers in 2005 in respect of each housing authority which issues loans is set out in the table. The data are in respect of repayments of principal only on amounts lent to borrowers. The interest payments are credited to the revenue account and are not identified as a separate item. As the information in respect of principal amounts was included in local authority annual financial statements for the first time in 2005, information in respect of 2004 is not available to my Department.

	Mortgage Payments in 2005
	€
<i>County Councils</i>	
Carlow	492,886
Cavan	486,049
Clare	1,014,555
Cork	2,888,177
Donegal	1,180,813
Fingal	4,114,105
Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown	397,374
Galway	960,089
Kerry	755,838
Kildare	1,186,233
Kilkenny	1,519,442
Laois	1,016,324
Leitrim	122,870
Limerick	908,014
Longford	676,930
Louth	262,348
Mayo	1,341,493
Meath	1,018,791
Monaghan	489,389
North Tipperary	412,820
Offaly	699,335
Roscommon	393,660
Sligo	669,441
South Dublin	2,941,063

	Mortgage Payments in 2005
	€
South Tipperary	696,711
Waterford	702,112
Westmeath	1,120,221
Wexford	1,285,661
Wicklow	855,198
<i>City Councils</i>	
Cork	3,539,774
Dublin	8,700,000
Galway	1,011,211
Limerick	419,349
Waterford	138,465
<i>Borough Councils/Town Councils</i>	
Clonmel	198,224
Drogheda	255,885
Kilkenny	110,276
Sligo	315,717
Wexford	180,000
Athlone	131,429
Bray	73,519
Dundalk	149,159

#### Local Authority Services.

321. **Ms C. Murphy** asked the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government the amount levied by and paid to local authorities in the years 2004 and 2005 in commercial water charges; the amount per unit charged; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41991/06]

**Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government (Mr. Roche):** The amounts charged by each local authority per cubic metre for water services for 2004 and 2005 are set out in the table.

Returns made to my Department by local authorities indicate that the total amount for collection in respect of non-domestic water charges, including arrears, in 2004 was €171.2 million and in 2005 was €214.5 million. The amount collected in 2004 was €106.8 million and in 2005 was €134.3 million.



[Mr. Roche.]

	2004 Charge per cubic meter for non-domestic customers	2005 Charge per cubic meter for non-domestic customers
Carlow	0.77	0.81
Cavan	0.70	0.77
Clare	0.82	0.89
Cork City	2.03	2.30
Cork county	0.77	1.70
Donegal	1.05	1.18
Dublin City	1.26	1.33
Dún Laoghaire/Rathdown	1.41	1.64
Fingal	1.31	1.44
South Dublin	1.14	1.33
Galway City	1.04	1.04
Galway county	0.73	0.80
Kerry	1.51	1.57
Kildare	0.97	1.20
Kilkenny	0.80	0.85
Laois	0.97	1.04
Leitrim	0.61	1.46
Limerick City	0.93	1.54
Limerick county	1.12	1.05
Longford	1.75	1.75
Louth	0.89	0.85
Mayo	0.95	1.02
Meath	1.24	1.36
Monaghan	0.72	0.77
Offaly	0.88	0.95
Roscommon	0.87	0.89
Sligo	1.01	1.01
North Tipp.	0.94	0.94
South Tipp.	1.09	1.13
Waterford City	0.70	0.77
Waterford county	0.97	0.66
Westmeath	0.90	0.90
Wexford	1.78	2.34
Wicklow	1.55	1.65