



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE  
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DÁIL ÉIREANN

TUAIRISC OIFIGIÚIL—*Neamhcheartaithe*  
(OFFICIAL REPORT—*Unrevised*)

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# DÁIL ÉIREANN

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*Déardaoin, 6 Nollaig 2007.*  
*Thursday, 6 December 2007.*  
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Chuaigh an Ceann Comhairle i gceannas ar 10.30 a.m.

—————  
*Paidir.*  
*Prayer.*  
 —————

## Requests to Move Adjournment of Dáil under Standing Order 32.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Before coming to the Order of Business I propose to deal with a notice under Standing Order 32. I have received notice from Deputy Michael D. Higgins and call on him to state the matter.

**Deputy Michael D. Higgins:** I seek the adjournment of the Dáil under Standing Order 32 to debate the following urgent matter: given the announcement of a closure decision at Abbot Ireland in Galway city, the urgent need for such new legislation as is necessary, and the monitoring and implementation of the existing legislation passed by Dáil Éireann to give the full force of law in the State to the EU employment directive on information and consultation framework through, among other means, establishing and resourcing a proper inspectorate.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Having given the matter full consideration, I do not consider it to be in order under Standing Order 32.

## Order of Business.

**The Taoiseach:** It is proposed to take No. 9, motion re proposed approval by Dáil Éireann for a Council decision concerning co-operation between asset recovery offices of the member states (back from committee); No. 8, Supplementary Estimates for Public Services — Votes 20 and 21 (back from committee); and No. a11, financial motions by the Minister for Finance, 2007 — motion 5, (resumed). It is proposed, notwithstanding anything in Standing Orders, that the Dáil shall sit later than 4.45 p.m. and business shall be interrupted not later than 7.30 p.m.; Nos. 9 and 8 shall be decided without debate and any division demanded on No. 8 shall be taken forthwith; and the following arrangements shall apply in respect of the resumed debate on No. a11: the speech of the Taoiseach and of the main spokespersons or a Member nominated in his or her

stead for the Fine Gael Party and the Labour Party, who shall be called upon in that order, shall not exceed 40 minutes in each case and the speech of each other Member called upon, who may share their time, shall not exceed 30 minutes in each case.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** There are three proposals to be put to the House. Is the proposal for the late sitting agreed? Agreed. Is the proposal for dealing with Nos. 8 and 9 without debate agreed? Agreed. Is the proposal for dealing with No. a11 agreed? Agreed.

**Deputy Enda Kenny:** If I heard it correctly this morning on RTE, the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government is to announce his carbon budget, as it is described, today. Can I take it that the announcements being made by Ministers will be made here in the House, as was the case with the budget yesterday, and that the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government will make his announcement here?

**The Taoiseach:** That is how I understand it.

**Deputy Eamon Gilmore:** Following the budget statement yesterday, the Minister for Health and Children announced increases in charges for accident and emergency departments and overnight stays in hospital and an increase in the threshold for the drugs payment scheme. Why were those increases not contained in the budget statement made by the Minister for Finance yesterday? Are there any other little increases in charges likely to be made by other Ministers and which were not in the budget statement?

**The Taoiseach:** They are not taxation measures and are not required to be included in the budget statement. They are in the principal features of the budget. There are a number of issues in the principal features. The Minister for Health and Children outlined last night why these issues come up at budget time. They come up regularly at budget time and are included in a departmental estimate for next year.

**Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin:** In the same vein, in his budget speech and in what I can only describe as an effort to excuse the Government's renegeing on its promise to extend the medical card, as contained in the programme for Government, the Tánaiste and Minister for Finance indicated that the Minister for Health and Children is carrying out a review of eligibility. The eligibility for health and personal social services Bill has been long promised and is long overdue. Will it be further delayed because of the review being undertaken by the Minister for Health and Children in respect of entitlements or will the Taoiseach take the more correct approach and bring forward that legislation so Members of the

[Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin.]

Houses of the Oireachtas will have the opportunity to directly impact on this so-called review and help guide this Government correctly for the first time in respect of the entitlement to health care of all citizens on the basis of need?

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Is legislation promised in this area?

**The Taoiseach:** The eligibility for health and personal social services Bill is expected in 2008 but the review is not predicated on that legislation.

**Deputy Bernard J. Durkan:** In view of the low esteem in which the political establishment appears to be held by the public, as indicated in a recent report, is it intended to bring in the legislation to allow for the ratification of the UN Convention against Corruption and if so, when? It is promised for next year.

In view of the large number of vacant spaces on the Government front bench this morning, is it intended at an early date to give legislative effect to the convention which seeks to prevent the arrest, detention, abduction or any other deprivation of liberty by agents of the State or any group supported by the State? The item in question is No. 63 on the Government's legislative programme. Obviously, there is something preventing the very good members of the Government front bench from being in attendance this morning.

**The Taoiseach:** The first matter raised by the Deputy will be dealt with in this session. I do not know what the other issue is about.

**Deputy James Bannon:** The budget contains nothing in respect of protecting and managing our heritage resource. It is part of our development and is linked with the tourism industry. When can we expect the national monuments Bill to come before the House? A huge number of controversies have crept into the system in this area since Deputy John Gormley took over the Environment, Heritage and Local Government portfolio. He is seemingly turning a blind eye to many of the controversies. Maybe the smell of the diesel State car is having an effect on him.

**The Taoiseach:** There was a large increase in his Estimate yesterday. The national monuments Bill will be taken next year.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** A number of Members are offering but, by recent convention, the Order of Business is very short on the day after the budget to allow the party leaders to debate the general resolution to proceed.

**Deputy Pádraic McCormack:** That is very decent.

**Deputy Joe Costello:** In view of the failure to process the Civil Law (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill, many tenants and leaseholders are facing eviction. When will the Bill, which is on Committee Stage, be resurrected and passed?

**The Taoiseach:** The Bill is on Committee Stage. All I can do is bring Deputy Costello's views to the Minister.

**Deputy Joe Costello:** It concerns constituents of the Taoiseach.

**Deputy Tom Hayes:** In view of the fact that decentralisation was not mentioned once in yesterday's budget, will the Taoiseach update the House on decentralisation and the progress being made?

**Deputy Pádraic McCormack:** Tom Parlon mentioned it last night.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** That would be a very good parliamentary question. It is not for the Order of Business.

**Deputy Michael Ring:** Is there a major shortage of legislation? I refer to the Health (Amendment) Bill. The best statement that one of the Ministers, who are paid a lot of money, could send out was to tell the women of the country how to cook their Brussels sprouts for Christmas.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I would have thought it was timely.

**Deputy Michael Ring:** We are paying them a lot of money and there is no legislation in the House. Is that the best statement he can send out? I do not care how he cooks his Brussels sprouts, nor do the women of the country, nor the men. It is not good enough.

**Deputy Bernard J. Durkan:** We hope he did not burn them.

**Deputy Michael D. Higgins:** It is all cabbage in Mayo.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** No matter how they are cooked, one cannot legislate for the cooking of Brussels sprouts.

**Deputy Tom Sheahan:** On the anniversary of the animal of decentralisation, I ask the Taoiseach and the Minister for Transport beside him how he can suggest to close Valentia and centralise the work to Drogheda, taking 17 jobs from a rural area such as Valentia and transferring them to Drogheda.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** That is not in order.

**Deputy Noel Dempsey:** No jobs were taken out. The Deputy should try to tell the truth.

**Deputy Tom Sheahan:** The Minister is totally out of order.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** So is Deputy Sheahan, unfortunately.

**Deputy Tom Sheahan:** I thought the Ceann Comhairle would support me.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Sin ceist eile.

**Deputy Pat Breen:** Some €5million was put aside for tourism in the Shannon region in yesterday's budget. Has €53 million tourism development funding been set aside in the budget to prepare Shannon for open skies?

**An Ceann Comhairle:** That is not in order. That must be raised during the budget debate.

**Deputy Pat Breen:** Why is it not in order? It relates to funding within the budget. I raised this matter several times.

**Deputy Pádraic McCormack:** What is being done in Shannon is not in order.

#### **International Agreements: Motion**

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Noel Dempsey):** I move:

That Dáil Éireann approves the exercise by the State of the option or discretion provided by Article 1.11 of the Treaty of Amsterdam to take part in the adoption of the following proposed measure:

a proposal for a Council Decision concerning co-operation between Asset Recovery Offices of the Member States in the field of tracing and identification of proceeds from, or other property related to, crime,

a copy of which proposed measure was laid before Dáil Éireann on 20th September, 2007."

Question put and agreed to.

#### **Estimates for Public Services 2007.**

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Noel Dempsey):** I move the following Supplementary Estimates:

#### **Vote 20 — Garda Síochána (Supplementary).**

That a supplementary sum not exceeding €25,000,000 be granted to defray the charge which will come in course of payment during the year ending on the 31st day of December 2007, for the salaries and expenses of the Garda Síochána, including pensions, etc.; for payments of compensation and other expenses

arising out of service in the Local Security Force, for the payment of certain witnesses' expenses, and for payment of a grant-in-aid.

#### **Vote 21 — Prisons (Supplementary).**

That a supplementary sum not exceeding €42,000,000 be granted to defray the charge which will come in course of payment during the year ending on the 31st day of December 2007, for the salaries and expenses of the Prison Service, probation and welfare staff and other expenses in connection with prisons, including places of detention; for probation and welfare services; and for payment of a grant-in-aid.

#### **Vote 25 — Environment, Heritage and Local Government (Supplementary).**

That a supplementary sum not exceeding €50,000,000 be granted to defray the charge which will come in course of payment during the year ending on the 31st day of December 2007, for the salaries and expenses of the Office of the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government, including grants to Local Authorities, grants and other expenses in connection with housing, water, miscellaneous schemes, subsidies and grants.

#### **Vote 26 — Education and Science (Supplementary).**

That a supplementary sum not exceeding €100,000,000 be granted to defray the charge which will come in course of payment during the year ending on the 31st day of December 2007, for the salaries and expenses of the Office of the Minister for Education and Science, for certain services administered by that Office, and for the payments of certain grants and grants-in-aid.

#### **Vote 27 — Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs (Supplementary).**

That a supplementary sum not exceeding €1,000 be granted to defray the charge which will come in course of payment during the year ending on the 31st day of December 2007, for the salaries and expenses of the Office of the Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs, for certain services administered by that Office, and for the payment of certain grants.

#### **Vote 31 — Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Supplementary).**

That a supplementary sum not exceeding €1,000 be granted to defray the charge which will come in course of payment during the year ending on the 31st day of December 2007, for the salaries and expenses of the Office of the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food,

including certain services administered by that Office, and of the Irish Land Commission and for payment of certain grants, subsidies and sundry grants-in-aid and for the payment of certain grants under cash-limited schemes.

**Vote 32 — Transport (Supplementary).**

That a supplementary sum not exceeding €60,000,000 be granted to defray the charge which will come in course of payment during the year ending on the 31st day of December 2007, for the salaries and expenses of the Office of the Minister for Transport, including certain services administered by that Office, for payment of certain grants and certain other services.

**Vote 35 — Arts, Sport and Tourism (Supplementary).**

That a supplementary sum not exceeding €1,000 be granted to defray the charge which will come in course of payment during the year ending on the 31st day of December 2007, for the salaries and expenses of the Office of the Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism, including certain services administered by that Office, and for payment of certain subsidies, grants and grants-in-aid.

**Vote 37 — Army Pensions (Supplementary).**

That a supplementary sum not exceeding €4,000,000 be granted to defray the charge which will come in course of payment during the year ending on the 31st day of December 2007, for retired pay, pensions, compensation, allowances and gratuities payable under sundry statutes to or in respect of members of the Defence Forces and certain other Military Organisations, etc., and for sundry contributions and expenses in connection therewith; for certain extrastatutory children's allowances and other payments and for sundry grants.

Votes put and agreed to.

**Estimates for Public Services 2007: Message from Select Committee.**

**An Ceann Comhairle:** The Select Committee on Education and Science has completed its consideration of the following Supplementary Estimate for public services for the service of the year ending 31 December 2007, Vote No. 26.

**Financial Resolutions 2007.**

**Financial Resolution No. 5: General (Resumed).**

Debate resumed on the following motion:

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.

—(Minister for Health and Children).

**The Taoiseach:** The confidence of the Irish people in the capacity of the Government to manage our way through difficult conditions has been fully vindicated by the terms of the budget introduced by the Tánaiste and Minister for Finance, Deputy Brian Cowen. The role of the budget in a modern economy is only in part about the specific measures announced on budget day. Its more important role is to signal the strategic direction that policy is taking and thereby to send a clear signal to citizens and to stakeholders about how current challenges will be met.

This is a budget that will sustain progress in the Irish economy through more difficult international conditions. Our ability to produce an innovative, progressive and socially caring budget at this time reflects well on the strength and resilience of our economy, built up over many years. Today, we have the resources and the flexibility to respond constructively to less favourable conditions, in a way that would be the envy of our predecessors in the 1980s and of many of our European partners now. The budget is prudent and stays well within the margins of safety but expresses the Government's determination not just to hold what we have but to maintain forward momentum.

The message is loud and clear from this budget: we will maintain our focus on deepening the competitiveness of the economy so that we more that match most of our competitors, we will continue to prioritise the needs of the disadvantaged and those who need our support within the resources that are available and we will continue to create an environment where working people are rewarded for their efforts while enterprises are encouraged to invest through a strong and consistent pro-enterprise tax system. These strategic priorities have to be pursued in a realistic fashion, year by year. Our great strength as a society is our capacity to respond rapidly to changing circumstances. That is what is facing us at present. As a very open economy, we are directly and rapidly affected by changes in the external environment, such as the dramatic developments in international financial markets, the related sharp reduction in the value of the dollar, the changes in the environment for corporate investment globally and the international trend in consumer and business confidence.

Some pre-budget commentary appeared to suggest that the Government should somehow be able to control these forces while others suggested that we should implement all our specific policy commitments at once, irrespective of the economic and fiscal context. Some have warned us that we will be criticised either for taking account of these fiscal realities or for not taking account of them. At least we know where we stand with those people.

We have continued to make substantial economic advances this year and we look forward to further positive growth, including growth in employment, even if somewhat slower, next year. In 2007, growth will be well over 4%. The latest Central Bank figure is 4.75% for the year end. Next year, we expect it to be approximately 3%. About 72,000 net new jobs have been created this year, bringing total employment to approximately 2.1 million. This compares to less than 1.1 million at work 20 years ago. Next year, we expect to create net 24,000 new jobs.

Growth in current expenditure will be a healthy 8% and in capital expenditure it will be 12%, while general Government borrowing remains less than 1%. Very few of our EU partners have the financial scope to bring in such a positive budget in the current climate. In the circumstances, the Government is acting with great responsibility in adopting a fiscal policy that envisages a general Government deficit of 0.9% as a percentage of gross domestic product. This is a prudent course to adopt, within the parameters of our European commitments under the growth and stability pact, especially given the significant provision for capital spending and the responsible measures being taken to contain current spending to an increase of 8.2% in the current year, which is nevertheless a measured deceleration compared with recent years.

Some of the outside commentary of recent weeks might have led people to believe that there would be a different budget. We have no recession. There are no cutbacks of any significance and no stealth taxes. This budget is for a country that is continuing to do remarkably well. Despite this, many people are anxious to emphasise only the negative side, the problems and challenging structural deficiencies that the Government is addressing. Many of the critics inside and outside this House are not willing even to acknowledge, let alone praise, the amount of progress being made on so many fronts, of which the public is aware.

The strategic priorities of this budget will come as no surprise. That is because they are consistent with the policy of Government over the past ten years. Not only that, they are consistent with the strategic direction for the medium to long term that we have set out with the social partners in the framework agreement, *Towards 2016*. The reality is that we cannot achieve all our goals in one year or even in a short run of years. The changes that have brought us thus far, and the further changes that are needed to allow us to meet our economic and social objectives in full, require the consistent pursuit of policy goals over a long period, during which short-term challenges must be faced and dealt with while we keep a clear focus on the underlying direction in which we wish to travel.

In political terms, we have made a good start on implementing our promises. The *Fianna Fáil* election programme and the programme for

Government agreed with our colleagues in the Progressive Democrats and the Green Party are for five years, not for one. Taking into account adverse developments since mid-year, we are running a small and manageable deficit of under 1% of GDP. Taking one year with another, this is not too far removed from keeping the budget in broad balance. We said we would invest 5.4% of GNP in public infrastructure. Instead, we will raise it to an average of 6% over the next five years.

In the programme for Government we said we would increase tax bands and credits in line with wage inflation. We have done so. We immediately abolished stamp duty for first-time buyers in June, as agreed with the Progressive Democrats and the Green Party, and we have improved mortgage interest relief for first-time buyers in this budget, increasing it by €2,000 for a single person and €4,000 for a married couple. We have gone beyond that and reformed and simplified stamp duty on residential homes.

In the absence of a general property tax, stamp duty is, as I have stated on many occasions, an important source of revenue to fund essential public services and it raises approximately €3 billion annually. The existing step changes in stamp duty undoubtedly create anomalies, which there was little opportunity to modify when the market was already overheating. A rationalisation of the system on houses is clearly warranted and this is a good time bring it about. Sooner or later, a correction in the housing market was inevitable, given the high level of house building and historically low interest rates in recent years. It will be beneficial in bringing home purchase more within the reach of younger couples. One of the issues in previous partnership discussions was the high cost of housing, particularly in Dublin. The changes to stamp duty will restore confidence and stability.

The message from the budget is one of confidence that our short-term goals are attainable, that our strategy is the right one, that we have delivered in recent years and that we will continue to deliver. The message is one of confidence that the underlying strength of the economy enables us to increase spending — for both investment and current purposes — at significantly faster rates than most of our partner countries and that we can anticipate employment growth, low unemployment rates, increases in real living standards and improvements in physical infrastructure and human capital, in respect of which we are doing more than almost all of our trading partners. All of this is while maintaining a prudent fiscal position, including record low levels of national debt, and facing fully up to our responsibilities to build a more environmentally sustainable society and economy.

The budget sends a clear message that our delivery under all of these headings will continue. The dislocation caused by international economic turbulence will be limited, and will not deflect us

[The Taoiseach.]

from the strategic course on which we have embarked. Workers whose real incomes are protected by the budget, businesses whose commitment to development through moving up the value chain by a greater reliance on research and development, towns and regions that are planning for a new and strengthened role under our commitment to regional balance, educational institutions that seek to meet the needs of the students of today and tomorrow, families with caring responsibilities and communities seeking to look after their older people, their children and those with disabilities, can all see that their needs and efforts are being supported by the Government through the very balanced and progressive measures in the budget.

This budget is strong on equity. The gains in tax relief are again concentrated at the lower end. We have succeeded in maintaining the position where only approximately one fifth of income earners are on the top rate of tax, where two fifths pay the standard rate and where the remaining two fifths are outside the tax net altogether. As has been observed by the EU Commission on many occasions, we have the most favourable tax system for low earners in the Union.

Tables in the budget booklet also show how in the past ten years effective rates of taxation on annual earnings have declined both in percentage terms and on all levels of income. For example, a married couple on a joint income of €60,000 with two children now pay only 12% of their income in tax. Ten years ago, they would have paid three times that amount, namely, 36%. This is an enormous improvement for those on lower pay, which those opposite are incapable of acknowledging.

On the personal tax side, we have honoured our commitments to the social partners that net income gains will be preserved. Increases in bands and credits will ensure that four out of five income earners, including all those on average industrial earnings, will pay no more than the standard rate of tax, while those on the increased minimum wage will continue to remain outside the tax net. Average industrial earnings have risen by more than €14,600 in the past decade. Compared to then, however, tax on these earnings has been cut by more than €430. Since 1997, those on average industrial earnings have seen their take-home pay increase by 41%. Our consistent approach to income tax policy is to make work pay.

These changes maintain the strong, progressive character of tax policy in recent years. With them in place, the top 1% of income earners will pay 25% of all income tax, compared to the 15% they paid ten years ago. At the same time, those on average earnings or below who comprise 55% of all income earners, will pay only 4% of all income tax, down from the 14% paid ten years ago.

It is correct that we should provide clear incentives within the tax code to underpin economic

activity on a sustainable basis. For that reason, I greatly welcome the further enhancements of the tax credits for research and development expenditure. It is vital that our enterprise sector, both indigenous and overseas, should be constantly attuned to innovation and development. The Government is continuing to increase its own investment in third and fourth level education and the associated research efforts. It is equally important that the enterprise sector should continue to increase its investment and the budget gives it further encouragement to do so. Tax changes affecting agriculture will also benefit that sector of the economy.

The changes in stamp duty on residential property bring to an end the period of uncertainty created by others about how stamp duty might evolve and might impact upon future transactions. The Government has a primary concern to support first-time buyers who are largely exempt from stamp duty. The increases in mortgage interest relief, which the Minister for Finance had flagged and which have now been implemented, will ensure that most new buyers are effectively insulated from the negative impact on affordability of trends in market interest rates.

The changes in stamp duty will encourage those who have perhaps been holding back from appropriate changes in their housing to reflect, for example, the stage of the life cycle they have reached. The six rates have been reduced to two and there will be a substantial reduction in liability. There will, for example, be a saving of €11,000 on a house costing €450,000.

Furthermore, young families moving into somewhat larger accommodation or older people trading down to more manageable properties will now have confidence regarding the stamp duty implications, which in most cases will now be more positive than would otherwise have been the case. This will provide greater confidence across the housing market and will help stabilise housing output at levels appropriate to our underlying need and at price levels that are realistic and sustainable. It is appropriate that those engaging in property transactions at the high end should contribute through stamp duty a proportionately higher share of the yield from property. However, everyone will benefit to some degree from these changes.

In other areas of the construction industry, there will be strong satisfaction at the clear commitment of the Government to maintain record investment levels in physical infrastructure. The national development plan is central to our economic strategy. It has the capacity to raise our performance. In previous times, a reflex response to periods of economic difficulty was often to cut capital expenditure as a less painful option. We are not merely maintaining it, we are stepping it up for the period ahead.

We have made rapid progress in recent years in rolling out our high-quality roads programme and developing public transport capacity and

quality across the various modes of travel. We have provided record improvements in the water services required by our growing population. That trend will continue and accelerate, with an overall increase of 12% in capital spending over the current year. The Tánaiste is right to maintain this focus on the investment which will produce the basis for our continued prosperity, while enhancing the social infrastructure, such as output of social housing in line with our commitments under Towards 2016.

Road improvements, the removal of serious bottlenecks and the achievement of faster and more consistent journey times are appreciated by the public and are essential to all elements of industry and commerce. They are making many different parts of the country more accessible and, therefore, easier to live in and work from. Additional funding is being provided to maintain momentum.

Commuting, particularly at peak times, needs improved and expanded public transport capacity. Up to 1997, when I became Taoiseach, there was limited EU, but no domestic investment in public transport. That situation was transformed from the late 1990s by this Government and in 2008 investment will further increase to close to €1 billion.

I have a particular commitment to those who are least well-off in our society. Nearly €1 billion has been allocated to support those in need. In recent budgets, the Government has provided record increases in the principal social welfare rates, especially the lowest rates. This is in accordance with our national anti-poverty strategy and our agreement with the social partners. I am pleased to say that the focus of the social welfare increases in the current budget has been to increase the rates for those dependent on social welfare. Despite the pressure on resources, the increases of €14 and €12 per week in the main rates are in line with what is required to maintain the relative value of payments and entail increases very significantly ahead of inflation. They put us well on target to achieve a pension of €300 a week by 2012 in line with the commitments in the programme for Government.

These real increases are particularly welcome in the case of older people. There is a strong conviction across society that those who have worked hard all their lives, reared families, paid taxes and built up the foundations on which our current prosperity rests should benefit from our policy decisions. The increase of €14 per week is in line with the commitments in the programme for Government. I am particularly pleased at the increase in the qualified adult allowance for pensioners, which means that couples over age 66 in receipt of the contributory old age pension and dependent allowance will have an 11% increase, equating to €41 per week. Equality will be achieved in next year's budget. Support for families with children is also most welcome, with

increases across the full range of supports, including a 10% increase in the child care payment for children under six. This support is a quantum leap ahead of what it was ten years ago.

Increases in the health Vote include additional resources for cancer services. The very substantial increases in expenditure on health services only make sense in a situation where we can be reasonably sure that they will be applied to best effect. For that reason, I welcome the steps being taken under the health forum, established at the initiative of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions, to bring all of the energies of the social partnership process to bear on developing a world-class public health system that we all desire. I appreciate that the changes which may be required to get from where we are to such a preferred model will not be easy. However, I express the Government's absolute commitment to delivering a world-class service and to supporting the change agenda which will come from the forum.

I welcome very strongly the provisions in the budget in support of the agenda for environmental sustainability. This is no longer a policy option. Well before the current Government was formed, I signalled my conviction that the question of climate change and the more general environmental challenge had to be at the centre of the policy-making agenda. Last year, the Minister for Finance made important changes in the supports available for more sustainable energy, including domestic heating systems. He flagged then his intention to do more, especially to align vehicle taxation more closely with environmental policy objectives. I strongly welcome the measures he has announced. They will encourage people to act responsibly when making decisions about car purchase.

It is a strategy which is entirely in line with making the cost of pollution more transparent, to be borne by those who choose to generate it. With these and other measures, the budget sends a clear signal about the direction of change which the Government has been driving since the summer. Later on, the Minister for Environment, Heritage and Local Government will bring before the House the first ever carbon budget to deal with our CO<sub>2</sub> emissions and show that we can generate new policy initiatives that will have a substantial effect on the kind of life we live in future.

The Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources will seek to find out how we can drive further investment in new technologies in the context of economics and business. We have seen how the private sector and environmentalists agree with the policies that we have created to make this a practicable way of doing business in the future. I look forward to these contributions later on today. These and other measures send a clear signal about the direction of change the Government, as outlined in the programme for Government, will implement over the next five years.



[The Taoiseach.]

These are now urgent matters if the scale of the global challenge is to be met and if we are to take seriously the issues of climate change. Later on today, I will meet a representative group of young people who take this as part of their social responsibility. They will be presenting their views to me and my colleagues and will be taking part in a peaceful march this weekend to show that climate change must be at the top of the Government, the country and the world's agenda.

The Government is following through on the commitment to bring our overseas development assistance up to the UN target of 0.7% of GDP. We will be raising our overseas development contribution to €914 million, or 0.54% of GDP in 2008. We are doing this to help the people of the Third World and to live up to our commitment. We should be proud of this country and the financial contribution we make to UN aid projects, but also to our own NGOs in many countries such as Vietnam, in Africa and other parts of the world which need our support. Staying on target to reach 0.4%, besides being the right thing to do, increases our influence and standing with a lot of the world's poorer countries which is deeply appreciated.

I would like to finish with reference to a particular change announced by the Tánaiste which is especially welcome. That is the reduction in stamp duty on payment cards and the parallel increase in duty on cheques. For some time now, my Department has been leading a cross-departmental and cross-sectoral debate about the development of a better payments system, which would be both more efficient and more appropriate to a knowledge economy. Yesterday's announcements will bring us closer to the day when payments are made more safely and more efficiently, and with significant savings as a result for customers and traders alike.

All budgets signal longer-term strategic studies and reviews. A quarter of a century after the commission on taxation, which was a catalyst for many significant changes, it is time to take a new look at our taxation system. This will include the question of how best to implement a carbon tax on a revenue-neutral basis. We look forward to the new commission on taxation being set up in the new year. We are also undertaking a review of administrative efficiency in all areas of the public service. This will complement the comprehensive review of the Irish public service by the OECD which I announced earlier this year and which will be finalised early in the new year. It will also complement the programme of external review of the capacity of Departments and offices which I initiated this year.

I note with some gratification that Ireland rated highly in an international business tax survey. The Minister indicated that he was also looking at uses of the tax system to encourage lower alcohol beverages, which is as important to public health as discouraging smoking. In the shorter

term, the Minister is also looking at section 481 film incentives in the Finance Bill, a sector where international tax competition is fierce.

By honouring our commitments to the people, by keeping faith with the social partners, by signalling our clear intent to deliver fully on the programme for Government, by exercising responsible choices for today with an eye on the needs of tomorrow, and by demonstrating that one can combine a drive for continued prosperity with both environmental sustainability and social equity, the Government has shown why we continue to earn the confidence of the people in our handling of the economy. This is the first budget of five for the new Government and I congratulate the Tánaiste on it. I commend this budget to the House.

**Deputy Enda Kenny:** This is a budget of no courage or vision and will not live up to the confidence expressed by the Government. It is important to put the budget in the political context in which it is framed. We have a Taoiseach who, by his own admission, is on the way out and will not be leading his party into the next election.

**The Taoiseach:** The Deputy will have to wait a long time for that.

**Deputy Enda Kenny:** It is a while away yet.

**The Taoiseach:** I hope the Deputy is still there when I leave.

**Deputy Enda Kenny:** It might not happen directly, but it is beginning to happen. There is also some rustling in the undergrowth from those who wish to contend against the anointed one. The Minister for Finance has had a favourable press for quite some time. If he was serious about being seen as the iron chancellor, I would have thought he would have measured up in his fourth budget to making some difficult decisions. He funk'd every difficult decision that faced him. No difficult decisions were taken and the easy option of borrowing €5 billion was taken to balance the books. Yesterday evening Deputy McGuinness said the public service was a shambles with the levels of service and efficiency 20 years behind where they should be. The Taoiseach's comments this morning about a vision for the future, leadership, efficiency and world class standards revealed vastly contradictory elements within the Government. If the Minister for Finance were serious about setting out his charge of leading the Government half way through its tenure of office, or whenever, one might have expected that he would at least have taken the decisions that had to be made for the future. It is a budget without courage or vision and which will not inspire the confidence set out as its hallmark, including in the Taoiseach's speech.

The alarming consequence of the budget is that in the face of a modest slowdown in the economy

the public finances have plunged precipitously, turning a €2.3 billion Exchequer surplus in 2006 into a €4.9 billion borrowing requirement next year. This will require at least €16 billion in borrowing over the next three years. The Taoiseach previously said we would eliminate borrowing and Government debt. This is the largest deterioration in the public finances in the history of the State, despite the comments by the Taoiseach and the Minister for Finance. Can we believe their words anymore?

Yesterday the Minister for Finance blamed global economic conditions for the fiscal mess over which he presided. However, the public finances have been left dangerously exposed to a domestic property downturn due to his inability to be competent and face the difficult decisions, the Government's mismanagement of the public finances and reckless cheerleading of an unsustainable and debt-driven housing boom.

Last month experts from the International Monetary Fund reported that no other economy was more vulnerable to a property downturn than this one. The international credit rating agency Standard & Poor's estimated that the economy faced a prolonged slowdown, possibly to 2013, as the property bubble deflated. Even more worrying than the recent slowdown in property related tax receipts has been the Government's longer term ratcheting up of public sector day-to-day spending without any consideration of value for money or public service reform. By urging on the property boom, Fianna Fáil generated a large tax bonanza for itself. This allowed it to increase spending dramatically, faster than economic growth without resorting to traditional tax sources to fund its extravagance.

Most commentators did not notice the tax and spend cuckoo that had crept into the nest. However, the end of the debt-fuelled property boom has shown it up in stark relief. For the last seven years Government spending has grown on average 40% faster than the economy. It has grown as a proportion of GNP from under 25% in 2000 to 31% today. Since the Minister for Finance took office he has presided over an acceleration rate of day-to-day spending growth of 10% in 2005, 11% in 2006 and 12% this year. So accustomed have pundits and commentators become to the Minister's extravagance with taxpayers' money that his promise to slow current spending growth to 8% next year, still 45% faster than the economic growth forecast, is presented as ambitiously prudent.

The budget is an opportunity to reflect on the Government's overall allocation of taxpayers' resources for the achievement of the country's economic, social and environmental objectives. Ireland's most significant challenge stems from Ministers presiding over vital areas of the public sector with inflated budgets which are not delivering results on the front line. I listened to some comments from Ministers on the requirement to face the challenge of making decisions

and delivering efficiency in the public sector, but there was no mention of this in the Budget Statement other than waffle and cotton wool. At the end of next year the situation will have deteriorated because this runaway horse is on the road and there is nothing in the budget to control it.

An unfortunate aspect of the budget and all of the Government's previous budgets is that only the marginal tax and spending changes receive attention. There is almost no focus on the €39 billion in current spending allocated to Departments on an "existing level of service" basis. There is little focus on the €27 billion non-social welfare Government spending on day-to-day goods and services. There was the usual lazy assumption in the budget presentation that every euro spent by Departments offered value for money for the taxpayer and that the purpose of the budget was to allocate extra resources on top of historical spending patterns. That is a fundamental weakness in the Government's capacity to deliver efficiency in the public service, not just this year but in the past seven years. The Government has turned its back on the opportunity for public sector reform and achieving real value in the public spend. It has spurned the process of budgetary scrutiny recommended by the Committee of Public Accounts. It allowed the culture of performance initiated in the 1997 Act to be still-born. It failed to use benchmarking which will cost the taxpayer €14 billion in today's money to leverage real reform. It is five years since I made the point in Killarney that if one was to pay benchmarking, one should build in targets, objectives and specifics for the delivery of efficiency in the public service. I was ridiculed for the cost of €1 billion per year for that benchmarking process. The attitude was pay the money and to hell with efficiency. As a result, we have a public service of greatly inferior quality than we should.

The Government has overseen the expansion of bureaucracy in the Health Service Executive. When one examines the titles of many of the higher administrators in the HSE and tries to figure out their roles, functions and responsibilities, it boggles the mind. The Government has outsourced its job to 178 new agencies, bringing the total at national level to over 630. This issue was raised by Deputy Varadkar when he spoke on the extent of quangos, the jobs they were supposed to do and the waste of public money involved in many of them.

The Government has overseen the high cost overruns on capital projects such as Luas and the Dublin Port tunnel, now *in situ* and working well but at vastly inflated costs. As a result, the CSO estimates that the rate of inflation in public services has run at an annual average of 6% since 2000, 45% higher than the rate of cost inflation in the public sector in the United Kingdom. If cost inflation in the Irish public sector had been kept down at the UK rate, we would have had an extra €13 billion for tax reforms or front line services in education and health in the period

[Deputy Enda Kenny.]

2000 to 2007, including an additional estimated €3.2 billion in 2007 alone. Mr. Gordon Brown's Government in the United Kingdom insisted that public sector managers target and measure efficiency gains for every Department, delivering a total of €30 billion in efficiency gains between 2004 and 2007. This stands out as something that could have been done here. They are now targeting further efficiency gains of 3% per year by 2010-11, which will release an extra €42 billion for frontline services. In contrast, the Government here has never required Departments to measure or deliver specified efficiency gains. The reference in the efficiency review 2008 says each Department will be required to examine all administrative spending under its own or its State body's aegis. What does that mean when there is no target inserted, no timeline and no specifics? If the Minister for Finance was serious about whipping public service efficiency out to the frontline of delivery, there would be efficiency targets and timelines which would be monitored and reported back to the Department of Finance on a monthly basis.

The measures identified should not jeopardise the maintenance of frontline services. So much more could have been provided for by way of frontline services had this been set out in a realistic, achievable and targeted manner.

In Britain they cut the number of administrative posts by almost 80,000, through technology-driven automation, with a high proportion of those posts being allocated to frontline services in education, health and policing. If the Irish Government had shown any semblance of a comparative level of ambition, there would now be 6,000 fewer administrative posts, with that capacity freed up for frontline services.

**Deputy Fergus O'Dowd:** Hear, hear.

**Deputy Enda Kenny:** They introduced three-year budgets for all spending ministries to enable longer-term spending. UK ministries are given full end-year flexibility to carry forward any underspend from one year to the next so that wasteful year end splurges of money merely to get it spent are eliminated. Some areas in the Irish public sector, I understand, now receive cheques and payments for work they have not yet done, simply because agencies and elements of Government Departments are unable to spend the money allocated to them in 2007. We have a situation where Irish public sector managers still face, in many cases, a "spend it or lose it" choice at the end of each year.

The British introduced a resource accounting and budgeting system to capture accurately the full running costs of public services, including the value of assets, and to sharpen management incentives. In contrast, Irish public sector managers still do not account for the value or use of the assets under their control. The British intro-

duced systematic, transparent outcome focused performance management systems in the form of public service agreements between the UK Treasury and line spending ministries. In contrast here the Government has only this year introduced annual output statements by Departments, few of which contain any concrete target for efficiency or performance and are not linked to resource allocation in the budget.

In short, Fianna Fáil-led Governments, spoiled by the property taxes that amounted to phenomenal figures from the debt-driven housing boom, avoided the hard decisions and new approaches being taken by other governments. Instead they stuck to the soft option politics of throwing money at every public service problem. After ten years in office the Government now joins that solemn chorus calling for wage restraint and public sector reform. It has announced a new efficiency review, to be carried out in 2008. However, when it comes to its own interests, there is no demand for reform and efficiency, but rather enormous pay increases, equivalent to €600 a week, with no matching performance improvement, as against the €14 for the single mother in Sligo this morning who, when asked what she thought of that increase, said "big deal".

Four new committees and three Ministers of State satisfied political demands in all the entourage. We can no longer afford these types of double standards and empty rhetoric about the need to achieve better value for money. Radical reform is not on the agenda of this Government. It just keeps doing the same thing, going back to the Taoiseach's basic ethics, namely, to get in here and stay here. To have any credibility whatsoever, the new efficiency review has to start by suspending the big pay increases for Ministers and senior public sector managers, making them conditional on the performances and efficiencies delivered. I guarantee, in two months time, when price increases have come in again and the budget is long-forgotten, people will remember that this Government, at a weekend, embraced the recommendations for higher pay for Ministers and higher public servants without any reference to performance, efficiency, output or standards, while everybody else could pay the price.

There is nothing in this budget for benchmarking. Obviously, that will kick in in 2009 and may well cost €300 million to €500 million — we do not know until the recommendations comes out in January. The Minister for Finance should insist that every public body should independently deliver audited efficiency improvements of at least 2% during 2008. What is in his report is meaningless and there will be no increased efficiencies in the HSE or within any Government Department, given the way this is phrased. He should institute an immediate audit of every agency with the aim of achieving real far-reaching rationalisation. He should have held back €500 million, requiring bodies to bid for that new

resource on the basis of delivering best practice at the frontline.

It would be childish not to welcome the improvements in pension and other social welfare benefit payments announced yesterday by Deputy Cowen, and indeed over successive budgets. Of course these measures are welcome. Even after the increases, however, one must reflect that the entire State pension for 2008 will still be less than one third of the pay increase now being accepted by the Taoiseach and Ministers. I look at the broken promises in this documents as regards taxation, PRSI and all the rest, a point made by Deputy Reilly. We are now carrying out an audit, which I hope will be more accurate than the one conducted as regards the medical card for over-70s. The limit is now €184, so that a social welfare allocation of €197.80 could conceivably disqualify an applicant from receiving a medical card. Together with the charges now coming in, this means the Government has let down hundreds of thousands of people. The Government knew this was coming. Carrying out a blind ended audit is simply more waffle.

This budget is highly conservative when it comes to tax reform. Gone are the promises of PRSI reform and the promise to reduce the standard rate in 2008, which was in Fianna Fáil's election manifesto. Gone is the top rate of tax promised by Deputy Cowen in his last budget. It is only a source of some amusement now that the one tax that was reformed yesterday was the measure the Minister for Finance had completely opposed. I witnessed his body language, words and aggression last May or June against this tax, and it was incredible. The Department of Finance never wanted anything to do with stamp duty. Whether the claims by the builders, who certainly got around Fianna Fáil last weekend, worked, they certainly have had their day, because the tax is being reformed. I cannot complain about that because Fine Gael, and indeed the Labour Party, had a very clear document about reform of stamp duty. That reform, however, was to be introduced at a time when confidence was still very high and it would not have waned like it has now. What has happened is akin to a particular make of car that was imported 20 years ago, where there were problems with the petrol tank. The internal paint on those cars began to peel off if the level of petrol, or confidence, were to run low. When it did, elements of that paint got stuck in the filters. Even when the car was filled with petrol afterwards, it still never moved as it had originally.

Confidence has ebbed out of the property market. In a desperate move, where he was completely and utterly opposed previously, the Minister now introduces stamp duty reforms. While that will move some houses in terms of contracts being dealt with, it will not restore the level of confidence the Government had hoped for. In fact, when builders or developers are now faced with development charges, with the acquisition of land at more than €1 million per acre in some

places, the cost for them of producing houses will be a figure below which they cannot sell.

People may feel stamp duty reform will bring major benefits, but I doubt it, given the international perspective and the uncertainty in banks with regard to interest rates and the ability to pay back mortgages. Serious issues surround first-time buyers getting on the property ladder. These issues include the cost of land and servicing land and the lack of real Government policy to provide for serviced land in sufficient quantities to reduce costs.

The point-blank refusal during the year of the Minister for Finance, Deputy Cowen, to have anything to do with stamp duty reform now seems hypocritical in the extreme. This is the second time the Minister has been done down on this matter from his point of view. I believe this budget was changed over the weekend and there was no serious intent to reform stamp duty until the figures became perfectly obvious during the past ten days. Perhaps the big builders and developers got around the Government last weekend.

The promises made with regard to tax and PRSI were broken. Back are the stealth charges and charges which were a feature of tax policy in the previous administration. The threshold for the drugs repayment scheme increased by €5, accident and emergency unit and hospital charges increased by 10%, motor tax rose by 10% and the employee PRSI ceiling rose by €1,900. The budget failed to fully index income tax credits and bands against earnings. These are all direct stealth charges, particularly against the middle-income group which will now be forced to pay more. As well as dragging more workers into the top rate of tax, the effect of these stealth charges and taxes will be to increase the rate of inflation by 20% next year, putting further pressure on living standards for those on low incomes. It will also undermine national competitiveness.

I am concerned about the drop-off in the level of corporate taxes now available to the Government. I do not have the details of the figures so I do not know whether the increase in exports we experienced this year was due to expenditure on research and development available to international firms here but being spent abroad. When this detail becomes available it will be interesting to see why a fall-off occurred in the level of corporate tax paid in view of the fact that exports increased in 2007.

Seven years ago, the national climate change strategy committed to the reform of VRT and carbon levies to reduce Ireland's greenhouse gas emissions. For seven years, the Government did nothing about this while 500,000 new houses were built, in many cases in areas which meant people had to travel 50 miles, 60 miles or 70 miles to work, which lead to 600,000 new cars on the road. There was a 55 minute delay on the road from the west this morning and it is like that every morning. The projections for car use by 2020 is that it will rise to approximately 3 million.

[Deputy Enda Kenny.]

No consideration was given to emissions or commuter comfort and the Government locked Ireland into unsustainable energy uses for years to come. The Government has made no attempt to reach the Kyoto targets set for us. We now wonder why we must borrow large sums of money to pay our way out of the emissions commitments this country made under the Kyoto Protocol.

I welcome the changes in VRT. Why would I not do so? Fine Gael proposed these changes two years ago. The Government acts only when it is late and when the potential benefits of early action have long since been diluted. This happened with stamp duty and VRT reform.

The Minister for Finance, Deputy Cowen, is not here this morning. If he were serious about building a platform for this country's future, why were difficult decisions left by the wayside in the budget? It is a soft option to borrow money, balance the books and keep it going as best one can. In recent weeks, the Government faced two motions of no confidence in the Taoiseach and the Minister for Health and Children. This budget will not restore the level of confidence people need.

**Deputy Pádraic McCormack:** We had an election budget.

**Deputy Enda Kenny:** On 25 March at the Fianna Fáil Ard-Fheis we were told taxes would be reduced, but Irish motorists woke up this morning knowing they were misled. The increase in motor tax represents a tax of €83 million that will hit every household and family. The spin from the Government is that this is part of a green agenda. It is not. It is a direct hit on the pockets of hard-pressed people who require motor transport to get to and from work. It will hit the smallest economical vehicle to the largest gas-guzzler. It suits Fianna Fáil to use the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government, Deputy Gormley, as a cover for this raid, straightforward theft carried out by a Government wearing a green balaclava.

Yesterday, the Green Party became Fianna Fáil's mudguard for this tax hike in the same way Fianna Fáil used the Progressive Democrats as its mudguard on health. The Green Party will now be used to protect Fianna Fáil from this blatant tax increase.

**Deputy Ruairí Quinn:** It is organic.

**Deputy Enda Kenny:** The cry will be to blame the Minister, Deputy Gormley. It is a green tax and that is why he is at it and he had to be given something. It will hit hundreds of thousands of people directly.

I mentioned the stealth taxes of the accident and emergency bed charges and the drug refund scheme, which represents a €50 million tax attack

on the ill in society. It is strange that the Minister told us about the Kilbeggan bypass but not about the Government's plans to take €50 million out of our pockets. That is what is left of the Progressive Democrats mudguard.

This issue of stamp duty reform typifies the desperation which the Minister for Finance, Deputy Cowen, felt in the run-in to this weekend. The Minister physically, verbally and politically opposed stamp duty every time it was mentioned. However, when the figures became clear, the big builders stated they were in the tent in Galway and the Minister had better do something about this on Wednesday. We now see the result.

I do not believe that reform at this time will restore the level of confidence in the housing market which people assume from construction elements or housing agencies. It is six months too late. Had it been done in the early summer when confidence was still at a high level it would not have stampeded the market but would have allowed it to move in a beneficial way.

**Deputy Pádraic McCormack:** It was a sop to the *Sunday Independent*.

**Deputy Enda Kenny:** It is a dull, uninspiring and unimaginative budget from a Minister who is happier to take the easy option than make the difficult decisions. Ordinary families and small businesses will pay for the incompetency and mismanagement of Fianna Fáil running this economy. Whether we have the same Taoiseach this time next year, when we stand in the House we will find the chickens will have come home to roost from this budget. It is a dull, uninspiring and unimaginative budget that lacks courage and vision, and from that perspective it leaves a lot to be desired.

**Deputy Eamon Gilmore:** This budget is a monumental breach of the promises made by Fianna Fáil to the Irish people at the general election in May. We recall that when the Fianna Fáil campaign floundered last May, the Minister for Finance appeared at a press conference, thumped the table, steadied the ship and made the promises. Nobody was better placed than him to be informed of the state of the economy before he made those promises, and he made them in the full knowledge that it was never intended they would be delivered.

The Minister promised 4,000 extra teachers, but he delivered none. He promised 2,000 more gardaí. Where are they? He was to double capitation funding for schools but he has not done so. He promised free fees for part-time students, but that is not in the budget. He promised 2,000 hospital consultants but, again, no money was provided in the budget for them. The list continues. We were to get additional child psychologists, extended GP services, local injury clinics, personal health checks and a community development fund. In terms of tax commitments, he

promised to cut the top and standard rates of tax, halve the rate of PRSI, increase the home carer credit and introduce major indexation to bands and credits. Many of the promises were imprudent, as the Labour Party noted at the time, but the Tánaiste had the full resources of the Department of Finance behind him when he made them. He also promised a €300 per week old age pension to come into effect within four or five years. Based on yesterday's increases, however, it will take a further eight years before pensioners receive that level of benefit.

Instead of real improvements to the health service, yesterday's announcement brought more stealth taxes in health. The cost of attending an accident and emergency department goes up by 10% and the threshold for the drugs payment scheme is increased to €90. These stealth taxes were announced in the dead of night after the statement by the Minister for Health and Children. When I asked the Taoiseach about them this morning, he told me reference was made to them in the Budget Statement. I cannot find any such reference, so he might indicate in his response the page on which they are mentioned.

Yesterday our country needed a new budget for a new era which would restore economic confidence, begin a serious reform agenda to tackle poverty, make the hard decisions on climate change, invest in the people and the ideas that will grow the knowledge economy and point the way towards a better future. What we got was harmless but useless. Where we needed vision we got drift; where we needed innovation, we got indolence; and where we needed energy, we got lethargy.

The annual budget is much more than an accounting exercise. It is, or should be, a governing document, that is, a primary statement of the Government's political, social and economic priorities and an elaboration of how it intends to achieve them. It should at a minimum provide for basic competence in the management of the Exchequer and fiscal policy and seek to protect the jobs and incomes of people. It should also go beyond that, however, to provide for a social dividend and a set of coherent policies which will improve the well-being of our communities and people, protecting in particular the least well off in our society. Economic management and social policy should be based on a vision of where our country stands and where the Government wants to take us. This budget fails those three tests. It is an admission of economic incompetence and does not provide for an adequate social dividend. Indeed, it demonstrates that the Government has no intention of living up to the many promises that were made in the Fianna Fáil manifesto, which was initialled by the Green Party and the Progressive Democrats and subsequently called the programme for Government. Rather than being grounded in a coherent vision or national purpose, it continues the aimless drift of an Administration that surfed the wave of the econ-

omic boom it inherited, squandered its fruits, engendered serious economic imbalances and has no idea about what to do next.

This budget constitutes an admission of economic incompetence on behalf of the Tánaiste. That a Minister for Finance should see it as necessary to change the stamp duty regime twice in six months is an extraordinary admission of bad judgment. This is the Tánaiste's third attempt at stamp duty. First, he said he would make no reforms, then he implemented the wrong reforms and now we must wait to see the effect of his latest proposals. A simple review of some of the main aggregates presented in the budget also raises basic questions about the Government's economic competence. The Tánaiste is predicting 3% growth in real GNP in 2008 and 5.5% growth in nominal GNP, yet his baseline no policy change forecast, as set out in the White Paper, is for tax revenue to grow by 3.1%. Why is the elasticity of total revenues with respect to nominal GNP so low? How can it be that the configuration of taxes yields such limited revenues from what in most European countries would be regarded as a broadly healthy level of economic growth? I would like to hear an explanation because otherwise I am left to wonder if the Tánaiste has doubts about his own GNP growth forecast or is understating the expectations for next year's tax yields.

The weakness in tax yield explains why the Tánaiste is having to borrow nearly €5 billion to finance what is by modern standards a very limited social welfare package, almost no improvements in public services and an anaemic tax package. It should also be borne in mind that the total increase in capital spending amounts to only one sixth of the Exchequer borrowing requirement. Little is being achieved from the projected rise in current spending of 8.2%. In any other advanced economy, an 8% increase in spending would yield major improvements in public services but we are getting virtually none. Of the €5 billion increase in gross current expenditure, only 15% takes the form of improvements in non-social welfare services. The total budget for service improvement in health amounts to six days spending under that heading.

These wounds are self-inflicted. For some time, it has been clear that significant imbalances have been developing in the economy, particularly but not exclusively in the property sector. The housing boom brought a welcome and necessary increase in the housing stock and a strong increase in employment in the construction sector. It also resulted in an over reliance by both the economy in general and the Exchequer in particular on the construction sector. The key to managing this threat was house prices. The boom was driven by spiralling house prices, which drove profits and drew more and more workers and materiel into the construction sector. Time and again, the Labour Party warned the Government that allowing house prices to race on unchecked

[Deputy Eamon Gilmore.]

was making life impossible for buyers and that the economy was over reliant on construction but the Government refused to listen. Almost two years ago, the banks moved to curtail their exposure to land speculation by cutting down on loans for purchase of development land. It was also clear from the planning permissions data that developers were starting to stand back from the market. The total number of new housing units for which planning permission was granted peaked at nearly 76,000 in 2005 but decreased to 60,000 in 2006, a fall of over 20%. The downturn in the housing market was well flagged but the Government did nothing.

The inevitable has now happened in that the housing market has stalled. The ESRI-Permanent TSB index reports an average decline in house prices of 4.9% since the beginning of this year, including 1.3% in October alone. Anecdotal evidence suggests far more significant falls in some areas. However, that is only part of the picture. As anyone trying to sell a house will attest, the volume of transactions has collapsed. Many potential buyers are standing back from the market and waiting to see when prices will stabilise, which in turn is making stability even less likely. Of course, interest rates have had a major impact but the abrupt slowing of transactions in the housing sector is directly related to price uncertainty. The fact that rents are increasing is direct testimony to the strength of the underlying demand for housing.

A number of factors have come together to cause this fall in prices and collapse in transaction volumes, including general economic uncertainty, the rise in interest rates and the Government's hamfisted handling of the stamp duty issue. This tax, and particularly the accelerator built into it, was allowed to go unreformed for years, so that as house prices increased it became inevitable that stamp duty would eventually act to choke off demand rapidly rather than gradually. It was within the Government's power to reform the tax but it did not do so. Instead, it was a Government Minister, former Deputy Michael McDowell, who first created uncertainty about stamp duty and started the phenomenon of buyers withdrawing from the market. At that point, it was correct to be concerned about a cut in stamp duty causing an acceleration in prices but once the market had come to a halt and transaction volumes had fallen off, the time was right for significant reform. The reform introduced by the Minister for Finance, Deputy Cowen, after the election was too little, too late and badly constructed.

In the debate on that measure in the House last June, the Minister stated: "The proposals before the House to introduce stamp duty reform with retrospective effect will restore stability and certainty to the market." Now he has decided he needs a second bite at the cherry. It is a stunning admission of incompetence for a Minister for Fin-

ance to have to revisit a capital tax of this type twice within six months.

None of this was necessary. Time and again, the Labour Party called on the Government to address the spiral in house prices, through a number of measures, including intervening to limit increases in the price of building land. Fianna Fáil refused to do so. Now house prices are falling and buyers have withdrawn from the market, with the result that the number of units being built has also dropped dramatically. There has been a corresponding impact on the level of economic activity, with 1% being knocked off the rate of growth for every 10,000 fewer units being built. It is this failure of economic management which has led us to this budget.

It remains to be seen whether the changes announced yesterday will have the desired effect. With the construction boom fizzling out, there is little enough left in the Government's economic locker. Employment has been driven for some years now by construction and the public service. Neither sector will now drive growth or jobs.

The target for job creation for next year is very disappointing — at 24,000 it is half the figure of ten years ago — as is the prospect of unemployment creeping upwards. Only this week, Abbott Ireland announced the loss of 500 jobs in Galway. Why does the budget have no strategy to provide education or training opportunities for those being laid off from the construction sector and other sectors in order that they might be re-employed in other sectors of the economy?

Meanwhile, the competitiveness of the traded sector of the economy has been significantly eroded. When Deputy Ruairí Quinn left office as Minister for Finance the current account of the balance of payments was in surplus to the tune of 2.7% of GNP. Today, there is a deficit of 4.9% of GNP. While the balance of payments is not of immediate concern, the weakness in this area is a reflection of poor export performance and of an economy which has substituted domestic demand for export led growth.

The difficulties the Minister has encountered in framing this budget are of his own making. He has failed during his tenure to exercise the economic management required to avoid the hard landing we are now experiencing. This was not, however, the task he was given. He was appointed to the Department of Finance after the last local elections and given the job of rescuing Fianna Fáil rather than properly managing the economy. It was the Fianna Fáil interest as opposed to the national interest that came first. The damage done to the economy extends beyond the usual cynicism of spending before an election and cutting back afterwards. Through his failure to exercise basic economic management, we have been left with serious imbalances in the economy, the correction of which will cause unnecessary and in some respects severe pain.

As I stated, most European countries would be delighted with 3% economic growth. While there

are problems in the economy, there are also many positives. Growth is no longer driven by exports of goods, although recent trade figures show growth in services exports of 16%, albeit from a low base. We should by no means abandon the idea of Ireland as a manufacturing location but the future lies in high value added activities such as sales, research and development and high value traded services. While Ireland cannot hope to make a living making the things other countries design and sell, there is no reason we cannot design and sell things ourselves.

If Ireland is to prosper in the next two decades, we must embrace the new economy and organise ourselves properly to latch onto and make the most of scientific innovations. We need to ensure not only that we invest in research in our universities but that the knowledge being generated is turned into commercial activities and young indigenous companies.

Significant investment has been made in our universities in developing world class research teams and facilities. What will determine our success, however, will be whether we can commercialise new ideas and intellectual property and turn them into jobs and incomes. A central element of this process is ensuring that entrepreneurs have access to start-up capital, an area in which Ireland currently falls short.

In the past 20 years, far too much investment has been made in property, in no small measure because the Government has provided tax based incentives for what was low risk activity. It is not overstating the case to say we have developed a cultural preference for lower risk investment in property rather than higher risk productive activity. We need to get better at ensuring technology, entrepreneurs and venture capital come together in the same place and time. In that way, we can develop the indigenous companies which will provide high value, high paying jobs and help to drive growth in other sectors. We need to shift the balance of advantage within the tax code towards high risk, high-tech investment and this budget was a missed opportunity to begin to reorientate the tax code in that direction.

The budget correctly maintains strong investment in the national development plan. If the expenditure plans set out are realised, we will finally reach the 5% of GNP target promised many years ago, notwithstanding the number of times the Government has congratulated itself for announcing the target. The issue of value for money arises regarding this expenditure. The Government has also made a number of announcements about this, before immediately praising itself for its record on this issue, as though announcements were action or correcting appalling levels of waste were an achievement.

There have been some changes to the budget process this year, which we welcomed, although the differences between the pre-budget statement and White Paper were such as to call the first exercise into question. I will refer, however, to

the approach taken to investment spending. The Minister was correct to refer to the centrality of productivity growth to our future prosperity. While investment in physical capital is central to productivity growth, so too is investment in human capital. In other words, in a knowledge economy we cannot invest too heavily in our people.

Investment in human capital also allows a Government to simultaneously pursue higher productivity and social objectives. There is no better investment, for example, than universal pre-school education but it is also a highly important anti-poverty measure. The Labour Party has repeatedly called for this basic provision for our children. It is not expensive in the greater scheme of things and could be implemented over a number of years. Against that objective, the €1.50 per week increase in child benefit provided for in the budget is a matter of grave disappointment.

It is disappointing that in drawing up this budget the Minister has adhered to the old-fashioned distinction between capital and current expenditure in deciding what is investment. While I welcome the additional spending on school buildings, very little additional money have been made available to run the schools we have. Before the election the Government promised to double the capitation payment to primary schools. It could and should have taken this step this year because the cost is minimal and the long-run advantages are enormous.

Investment in human capital must begin with the basics, with children being taught in small classes, in high quality buildings with decent back-up services and resources for those who need extra help. Sometimes it is the small, unglamorous investments which are of most significance.

The greatest threat to our long-run prosperity is not the budget deficit or balance of payments deficit but the skills deficit. We cannot afford to continue with circumstances in which 165,000 adults under 35 years do not have a leaving certificate. We need a determined programme of investment in training and upskilling and a corresponding shift in our work culture to achieve it. For example, everyone who leaves school should benefit from a third level education, whether at degree level, through a post-leaving certificate course or another suitable form of education. This budget should have made a start by eliminating fees for part-time students who do not already have a degree — again, a modest but affordable measure.

We also need to look at targeted measures to improve skills in key areas. I would like to see the development in one of our third level colleges of an institute for advanced studies in financial services, which could be an important factor in the future development of what, for Ireland, is an important and high-value added industry. The over-arching

12 o'clock



[Deputy Eamon Gilmore.]

point here is that we need a new approach for a new era, not simply a re-heat of budgets gone by.

The big picture in this budget is that capital spending has been increased, the rate of growth in current spending has been curtailed, a minimal tax package has been introduced which will effectively increase the taxes that families pay, and the State is willing to borrow about 1% of GDP. It is necessary to manage down the rate of growth in current spending from the unsustainable pre-election splurge, but again it is striking how little has been achieved with 8% current expenditure growth. How limited is the social dividend from 3% real economic growth?

Pensioners have fared best from the social welfare package. From 1 January, they will receive an extra €14 per week. By Christmas 2008, they will have received the same increase that the Taoiseach has awarded himself for a week. The remainder of the social welfare package is minimal. What can a person on the lowest rate of social welfare buy for €12 per week? What can a family on a low income buy with a child benefit increase of €1.43 per week — barely the price of a loaf of bread?

The Minister claims to have increased social welfare rates by more than inflation, but the truth is that inflation for people on low incomes is much higher at present than for the population as a whole. This is because the price of basic food-stuffs, such as milk and bread, is being driven up by increases in world commodity prices, particularly the price of cereals.

The UN Food and Agriculture Organisation predicts that these high prices will be a feature of world markets for the foreseeable future. There is a requirement to change the traditional mind set which compares social welfare increases to the cost of the standard basket of goods as measured by the consumer price index.

This budget contains no concerted or thought-through effort to address the very real poverty that afflicts our society. One in nine children in Ireland lives in poverty, but there is no concerted effort here to address this monumental waste of human potential. We will only truly address the problem of poverty, when we extend the ladder of opportunity to every family in the State and break the intergenerational cycle of poverty. We will do that, when we ensure that people who can work can access the educational and training opportunities and the child care and other supports that are necessary to make the transition into the workplace.

The existing social welfare code does not do that. In fact, it traps people in poverty through schemes such as the rent allowance or the one-parent family payment, by not offering people real opportunities to train, and by its hopelessly inadequate child care system. The proposal to cut the funding for community crèches is typical of the small-minded cheeseparer myopic attitude that has driven social policy for too long. My col-

league, Deputy Burton, referred yesterday to a number of the reforms the Government could have made, but did not — tackling the poverty trap that is the rent allowance, reforming the lone parents' payment, introducing a supplementary child benefit payment for people on low incomes, including the working poor. These are the kind of measures that need to be introduced.

Perhaps the most abject and pathetic element in this budget is the paragraph on medical cards. The Government says it wants to increase the number of medical cards for families with young children and for families who have a child with an intellectual disability. However, it says it cannot because it has to conduct a “data collection exercise” and a “review of the eligibility criteria for medical cards”. That is very fine English. What it actually means is that it wants to give out more medical cards but does not know how to do it.

Will the Taoiseach please go and tell a mother, working on a low income, whose child is running a high fever, and who knows she cannot afford the €50 or €60 doctor's fee, that he does not know how to give her a medical card?

The net effect of this budget is to essentially freeze public services for a year. The allocation for improved services in health is so small, that the HSE will probably not notice it has it. It amounts to six days of spending on the health services. Other Departments, including the vital areas of Education and Science and Justice, Equality and Law Reform are getting paltry amounts for additional services. This is in an economy which after 15 years of growth has a crumbling health service and crumbling schools. It is striking that in the Departments of Health and Children, Education and Science and Justice, Equality and Law Reform, the money for additional services is contingent on something called “savings in other areas”. There is an entire section on what is called an “efficiency review”. Why is the roll-out of cancer screening dependent on tight control of the number of pencils the Department of Health and Children buys? This is the same Department that cannot figure out who has and who does not have a medical card. All of these references, with which the Budget Statement is peppered, to savings in other areas look like cutbacks on a timer. I do not expect the Government to change everything overnight, but I expect it to have a reform agenda — to say, this is what it wants to do, and this is the first instalment. Even that would constitute a social dividend, but it is absent from this budget.

There is little enough to say about the tax package, because there is little enough in it. I want to comment, though, on one issue, individualisation. The indexation of tax bands has once again deepened the process of individualisation, but so too has the increase in the PAYE credit. For some years now, we have seen an increase in the PAYE credit alongside the personal credit, as a cheap way of taking employees on low incomes out of the tax net. One consequence of this policy,

however is to further disadvantage one-income families, since the personal credit is doubled for one-income families, but the PAYE credit is not. This amounts to €1,830 per annum. It also disadvantages the large number of people, particularly in construction, who are technically self-employed.

I welcome the Minister's and the Taoiseach's conversion to the environment, though it would have been helpful had the Government seen the light in time to meet our Kyoto commitments during the past ten years. The greenest thing about last year's budget was a €270 million fund to purchase carbon credits from abroad. We were treated to more hot air yesterday, when the Minister said that all sectors of the economy must "contribute as best they can to the necessary reductions" in carbon emissions, but then proceeded to tackle only the soft-touch of the private motorist.

Where are the economy and society-wide changes championed by the Greens before they went into Government? Where is the climate change legislation to put the targets, with which we agree, on a statutory basis? A carbon report is not a carbon budget, no matter how it is spun. What about a rebalancing of infrastructure spending in favour of public transport — something that would be welcome?

The sustainability of our economy is dependent on the sustainability of our environment. We need vision to go beyond what is immediately necessary, and to anticipate the changes we will ultimately have to make. The vision of this budget does not reach that far. Increasing taxation on heavy CO<sub>2</sub> emitting cars is a positive step, but is it enough to bring about a significant change in behaviour? What of those who have no choice but to travel by car, because they do not have access to public transport? If the track record on delivering public transport infrastructure is anything to go by, relatively minor changes to VRT will not deter people who have to get to work by the only means available for years to come. That €1 billion should be spent on replacing train carriages and commuter links is fine, if people did not have to go to work until 2009, instead of Monday morning. Delivering reliable, efficient public transport infrastructure within the next few years — not the distant future — are what will bring about real behavioural change.

One could start with purchasing 500 extra buses for Dublin, extending the Dublin Bus network further into our new suburbs, and introducing a simple €1 adult fare for the greater Dublin area, as proposed by the Labour Party earlier this year.

Reducing our carbon footprint must go beyond fine words and expensive ad campaigns. People need practical, accessible tools to help them to make changes to their homes, how they get around and where they get their energy. The greener homes scheme provided such support until the decision to slash its grants last September.

Improvements in building standards are long overdue, but what will the Government do for the millions of existing homes that have already been built to poor specifications, and that will continue to be expensive and carbon-intensive to run? A €5 million pilot scheme on insulation will hardly cover its own administration costs. I urge the Government to overhaul the greener homes scheme to help people achieve lower "whole house" emissions. This should enable people to insulate their homes and to install renewable energy heating systems through a mixture of grant assistance and a loan. Evidence has shown that Irish people will respond to practical environmental measures, so let us see more of them.

The Minister stated that €1.7 billion will be spent on energy next year but omitted to specify how much of this will be spent on green energy, and how much will be spent on coal and peat burning power plants that will cost us millions in carbon credits for years to come. If the Government wants to achieve its target of a 33% share in the energy market for renewable energy, it needs to give a clear signal to renewable energy suppliers that it is serious about weaning Ireland off its fossil fuel addiction.

This budget confirms, once again, that the Government has long since run out of ideas. It has simply no concept of where it wants to take our country or of what kind of society we should build. This is not a new budget for a new era; it is a budget for muddling through what, it is hoped, will be a temporary diversion from more of the same.

The Minister, in his speech and in recent pronouncements has shown some inclination to believing that he should have some kind of vision. He just cannot articulate what it might be, and he certainly will not adjust policy to reflect it. There were references in his recent speech to Indecon and something called "equity", but certainly not to true equality. There was much talk about productivity, which I applaud, but calling for higher productivity does not constitute a vision of society. There were references yesterday to the environment, but no sign of economy-wide action on climate change.

As a country we have come a long way but we still have a long way to go. We need a new sense of direction and new purpose. I believe we can set out an inspiring vision of what it is within our power to become, and the Government can take the concrete steps that will further realise that vision. We did not get that yesterday. This was not a budget with a vision. It was not, as the Taoiseach said, the first of something new. It was the 11th budget of a tired Government. It was the budget of a Minister for Finance who has one eye on the Taoiseach beside him to see when he is leaving and the other on his colleagues to see which of them will challenge. If he had an eye in the back of his head, he would need it to keep track of the shifting sands of support behind him.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Ciarán Cuffe):** I call on the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government to present a report on progress being made towards meeting our targets for emissions reduction.

**Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government (Deputy John Gormley):** I will deal with some aspects of the budget as well as dealing with the carbon budget.

**Deputy Enda Kenny:** On a point of information, would the Minister, Deputy Gormley be happy to have Deputy Hogan attend his press conference today as a Fine Gael spokesman in the same way the former Minister, Deputy Roche, used to welcome Deputy O'Dowd to his press conferences?

**Deputy John Gormley:** I would be happy to——

**Acting Chairman:** That does not arise.

**Deputy John Gormley:** It is not a matter that arises now but I would be happy to discuss the matter with Deputy Hogan.

**Deputy Enda Kenny:** Would the Minister be happy to have him attend?

**Deputy John Gormley:** I am happy to discuss the matter with Deputy Hogan.

**Deputy Enda Kenny:** It is the Minister's press conference.

**Acting Chairman:** Deputy Kenny, that matter does not arise.

**Deputy Enda Kenny:** It does.

**Deputy Paul Kehoe:** It does arise.

**Deputy Enda Kenny:** If I could just get clarification——

**Acting Chairman:** I call the Minister to make his speech.

**Deputy Enda Kenny:** Would it be all right for Deputy Hogan to attend the Minister's press conference?

**Acting Chairman:** Deputy Kenny, resume your seat, please.

**Deputy Enda Kenny:** I know the Acting Chairman is defending his own Minister but I am asking——

**Acting Chairman:** I am simply asking the Deputy to resume his seat because the matter does not arise.

**Deputy Enda Kenny:** This is a public press conference. I want to know whether the Minister would welcome Deputy Hogan's attendance at his press conference.

**Deputy Paul Kehoe:** It is a "yes" or "no" answer.

**Deputy John Gormley:** I have answered the question.

**Deputy Enda Kenny:** The Minister has not answered the question.

**Deputy John Gormley:** I have answered the question.

**Deputy Enda Kenny:** Is it "yes" or "no"?

**Acting Chairman:** Deputy Kenny should resume his seat.

**Deputy John Gormley:** I said I would discuss the matter with Deputy Hogan.

**Deputy Enda Kenny:** He can discuss it at the press conference, in that case. Will the Minister discuss it at the press conference?

**Deputy John Gormley:** I welcome the opportunity to contribute to the debate as leader of the Green Party and as Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government.

**Deputy Enda Kenny:** This is nonsense. I would attend, if I were Deputy Hogan.

**Deputy Paul Kehoe:** The Minister is afraid.

**Deputy John Gormley:** I congratulate the Tánaiste on the presentation of the budget. He has demonstrated a clear pathway forward for the sound financial management of the economy. He has taken a balanced and constructive approach to the challenges that lie ahead. I particularly welcome the strong defining theme in his Budget Statement highlighting the Government's environmental agenda. My party fully endorses the principles he has enunciated and we will work to deliver on compelling environmental policies side by side with maintaining growth and competitiveness in our economy.

The issue of climate change is the greatest challenge facing humanity over the coming century. Climate change is a challenge like no other. It is profound in its implications for the planet and its inhabitants. It also cuts to the core of modern living and commerce in the 21st century. The causes are known — human induced emissions of greenhouse gases. The solution is obvious — we must reduce these emissions and quickly enough to avoid the worst impacts of climate change. We all have a personal interest in succeeding in this objective. We all have a responsibility to play our part.

In global terms, Ireland's emissions may be relatively small but our scope to show leadership is enormous. Over the past 20 years, we have succeeded in becoming one of the world's most advanced countries, economically and technologically. Now, we need to draw on the resourcefulness, initiative and determination that brought us such success and apply it to the challenge of adapting to a low-carbon society. With our EU colleagues, we have been to the forefront in bringing the Kyoto Protocol into force and we will begin, next week, the task of persuading all the nations of the world to join us in a strong global agreement for the post-Kyoto period. Our efforts to secure global agreement on deep cuts in emissions must be backed up by a sufficient level of ambition at home. The programme for Government makes it clear that we are up for the challenge.

**Deputy Simon Coveney:** It does not.

**Deputy John Gormley:** I am pleased today to introduce the first ever Irish carbon budget. The preparation of an annual carbon budget is a central commitment of An Agreed Programme for Government. The Carbon budget marks the beginning of a new era. It is an era in which climate change moves to the heart of Government decision-making. It puts our responsibilities to tackle climate change on an equal footing with our responsibilities to manage the economy.

**Deputy Simon Coveney:** It does not.

**Deputy John Gormley:** It recognises that the economy and the environment cannot be separated, and that the greatest risk to the economy is climate change.

This carbon budget will serve a number of purposes. It will integrate climate change considerations into the Government's budgetary policy, as they must be integrated into the decision-making process across all sectors of Government. It will be a clear measure of the progress made each year towards meeting our targets for emission reductions. It will help in our efforts to increase public understanding of climate change and the Government's response.

The concept of the carbon budget is new and this year's format can be seen as a pilot. I will consider how its content and format can be developed and improved in future years. The carbon budget process as it develops will be essential to achieving our greenhouse gas emissions goals. Climate change is a core consideration in Government policy-making. Therefore, it must be integrated into the annual budget process. We must reach a situation where our estimates of the carbon impact of the budget are as good as our estimates of the financial and economic impacts of the budget.

From now on, we must think differently — we must think carbon. Carbon must become the new

global currency if we are to successfully tackle climate change and we must then de-carbonise society. We must put a price on carbon. I hope all Deputies in the House will begin to understand the necessity of introducing a carbon levy.

My statement today is accompanied by a short table, which has been circulated to Deputies, and which is the essence of the carbon budget. It presents an historical picture of Ireland's emissions trends to date and is forward-looking in that it shows how Ireland's emissions are expected to develop over the next five years. The table includes Ireland's emissions in 1990 and 2005, as well as provisional estimates from the EPA and SEI for 2006. These figures show some revisions for the years 1990 and 2005 compared to those published early this year due to ongoing improvements in the reporting systems. The provisional estimates are that total emissions in 2006 were just under 1% lower than in 2005, a welcome reduction following the previous year's increase.

Deputies should refer to the table and I will explain what it contains. The three key columns are identified as D, E and F. Column D shows projected emissions for the 2008-12 Kyoto Protocol period, taking account of measures included in the national climate change strategy published last April. Column E shows the effects of the additional measures we have put in place, including those in the budget. Column F updates projected emissions to take account of these measures. Column D shows that the combined effect of all measures quantified in the national climate change strategy was projected to reduce our net emissions to 66.2 million tonnes as a yearly average in the 2008-12 period. That is 3.2 million tonnes above our Kyoto Protocol target and would, therefore, have required the State to buy an average of 3.2 million carbon credits each year under the flexible mechanisms of the protocol, at an annual cost of anywhere between €30 million and €60 million, or possibly even more, depending on the terms which the NTMA is able to secure for its investments in relevant funds and projects.

That projection in the national climate change strategy of 66.2 million tonnes in the 2008-12 period is about 2.2 million tonnes above what is required to meet the programme for Government target of an average annual reduction of 3% in emissions. Deputies can see, from columns E and F, the effects of the further steps we are taking to deliver more reductions in emissions. These steps will get us closer to the 3% target and also reduce the amount we have to spend on carbon credits to comply with our Kyoto Protocol commitment.

I recognise, as Al Gore did when he was in Dublin last weekend, that the flexible mechanisms are an integral part of the Kyoto Protocol agreement and an important instrument in promoting low emissions investment in developing countries. Notwithstanding this, the Government is committed to ensuring Ireland is able to fulfil its commitments as much as possible by emission

[Deputy John Gormley.]

reductions through domestic action, reflecting our status as a developed nation with the resources, knowledge and political commitment to do so. If we can achieve the 3% annual reduction on average between now and 2012, we will need to purchase only 1 million carbon credits on average each year. Such a reduction is a big challenge but we are determined to meet it and the budget is a significant first step.

I will now provide a summary of new measures. The carbon budget table shows a preliminary indicative additional saving of 600,000 tonnes from measures announced since the publication of the national climate change strategy. These savings will be achieved due to additional savings by the emissions trading sector following the Commission's decision on Ireland's national allocation plan in July this year; additional measures included in the draft energy efficiency action plan, published by my colleague, the Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources — these include the announcement yesterday by the Minister for Finance of funding for an initial pilot programme to encourage the owners of older housing stock to upgrade the energy performance of their homes; and additional funding for a further phase of the highly successful greener homes scheme. The new phase of the scheme which was launched in October will promote a new range of additional renewable technologies now ready for market and deliver almost double the emissions savings that will be achieved under the scheme.

The overall effect of all these additional measures is to deliver a total annual saving of 600,000 tonnes on average each year in the 2008-12 period, bringing projected annual net emissions down to 65.6 million tonnes. This has two important consequences. First, it reduces our reliance on purchasing credits by 600,000 tonnes per year which, in turn, means a significant saving to the Exchequer. Second, it brings us closer to meeting the 3% target for annual average domestic reductions. The gap to be bridged is reduced from 2.2 million tonnes to 1.6 million tonnes.

As well as these measures which are calculated to deliver additional emissions savings, I am taking steps to implement measures which will deliver savings already quantified in the climate change strategy, as follows. I am announcing major changes to the existing motor tax regime to accompany the VRT changes announced yesterday by the Minister for Finance. Under the new system, both taxation regimes will be based completely on the rated CO<sub>2</sub> emissions from the vehicle in question. These changes will be accompanied by a new mandatory labelling system for cars based on emission levels which will be similar to the energy rating label in place for white goods. I will give details of the motor taxation changes later in this address. I will sign regulations by the end of this month to strengthen

significantly the energy efficiency requirements for new homes to deliver energy and emissions savings of 40% on current standards. I will further strengthen building standards in 2010 to achieve a 60% improvement on current levels. It is my ambition eventually to achieve zero carbon emissions associated with new dwellings. I hope to do this by 2016.

As I said, this is a first step. Efforts to reduce Ireland's greenhouse gas emissions will be an ongoing and central feature of the work of the Government across every sector. For example, it is clear from the table that the transport sector has a critical role to play. Last year greenhouse gas emissions from transport increased by over 5%, indicating the scale of the challenge in the sector. Next year will see the publication of the sustainable travel and transport action plan which will provide the basis for radical change in that sector.

All my ministerial colleagues on the Cabinet committee on climate change and energy security are looking closely at what more can be done in the sectors for which they are responsible. To take just one example, from my own area, of the scope for further action, I am announcing today that I will develop a national energy efficiency standard for lightbulbs.

**Deputy Phil Hogan:** Will the Minister change the bulbs again?

**Deputy John Gormley:** While the national climate change strategy proposed a levy on low efficiency bulbs, a more direct approach is necessary. The standard I will introduce will see an end to incandescent bulbs and will have to be met by all lightbulbs on the Irish market from January 2009. A national standard will create certainty for manufacturers and suppliers about the lamps that can be supplied and will stimulate the development of alternative lighting technologies in Ireland. It will also provide the greatest assurance as to effectiveness of the desired environmental outcome, both in terms of reduced greenhouse gas emissions and reduced energy consumption. This measure will deliver emissions savings of up to 700,000 tonnes per year from residential lighting alone when incandescent bulbs are fully replaced in all domestic light fittings. It could also save consumers an estimated €185 million in electricity costs per annum.

Next week I will join the world's environment Ministers as we begin the process that must lead to an international agreement on reducing emissions in the post-Kyoto Protocol period. Europe is showing real leadership on what is required and we must be part of it. The need to look to 2020 and beyond and contemplate the scale of the required emission reductions clearly shows that the annual carbon budgeting process must be an integral feature of the Government's policy-making and annual budgetary process. I will be providing more detail on the information contained

in the carbon budget when I present the first annual status report on the implementation of the national climate change strategy to the Oireachtas in the spring.

I wish to deal with motor tax measures. Following a review earlier this year of its strategy to reduce carbon dioxide or CO<sub>2</sub> emissions from new cars, the European Commission concluded that only limited progress had been made. In the light of this review, the Commission announced the framework of a new strategy that sets out an integrated approach towards achieving this overall objective. The new approach proposed a combination of legislative measures encouraging member states to levy car taxes based on CO<sub>2</sub> emissions; promoting improvements in vehicle technology through enhanced research efforts, and promoting the purchase of fuel efficient vehicles.

Road transport generates about one fifth of the European Union's CO<sub>2</sub> emissions, with passenger cars responsible for around 12%. Although recent years have seen improvements in vehicle technology — particularly in fuel efficiency which translates into lower CO<sub>2</sub> emissions — this has not been enough to stem the growth in emissions due mainly to increased car ownership and increased size. While the European Union reduced overall emissions of greenhouse gases by almost 5% between 1990 and 2004, CO<sub>2</sub> emissions from road transport rose by 26%. This was despite a reduction of over 12% in average new-car CO<sub>2</sub> emissions between 1995 and 2004.

The situation in Ireland is even more stark. While road transport accounts for a similar portion of total emissions, we have seen an increase in emissions from road transport of around 180% between 1990 and 2006. This reflects growth from relatively low car ownership levels in 1990 but unfortunately the growth is expected to continue.

Currently, 12 EU member states, including Austria, Belgium, Cyprus, Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, Luxembourg, The Netherlands and the United Kingdom, levy or propose to levy car taxes that are totally or partially based on a car's CO<sub>2</sub> emissions or fuel consumption, or both.

In tandem with the Tánaiste's announcement yesterday on vehicle registration tax, I am introducing a fundamental change in the manner in which motor tax is to be charged for all new cars and newly imported cars. It will come into effect on 1 July 2008, from which date motor tax on such cars will be determined solely on the basis of their CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. Thus, motor tax will be re-balanced in favour of cars with lower emissions. The public consultation undertaken on the greening of motor taxation following last year's budget proposed a system based on a combination of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions and engine size. If we are serious about addressing emissions from cars, we need to move to a system based solely on CO<sub>2</sub> emission levels. I am very pleased we are introducing this today. It reflects the views of many contributors to the public consultation exercise.

Turning to the detail of the new motor tax system, there will be a number of CO<sub>2</sub> bands, commonly referred to as the seven white labels ranging from A to G. These are the same bands announced by the Tánaiste yesterday in respect of vehicle registration tax, and thus there will be a common approach in the motor tax and vehicle registration tax systems. Motor tax rates will be graduated as one moves up the CO<sub>2</sub> bands. Band A corresponds to CO<sub>2</sub> emissions of under 120g/km — the motor tax rate will be €100. Band B corresponds to CO<sub>2</sub> emissions of between 121g/km and 140g/km — the rate will be €150. Band C corresponds to CO<sub>2</sub> emissions of between 141g/km and 155g/km — the rate will be €290. Band D corresponds to CO<sub>2</sub> emissions of between 156g/km and 170g/km — the rate will be €430. Band E corresponds to CO<sub>2</sub> emissions of between 171g/km and 190g/km — the rate will be €600. Band F corresponds to CO<sub>2</sub> emissions of between 191g/km and 225g/km — the rate will be €1,000. Band G will be the top band and the rate will be €2,000, reflecting CO<sub>2</sub> emissions of over 225g/km.

**Deputy Simon Coveney:** The Minister's car.

**Deputy John Gormley:** Mine is not in the top band because it is a hybrid.

The clear objective of this new motor tax system is to influence the purchasing decisions of consumers by rewarding the buyers of low-emission cars and charging a premium on less-efficient vehicles. From 1 July, anyone buying a new car or importing a car can make a choice for the environment by purchasing a low CO<sub>2</sub> emitting car, and thus enjoy a lower rate of motor tax. Alternatively, if the choice is to purchase a high CO<sub>2</sub> emission car, a higher rate of motor tax will apply.

A key part of both the motor tax and vehicle registration tax initiatives will be a new mandatory labelling system for cars based on CO<sub>2</sub> emission levels. This will be accompanied by an active public information campaign to promote the purchase of fuel-efficient cars. The proposed improvements in vehicle labelling are a very positive step in enabling Irish motorists to make more informed choices in buying new vehicles. I look forward to support from the motor industry in making their introduction a success.

The fundamental changes I am announcing for the motor tax regime for new cars are designed to achieve financial neutrality in terms of income to the local government fund.

**Deputy Phil Hogan:** Will the haulage industry be included?

**Deputy John Gormley:** I will talk to the Deputy afterwards.

**Deputy Phil Hogan:** I am sorry for upsetting the Minister.

**Deputy John Gormley:** That is not a problem.

As we proceed, there will be a need to keep the new arrangements under review to ensure the environmental objective is delivered while funding for local authorities is sustained.

These new measures apply to new cars and newly imported cars only with effect from 1 July 2008. Cars registered before that date will continue to be taxed in future years under the existing system relating to cubic capacity engine sizes.

The Environmental Protection Agency is charged with protecting our environment and does so in different ways. It licenses environmentally high-risk activities through the integrated pollution prevention and control system and through waste licensing. It enforces the licenses that it grants, both to private and public sector undertakings, to ensure compliance with the conditions it attaches thereto. It also operates an emissions trading unit that is vital to our progress in meeting our Kyoto Protocol obligations. More generally, the agency monitors the state of our environment, highlighting the environmental pressures and challenges that we face.

The increase of over 40% in the Exchequer provision for the agency will enable it to carry forward this work with added impetus and vigour. It is further clear evidence of the impact of the Green Party in Government, and of the Government's commitment to respect and protect our environmental heritage in the broadest sense.

The revised expenditure provisions announced by the Tánaiste regarding my Department's Estimates make provision for increased levels of spending in many important areas. We will maintain strong momentum in the major national development plan housing and water services programmes. I am placing stronger emphasis on heritage areas in my Department and I will strengthen our capacity to further compliance and enforcement of our legal obligations in the area of environmental protection.

My Department's National Parks and Wildlife Service, NPWS, is responsible for nature protection. NPWS has a nationwide presence and is key to front-line enforcement of our protected habitats and species. NPWS also provides expert advice to farmers and other landowners as well as to local planning authorities in circumstances where development impinges on sensitive sites and species.

The Government is committing resources to enhancing our national parks and reserves. In 2008 I will be seeking to consolidate and strengthen the Department's NPWS presence in the countryside. I also intend to review the natural heritage regulations in the new year to ensure that Ireland plays a leading role in nature conservation.

Ireland has a rich archaeological and architectural heritage. It is our duty to continue to protect it and hand it on to future generations to enjoy. The programme for Government sets out a number of important objectives on the protection

of our built heritage. Significant progress has already been made in the achievement of those objectives and the most recent budget continues that work.

The programme for Government commits to strengthening the role and operation of the Heritage Council, particularly regarding built heritage. We are very clearly giving effect to that commitment today by providing €13.4 million to the Heritage Council, an increase of 14% over the figure for 2007. This will allow the council to further increase awareness and the growing appreciation of heritage nationally, carry out heritage research surveys and analysis, and promote best practice in conservation and sustainable heritage management.

The significant investment in infrastructure and other development in recent years has, of necessity, been complemented by a strong expansion in the archaeological investigations essential to ensure we achieve the right balance between development and the protection of the non-renewable resource that is our archaeological heritage. I am very pleased, therefore, to announce I will be providing funding in 2008 for a dedicated archaeological research fund, which fund will come into operation next year. While details remain to be worked out, this new measure is likely to be administered by the Heritage Council, which already manages a number of built and natural heritage grants programmes successfully on behalf of the Department. My Department will continue to have broad oversight of the new measure and its administration.

I have no doubt there is widespread support for maximising archaeological knowledge as we progress our development projects, and for the dissemination of the information gained to the widest extent possible. The new archaeological research fund provides a mechanism to make this goal a reality.

Housing matters will be dealt with more fully by my colleague, the Minister of State with special responsibility for housing, urban renewal and developing areas, Deputy Batt O'Keeffe. The principle of sustainability is also a key concern of housing policy. While acknowledging the important economic aspects of the housing sector, housing policy is about providing homes for people. The aim must be to provide homes in a good quality environment with all that this means from a community and infrastructure perspective. Sustainable housing involves the construction of homes that are structurally sound, energy efficient, environmentally friendly and adaptable over time to changing household needs.

My Department places a particular focus on interventions necessary for those who cannot meet their accommodation needs solely from their own resources. I welcome the record financial provision of more than €1.7 billion for social and affordable housing in 2008. The increased level of funding is in line with the housing commitments contained in Towards 2016 and demon-

strates the Government's determination to fully honour these obligations.

The 2008 provision will allow for 6,600 local authority homes to be started or acquired, 2,000 starts by the voluntary and co-operative housing sector and continuing implementation of the rental accommodation scheme, with a total programme output of starts or acquisitions of 9,000 homes. Funding will also be maintained for the provision of Traveller and homeless accommodation and work will continue on the redevelopment of Ballymun.

In addition, I am particularly pleased to have been successful in securing funding of €10 million to kick-start the major regeneration programme in Limerick. As well as dealing with a serious legacy from past mistakes, the regeneration programme in Limerick is an exciting opportunity to showcase the quality and sustainability agenda, which is now at the heart of our approach to housing.

Improving the quality of social housing generally is a key focus for us now. New projects will be sustainable community proofed as part of the project appraisal stage. Greater innovation will be encouraged, building on those initiatives taken already by many local authorities in building sustainable housing.

I am determined to ensure that the substantial financial provisions secured for 2008 will be used wisely. By building on the momentum achieved to date, we will be well placed to meet, in scale and substance, the ambitious targets set for the initial 2007 to 2009 phase of Towards 2016 and the national development plan.

It is very clear that the environmental imperatives of sustainability and balanced regional development now take centre stage in the national development plan. Consistency with the national spatial strategy and the regional planning guidelines will be a requirement for all infrastructure investments. The systematic threading of the national spatial strategy into the national development plan in this way will yield important demographic, social and environmental dividends in the future. Equally, the factoring in of environmental impacts in a systematic manner is a real change in the way public expenditure programmes are implemented, which I very much welcome. It reflects a widespread consensus that now obtains regarding policies to promote economic growth and the protection of the environment.

I am happy to have had the opportunity of making a comprehensive statement to the House setting out budgetary implications in respect of matters for which I am responsible as Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government. I am particularly pleased to be in a position to announce the carbon budget. My colleague, the Minister of State with responsibility for housing, will address housing matters and, together with the other Ministers of State in the Department, we look forward to a very successful imple-

mentation of Government policies and strategies in 2008.

I reiterate that my party is in Government to effect significant changes for the good of the environment and for the continued prosperity of the country. We are making good progress and this budget is a significant step for us in the right direction. For the first time, we have put forward a carbon budget. I will be on my way to Bali on Saturday and it is important we set the tone here for the successful conclusion of negotiations there. Hopefully, we will have a road map to a better future.

**Minister of State at the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government**

**(Deputy Batt O'Keeffe):** I welcome the record financial provision for housing in 2008. It is worth reflecting on the extent of the resources being made available — over €1.7 billion in Exchequer capital and current finance. This figure is up 16% on the 2007 Estimate and more than double the Exchequer resources made available only six years ago in 2001 at the same juncture in the last national development plan period. In a sense, this very strong upward trend in housing provision mirrors activity in the housing sector generally in that period in terms of demand and output, but also in terms of the specific and continuing need for targeted intervention by Government in the social and affordable sphere.

The increased level of funding in 2008 is in line with the housing commitments contained in Towards 2016 and demonstrates the Government's determination to fully honour these obligations as we move into year two of the current national development plan. Data for the first six months of this year indicate increased activity by local authorities and the voluntary and co-operative sector as measured by both commencements-acquisitions and by the number of units in progress. Activity under the rental accommodation scheme is also accelerating.

Following a 20% increase in 2006, the delivery of affordable housing in 2007 has continued to grow with 1,200 homes provided in the first six months of the year. My Department remains committed to meeting the ambitious targets set for affordable housing in Towards 2016 and continues to work closely with local authorities and the affordable homes partnership to achieve the required level of output.

The funding provided in 2008 will allow for the commencement of a significant number of new social housing units as well as bringing to completion a large number of units under both the local authority and voluntary housing programmes. Specifically, resources available next year will allow for over 6,600 local authority homes to be started-acquired, 2,000 starts by the voluntary and co-operative housing sector and continuing implementation of the rental accommodation scheme. In total, it is expected that



[Deputy Batt O'Keeffe.]

programme output will amount to 9,000 homes in 2008.

We are also placing a particular emphasis on improving the quality of social housing which should be on a par with housing generally. In partnership with local authorities, we are tackling an important programme of regeneration and remedial works over the period of the national development plan. As well as continuing our support for the major Ballymun project, I particularly wish to support the programme of regeneration in Limerick being developed by the regeneration agencies established by the Government and Limerick City Council. As a demonstration of the Government's commitment to providing the range of supporting instruments required, an additional €10 million in resources has been made available in 2008 to support the initial phases of this process.

Through this year's budget, we will be able to devote a further €50 million to boost activity on affordable housing. Building on the successful market acquisition of housing initiated by the affordable homes partnership late last year, a further programme of purchases will be undertaken next year. In addition, we propose to examine the scope for introducing a new shared equity scheme to replace the current shared ownership option with the aim of offering new opportunities to eligible people to achieve their home ownership ambitions. Access to affordable housing will be further facilitated through increases in local authority loan limits from early 2008 and the development of nationwide on-line application systems by the partnership.

**Deputy Liz McManus:** I am sorry to interrupt the Minister of State but is there any chance we could get a copy of his speech?

**Deputy Batt O'Keeffe:** I understood it was to be circulated. I will check that.

We will also pilot a new approach — incremental purchase — through which social housing applicants can commence purchase of new social housing on an incremental basis over 30 years. These initiatives form part of a package of measures reflecting the Government's commitment to broaden people's housing choices and offer increasing paths to home ownership to lower income groups. As Minister of State with responsibility not only for housing, but also for developing areas, I want to see quality housing built in appropriate locations with proper access to public transport links, open spaces and essential amenities. The substantial financial provisions announced today will help to build on the momentum achieved to date as we press ahead towards meeting the ambitious target set for the initial 2007-09 phase of the longer timeframe. I commend to the House the budget, the 2008 Estimates and the very significant housing provisions contained therein.

**Deputy Phil Hogan:** I wish to share time with Deputies O'Donnell and Reilly.

I acknowledge that we are in a budgetary position today where considerable emphasis has shifted to an area of policy put on the long finger for so many years. Fine Gael recognises the serious threat climate change presents to the global environment and believes urgent action is necessary. Ireland's emissions have grown to enormous proportions and in 2005 were 25% above 1990 levels. This sets out the challenge we face to reduce emissions and meet the Government's target of a 3% reduction in its lifetime. As Ireland has one of the highest levels of emissions in the world *per capita*, we should not underestimate the challenge which the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government has, rightly, set out as a major task in order to achieve the objectives of the programme for Government. I wish the Minister and the parliamentary delegation every success in working with our EU partners at the Bali conference in the next few days to ensure an ambitious target is set that will ultimately lead to a new Kyoto Protocol, the aims of which we can realise without delay.

It is all very well to introduce a carbon budget in the House. I note considerable emphasis in the flexible mechanisms section of the table produced by the Minister. This is the cop-out clause for not realising our objectives. The Minister did not set out in detail the way in which the programme for Government commitment of a 3% reduction in emissions would actually be achieved. He did not set out how we would negotiate or consult interests in the agriculture, transport, waste and the various sectors of the economy that contribute to higher emissions on how to reduce emissions to meet the necessary targets. The devil will be in the detail of these measures and the Minister has refused to go into detail today. He is to be excused on this matter but for seven years the previous Government knew about our difficulties in meeting our Kyoto Protocol commitments in conjunction with our partners in the European Union and did absolutely nothing. As Deputy Bruton noted yesterday, we have 500,000 new houses and 600,000 new cars. We could have done much of this in the past couple of years but the Government failed to do it.

On behalf of Fine Gael, I welcome the changes in the VRT system and the announcement by the Minister that from 1 July 2008, motor tax rates will be emissions-based. That is the fairest way to deal with CO<sub>2</sub> emissions and give a choice to the people that when they buy motor vehicles, they will do so in the context of being incentivised to avail of new technology and take into account financial considerations in terms of the taxation regime. They will be able to make choices in respect of the output of emissions. If they want to pay €2,000 per year on motor tax, that is their prerogative, but I have no sympathy for those who want to make such choices. I welcome the

fact that this initiative has been taken. As it concerns new cars, the motor industry will have an opportunity in the next six or eight months to deal with whatever issues they must deal with to meet the new regime that will apply from 1 July 2008.

The budget is about more than just dialogue among ourselves on what we can achieve. As I said, the devil will be in the detail of the practical measures that must be taken across various Departments to meet our objectives. In that context, a €15 million campaign undertaken by the Minister to promote climate change awareness is not necessary. Everybody is aware of the importance of meeting our climate change objectives. There is considerable detail in the discourse and debate about the objectives we must meet. Therefore, it is not necessary for the Minister to undertake a campaign at a cost of €15 million when we could put the money into the green homes initiative which was launched successfully some time ago but which ran out of money. We shifted €10 million from the broadband budget, which was essential, to the green homes initiative in order to pay those who applied to participate this year. Changing light bulbs is one thing but a €15 million campaign is another, especially when it will not meet our objectives. I do not think such a campaign is necessary.

On the local government fund, if one looks at the volume of expenditure in the Estimates published, one will see that local government funding is due to be reduced in gross terms by 2%. Therefore, the Minister failed at the Cabinet table to obtain sufficient resources from the Minister for Finance to meet obligations under the local government fund. As he had to raise money one way or another, he chose the easy option of motor tax. He made a grab for a figure of €83 million to top up the local government fund which resulted in a minor increase of 2%. Therefore, we went from a 2% reduction to a 2% increase after the announcement of the budget yesterday. When one looks at the enormous obligations on local authorities from the perspective of health and safety measures and measures relating to energy costs associated with tarring and restoring roads, both of which are beginning to bite, one will see a net increase of 2% in the local government fund will not go too far in 2008 to meet existing levels of service.

The Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government handed over all the money relating to non-national roads to the Minister for Transport whom I said was not the best man in the world to hand over money to because he was not good at dealing with such issues. His record is not great. The Minister of State at the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government, Deputy Batt O'Keeffe, might agree with me that one cannot trust the Green Party when it comes to road expenditure, be it on non-national, regional, secondary or primary roads. All moneys must be dealt with by the

Fianna Fáil Minister. When one sees the way in which Fianna Fáil has had a go at the Green Party during the years, this is understandable, as the Green Party has been very reluctant when it comes to expenditure on roads and motorways and has had to reverse on the issue in recent times. It is understandable, therefore, that the Minister for Transport will be dealing with the budget for roads rather than the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government.

The energy efficiency budget which is very important if we want to meet our emissions targets has been slashed in the budget. The Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources has some explaining to do, as the budget for energy efficiency initiatives has been slashed by 50%. This ignores the fact that better energy efficiency levels have been identified as one of the easiest and cheapest ways to reduce carbon emissions. Obviously, Fianna Fáil pays no attention to the few green agenda references in the programme for Government. There has been something of a capitulation on this issue.

The commission on taxation has been announced yet again. After six months in office one would imagine that the Green Party would have managed to get the commission up and running to deal with all the various taxation measures taken in the budget to realise some policy commitments.

There are no major initiatives announced to meet the objective of meeting 33% of Ireland's energy needs from renewable sources. This would involve mostly wind energy. The National Off-shore Wind Association of Ireland estimates that it would cost between €600 million and €800 million to provide a new network infrastructure.

The budget is a continuation of the copying and pasting of the Fianna Fáil manifesto. A total of 15 of the 19 commitments on climate change in the programme for Government are lifted directly from the Fianna Fáil manifesto. The Green Party's attempt at a carbon budget is nothing more than spin, with the exception of the changes in motor tax, which I welcome. The target of reducing our emissions by 3% per year now seems a great challenge because, in the first budget, we failed to make a substantial leap forward or to outline the policy detail to meet those objectives.

I welcome the additional moneys for the Environmental Protection Agency and the National Heritage Council. I look forward to the proposals to monitor water quality, the environment and emissions. We should have regular reports to the Joint Committee on the Environment, Heritage and Local Government.

**Deputy Kieran O'Donnell:** In the speech of the Tánaiste and Minister for Finance, motor tax was included under the heading of climate change and environmental matters. We were given the impression that changes were revenue neutral yet clearly the Government is collecting €83 million

[Deputy Kieran O'Donnell.]

extra a year. Effectively these are increases in taxes, primarily on second hand cars and new cars up to 1 July. It is a bit rich to include it under climate change when it has nothing to do with climate change. It is a revenue collecting exercise, nothing more.

I see nothing in yesterday's budget or the carbon tax announcement by the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government, Deputy Gormley, today to suggest that the extra tax collected on motor tax will be ring-fenced for environmental matters at local authority level. It is regrettable that the Minister is not in the Chamber to address these points.

The budget is deceptive, it provides many increases but they are not of real benefit to anyone. The increases do not match increases in inflation. For lower income people inflation increases are upwards of 15% for foodstuffs. The increases in tax bands and credits do not keep pace with wage inflation.

The Minister laid down a number of fundamental planks. He referred to boosting the economy. If there is a €2.3 billion surplus at the end of 2006 that has reduced by €7.2 billion to an Exchequer deficit of €4.9 billion, one must question if that boosts the economy or if it is good management. The Minister's capitulation on various issues, particularly stamp duty, means there will be a major fall in taxes. Stamp duty receipts will reduce by €600 million, corporation tax receipts by €250 million and VAT receipts by €400 million. The Government is not responsible for everything but in terms of policy issues, of which stamp duty is one, it must take responsibility.

Regarding public sector reform; since 1997 Government public expenditure has increased threefold, from €17 billion to €53 billion. The increased funding does not show up in increased services at consumer level. Spending on health has increased fivefold in the past ten years, from €3.2 billion to €16.2 billion. Fine Gael made a practical proposal that, similar to the UK, the Government would seek a 3% saving per annum. This year, such a proposal would have yielded €3 billion extra funding, giving rise to a surplus of the general Government balance. The Budget Statement includes a blanket increase of 8% to all HSE areas except the midlands at 7%. A breakdown on administration is not provided, whereas for other Departments a breakdown is given. This is a fundamental flaw in the way the HSE is funded. It should be funded through the Department of Health and Children. At least the Minister could then be held accountable. In this situation we do not know how the money is spent or how efficient the HSE areas are.

Two measures were addressed to home buyers. Mortgage interest relief only provides €33 extra per month for a single person and €66 extra for a married person. Mortgage interest payments for the average person have increased by €200 per

month this year alone. This measure does not address the extra amounts to be repaid.

Regarding stamp duty, I asked the Minister to change stamp duty to make it more equitable on 26 June, during a debate on the Finance Bill, and on 20 November, during Question Time. On both occasions he refused. The public made up its mind that stamp duty was inequitable and stopped buying houses. The public sought a change in stamp duty but the Government was not forthcoming. People are experiencing negative equity and some 45,000 jobs will be lost in the construction sector. Fine Gael welcomes the measure since Fianna Fáil has stolen our clothes. The only difference is the rates Fine Gael proposed, which are more equitable. In the Finance Bill the Minister should consider providing relief for those purchasing residential sites, apart from the children of the landowner. This would make the system more equitable.

People are not buying houses, they are renting. In the private rented accommodation credit the Minister gave an additional €40 per year or €3.33 per month. Rents have increased by 20% in the past six months, €200 extra per month. It makes no sense.

Regarding the Government protecting the income of the vulnerable and supporting working families, the Government proposed that the inflation rate would be 2.4%, nowhere near what ordinary people deal with. The vulnerable will see a 15% increase in the price of milk, bread and eggs. The Minister gave €2 extra per day to the contributor pension and €1.71 to the non-contributory pension. The fuel allowance has increased by 3%, the family income supplement has increased by €10 per week and other social welfare benefits have increased by €12 to €14 per week yet the Minister will receive a €700 per week increase.

Nothing of substance was done with regard to child care. An additional €1.92 per week was given to early child care support, giving €1,100 per year, just over €20 per week but child care costs €215 per week for the average person, a shortfall of almost €200.

It is not correct to say that people on the low and standard rates of income tax will remain outside the higher taxation rate. The rate has not kept pace with wage inflation. Personal credit and PAYE credits have increased by only 4%, the bands increased by 4% for single people and in the case of a family with one earner, by 3%. Individualisation is militating against cases where the husband or wife wishes to give up work and remain at home with the children.

Stealth taxes have increased by €150 million and motor tax by 9.5%. On health, it was not mentioned in the Minister's budget speech but the cost of attending an accident and emergency department has increased by 10%. In addition, the cost of the DPS scheme has risen by 12%. Stamp duty for old age pensioners, in the context of writing cheques, has increased twofold from 15

cent to 30 cent. The Minister did not really refer to people with disabilities and provided only a €12 increase in respect of the disability allowance. Decentralisation was not even mentioned. To date, only 1,300 of the 10,300 jobs relating to the decentralisation programme have been delivered.

In the context of Limerick, I welcome the €10 million provided in respect of the regeneration project relating to both the north and south sides of the city. I wish Mr. Kenny all the best in the work he is doing in that regard. There was, however, no reference to the €53 million tourism and economic development plan, particularly in light of the discontinuation of the Shannon-Heathrow route. In addition, the Shannon-Limerick rail link was not mentioned.

I call on the Government to support the public service obligation relating to Shannon. The Taoiseach should approach his counterpart in Britain, Gordon Brown, and ask him to secure the requisite slots in order to preserve the Shannon-Heathrow route. The Government needs to stop paying lip-service to Shannon and take positive action instead. It has given nothing to Shannon. Where is the €53 million funding to which I refer? Will the Government support the PSO relating to the Shannon-Heathrow route?

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Séamus Kirk):** I call the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Deputy Dermot Ahern.

**Deputy James Reilly:** I am due to make my contribution.

**Acting Chairman:** I apologise, I misunderstood the position. I was of the impression that Deputy Reilly spoke before I entered the Chamber. There has been some slight erosion of the Deputy's speaking time.

**Deputy James Reilly:** How many minutes are available to me?

**Acting Chairman:** Eight and a half.

**Deputy James Reilly:** In that event, I will run through matters as quickly as possible.

We have managed to turn a surplus of €2.3 billion in 2006 into borrowing of €4.9 billion for next year. That is a good trick. While we are discussing billions, on numerous occasions I have heard the Minister for Health and Children state that the Government's spend on cancer care has risen by €1 billion over ten years. If one divides €1 billion by ten one is left with €100 million, which represents 0.6% of a €16 billion budget.

We are informed that the spending increase in health will be 9%, which just about meets medical inflation. I wish to consider the various aspects of this matter. When future generations consider the 21st century, they will consider the medical card scheme as one of the greatest scandals ever.

**Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Dermot Ahern):** I agree with the Deputy and he knows what I am getting at in that regard.

**Deputy James Reilly:** The Government promised to provide 200,000 full, not doctor-only, medical cards in 2002. In the event, however, 125,000 doctor-only cards were provided. People who received these are still obliged to pay for medicines and hospital charges and do not have access to public health nurses. In addition, 175,000 full medical cards were provided. Medical card coverage of the population is, as a percentage, at its lowest level since the inception of the scheme. The proportion of the population to be covered was supposed to be 40% but this has dropped as low as 27% nationally. In the greater Dublin area, the figure is 20%.

Many people do not realise how scandalously low is the income threshold for medical cards. If a single person has the temerity, audacity or misfortune to earn more than €184 per week, he or she is not entitled to a medical card. The Government increased the social welfare allowance to €197.80 and, as a result, people on social welfare payments are now above the threshold for medical cards. A specific instruction had to be issued to ensure that these individuals did not lose their medical cards.

**Deputy Dermot Ahern:** That was always the way.

**Deputy James Reilly:** It is outrageous.

**Deputy Dermot Ahern:** It was always the way.

**Deputy James Reilly:** No, it was not. It only became necessary to issue that instruction in the past couple of years because the Government failed to index link——

**Deputy Dermot Ahern:** It became necessary as a result of the inordinate increases——

**Deputy James Reilly:** I have only eight minutes in which to make my contribution. Perhaps the Acting Chairman will allow me to erode the Minister's speaking time.

**Deputy Dermot Ahern:** ——in the level of the old age pension.

**Acting Chairman:** I ask the Minister to cease interrupting.

**Deputy James Reilly:** The Minister should inform his constituents about the threshold of €184. In addition, he should indicate how this approach is patient oriented or patient centred. The Minister took a major pay rise and the Taoiseach gave himself a rise of €38,000. At the same time, someone earning little more than half the minimum wage is not entitled to a medical card. This is a disgrace and a scandal. It will be

[Deputy James Reilly.]

one of the greatest indictments of the Government, particularly as it occurred during a period in which the country has enjoyed its greatest ever prosperity.

What is the position with regard to the drug refund scheme? We are going to cater for the elderly, the vulnerable and the chronically ill and we will do so by charging them more for medicines. In that context, the threshold relating to the drug refund scheme has been increased from €85 to €90.

There has been a 10% increase in hospital bed and accident and emergency department charges. Someone sent me a text last night saying that I should give the Government hell because, to add insult to injury, it wants to charge people more to wait for hours on trolleys or plastic chairs in accident and emergency departments. People are furious with regard to what is happening.

I wish to refer to the ambulance service in the capital, particularly the part of it provided by Dublin Fire Brigade comprising 13 ambulances. At any given time during the day, the telephone queue for the ambulance service can stand at 300. I met members of the Dublin Fire Brigade who provided me with these figures. There has been a population explosion in Dublin but there has been no increase in the number of ambulances provided in the past 20 years. When I tabled a parliamentary question to the Minister asking why additional trolleys are not been made available in accident and emergency departments in order that ambulance crews might wheel patients straight in and then leave with replacement trolleys, I was informed that it was not safe to move people off trolleys. What a facetious response.

No additional hospital beds have been provided. In 2002, the Government promised to provide 3,000 extra beds but to date it has delivered only 1,000 of these. Where are the other 2,000 beds? This question is particularly pertinent when one considers the increase in population. The Government waxes lyrical about the increased spend in respect of health and the fact that we have reached the OECD average. Following 20 years of neglect, we have finally achieved this. How can we possibly hope to catch up? Everybody knows that one must spend more to catch up when one has been way behind. The most recent figures from the OECD show that we have 2.8 beds per 1,000 of population. This compares with an average across the OECD of 3.9 per 1,000. Is it any wonder that we are in a mess?

The beds that are in place are not used properly. A total of 22,000 bed days were lost in Beaumont last year and even more were lost at the Mater. The combined figure stood at 57,000, which is the equivalent of five 30-bed wards being closed for the entire year. People are not able to leave hospital early because community facilities are not being made available to them when the

acute phase of their treatment has been completed.

A sum of €35 million has been provided in respect of cancer care. However, when one digs deeper, one realises that this has been allocated for current spending and that capital spending aimed at providing linear accelerators, new mammography machines and other necessary equipment has not been provided. Compare this amount with the previously announced figure of €400 million which the Government indicated would be the cost of its new super-plan for cancer services under a public private partnership arrangement.

The previous Minister for Health and Children, Deputy Martin, established 117 task forces and committees. He became known as the Minister for committees by the time he left the Department. His successor, Deputy Harney, commissioned a review by Ann O'Doherty — which has not been published — and another by Brendan Drumm in respect of Portlaoise. In addition, other reviews are being carried out in Cork and Galway. What is the best the Minister can do in respect of medical cards? She stated that the data relating to them will be reviewed. The ink on the budget is not even dry and the Government has already reneged on its previous promise to index link the threshold. Nothing will be done until next autumn. If he does not mind doing so, perhaps the Minister for Foreign Affairs will indicate whether he thinks the income thresholds relating to medical cards are fair.

None of the recommendations of the task force on obesity has been implemented. I have called for the carrying out of body tests on a nationwide basis. Due to the fact that prevention is better than cure, everyone should receive an age-appropriate health check and we could thereby catch disease early. For every €1 spent on prevention, €20 is saved on treatment. The Government waxed lyrical about physical health checks but action has not been forthcoming.

A total of €2.1 billion was promised in respect of primary health care and it was stated that 23 teams would be put in place. What do these 23 teams mean to patients? The answer is nothing. No additional service is being created and very few additional personnel are being provided. Everything is virtual. The HSE and Brendan Drumm stated that they want to build up community services. They also indicated that this is where the money should go and that additional hospital beds should not be provided. Community services must be in place before the number of beds can be reduced. Additional beds are required and the Government also needs to deliver in respect of primary health care.

We should have a primary health care system based on the one-stop-shop model, whereby people can see doctors, be referred for blood tests, have X-rays taken and receive their results. Instead of 25 or 37 people being obliged to travel from Swords or Balbriggan to Beaumont or the

Mater, somebody could come to their area once a month to see them. That would be real change and it would represent progress. However, the Government will not make that change or provide funding in respect of it.

The number of patients seen by the National Treatment Purchase Fund has decreased to 80 per month. The figure previously stood at 1,400 to 1,700 per month. Cutbacks have obviously taken place in this regard. The allotment of an extra €10 million will not even cover half of these per month. In a memo to the Department last year, HSE officials stated that it was short €350 million for that year. This additional money will not even be able to keep pace. The Government talks the talk, but when it comes to walking the walk, it is actually engaging in health care rationing.

The Government will not give people medical cards, so they cannot afford to see their doctor and they cannot get their medicines. The Government will not support the ambulance service by putting in additional trolleys and more ambulances, so patients cannot get into accident and emergency departments. It will not use hospital beds properly nor will it build more hospital beds, so people cannot get treatment. Basically, it is about protecting the system from the patients.

The Minister of Health is not here today and I know she may have other things to do. At least she had the civility to allow me to attend her press conference, unlike her ministerial colleague, the Minister for Education and Science, Deputy Mary Hanafin, who refused to enter the room and had Deputy Brian Hayes removed forcibly. That is an absolute disgrace. The Government must engage in the commitment that the Minister for Health and Children made to the people of this country. I said before that I will support her efforts if they are real, but I will not support half-hearted, poorly thought out and ill-planned policies that are not properly resourced and doomed to failure from the outset.

**Deputy Dermot Ahern:** A press conference should be for the press. If politicians want to engage with each other, they should come in here and do so.

**Deputy James Reilly:** He only went to listen.

**Deputy Dermot Ahern:** I apologise to the Acting Chairman for intervening, but I find it very hard to contain myself when I hear Deputy Reilly accusing us of not wanting to give people medical cards.

**Deputy James Reilly:** Correct.

**Deputy Dermot Ahern:** Deputy Reilly was the leader of an organisation which fought the Government decision tooth and nail to give medical cards for over 70 year olds.

**Deputy James Reilly:** I want to correct that. I said it was inappropriate prioritisation at a time of plenty. We have seen the result of it now.

**Deputy Dermot Ahern:** It is very hard to take. It is a scandal that in a five or six year period, the cost of the medical card system has gone from €300 million to €1.5 billion. The average payment to a GP on the medical card system is €220,000.

**Deputy James Reilly:** The payment is to a GP practice, which includes nurses, secretaries and possibly four doctors.

**Deputy Dermot Ahern:** If the Government had the opportunity to spend that money on the people who deserve it——

**Deputy James Reilly:** I cannot let the Minister get away with that. The Minister is saying——

**Deputy Dermot Ahern:** The Deputy is looking after his vested interests now.

**Deputy James Reilly:** ——to the House and to the people that the payments are to a GP, when they are clearly outlined in the GMS payments book as payments to the practice——

**Deputy Dermot Ahern:** The Deputy should declare his vested interest.

**Deputy James Reilly:** ——which includes payments to nurses, secretaries and three or four doctors. The Minister should be accurate, stop his PR spin and tell the truth for once in his life.

**Acting Chairman:** Will the Deputy resume his seat?

**Deputy Dermot Ahern:** The level of spending on the GMS has gone up dramatically.

**Deputy James Reilly:** Is the income threshold for medical cards fair?

**Deputy Dermot Ahern:** I will not stand here and allow the Deputy to accuse this Government of not doing its level best for the people who deserve it most. When we decided to give medical cards to people over 70, the organisation formerly headed by the Deputy was against it.

**Deputy James Reilly:** Is €184 fair as an income threshold for medical cards?

**Acting Chairman:** The Minister, without interruption.

**Deputy Dermot Ahern:** I am here to deliver this speech on behalf of the Minister for Social and Family Affairs, who unfortunately is at the funeral of a colleague who died tragically.

This year's budget was agreed within more challenging financial circumstances than those of

[Deputy Dermot Ahern.]

recent years. The package of €900 million for social welfare measures clearly demonstrates the Government's commitment to protecting the less well off and most vulnerable members of society. Nearly half of all additional current Government spending announced yesterday will be spent on the social welfare sector. As a result, total expenditure by the Department of Social and Family Affairs next year will be €17 billion. The schemes and other supports that the Department administers will benefit over 1.5 million people. Families also receive child benefit for almost 1.2 million children.

The social welfare budget package for 2008 aims to achieve four important strategic objectives. It continues to make significant progress towards achieving the Government's target on social welfare pension levels. It significantly improves the position of the spouses and partners of contributory pensioners who receive the qualified adult allowance. It strengthens the framework of supports for family carers and it ensures that the real value of all social welfare payments are maintained and safeguarded. These were the overriding objectives of the Minister for Social and Family Affairs in framing his budget proposals. They ensure that decisive steps have been taken in implementing proposals in the programme for Government, Towards 2016 and the national action plan for social inclusion.

Let us now look in more detail at what is being done in the budget, starting with the position of older people. When considering pensions, much of the current debate focuses on the future and how we will address the challenges we face as our population ages. These are major issues for our society and ones which must be faced. However, we must not forget that there are also challenges to be faced today in ensuring that older people have a decent income in retirement. The increases in pensions over many years have been one of the major achievements of the Government. Since 2002, the level of the contributory State pension has increased by over 50% from €147.30 to €223.30 following this budget. This improvement has had a marked impact on the living standards of older people, enabling them to face the future with a greater sense of security and dignity.

This is most strikingly shown in the numbers of older people deemed to be at risk of poverty, measured on a relative income basis. The most recent figures from the EU survey on income and living conditions, which were published last week, have confirmed the steady improvements of recent years. The risk of poverty rate for older people has fallen from just under 30% in 2003 to 13.6% in 2006. The fall last year was 6.5 % from the previous year and this is before the significant improvement in social welfare pensions in 2007, and those announced yesterday, are taken into account. The Government is determined to maintain and improve on the progress we have made

in improving pensioners' incomes. It is committed to achieving a pension of at least €300 per week by 2012. The budget has taken the first step by increasing the contributory State pension by €14 a week and the non-contributory State pension by €12.

The Government is also committed to increasing the qualified adult allowance to the level of the non-contributory State pension and to increase the numbers of people eligible for this payment. In this year's budget, an increase of €27 in the pensioner qualified adult rate has been achieved, bringing it to €200 per week or 94% of the target. This measure will benefit all qualified adults aged 66 or over, including those on reduced rates of payment who will benefit on a proportionate basis. It will be of special benefit to women who do not have an entitlement to a contributory pension in their own right because of home responsibilities in the past.

As a consequence of these changes in the personal pension rate and the qualified adult rate, over 42,000 pensioner couples will see their household income increase by up to €41 a week, or nearly 11% next year. To give another example, the total social welfare support provided for a contributory pensioner couple receiving the fuel allowance will exceed €23,000, an increase of almost €2,200. There has also been an increase in the fuel season, in respect of which the fuel allowance of €18 a week is paid, by one week with effect from April next year.

Despite the major improvements which have been made to pensions in recent years, we have concerns for the long-term future of our pension system. Let us be in no doubt that we face difficult challenges ahead. People's working lives are now shorter and we are living longer in retirement. Longer life expectancy is something to be welcomed and celebrated, but it poses challenges for the sustainability of our pensions system and the adequacy of personal pension provision. On 17 October last, the Government published a Green Paper on pensions. It addresses all of the challenges we face in the pensions area and puts forward a number of options for tackling them. The purpose of the Green Paper is not to recommend any particular course of action, but rather to set out clearly the current situation and the implications, from an economic and social perspective, of the various courses of action that have been suggested. The Minister for Social and Family Affairs looks forward to moving the debate forward during the coming year.

Carers play a critical role in ensuring that our older people, people with disabilities and those who are seriously ill can remain in their own homes for as long as possible. This is a very valuable and much valued role in our society. Since taking up office in 1997, the Government has been committed to supporting care in the community to the maximum extent possible. Over that period, weekly payment rates to carers have been greatly increased, qualifying conditions for

carer's allowance have been significantly eased, coverage of the scheme has been extended and new schemes such as carer's benefit and the respite care grant have been introduced and extended.

As a result of these improvements, there are now over 34,000 carers in receipt of either carer's allowance or carer's benefit. These carers also receive a respite care grant, along with almost 10,000 other carers who do not qualify for weekly carer payments. The numbers availing of these schemes are continuously increasing. These improvements have been made in the context of continued developments in areas such as needs assessment and home care packages, which are also designed to facilitate the care of people in their own homes for as long as possible.

One of the key Government commitments to carers is the development of a national strategy. One of the recommendations of the report on the position of full-time carers, by the Joint Committee on Social and Family Affairs, was that such a strategy should be developed.

We are now in a position to act on that recommendation. This strategy will focus on supporting informal and family carers in the community. While social welfare supports for carers will clearly be a key issue in the strategy, other issues such as access to respite, health and other services, education, training and employment will also feature strongly.

Co-operation between relevant Departments and agencies is essential if the provision of services, supports and entitlements for carers is to be fully addressed. All relevant Departments and agencies will be involved in the strategy and there will be appropriate consultation with the social partners. An inter-departmental working group, chaired by the Department of the Taoiseach, is being established to draw up the strategy and to manage the consultation process. It is expected that the strategy will be completed by the summer of 2008.

In the meantime, the Minister for Social and Family Affairs is pleased to announce further improvements to the income supports available to carers which build on the significant improvements in recent years. As in previous years, there is an increase in the payment rates for carers. With effect from next January, the rate of carers' allowance will increase by €14, bringing the rate for carers over 66 years to €232 per week and carers under 66 years to €214 a week, while the rate of carers' benefit will increase by €14 to €214.70 per week. The Minister for Social and Family Affairs is pleased to announce an increase of €200 in the rate of the respite care grant to €1,700 from June 2008. This will allow over 48,000 carers next year to have a well deserved break from their caring duties and is a positive step towards the achievement of our commitment to increase the respite care grant to €3,000 per year over the lifetime of the Government.

The level of the income disregards for the carers' allowance has been increased to €332.50 per week for a single person and to €665 per week for a couple. This means that a couple can earn up to €60,150 per annum and still receive a reduced rate of carers' allowance as well as the associated free travel and household benefits. This measure surpasses the commitment in Towards 2016 to ensure that those on average industrial earnings can continue to qualify for a full carers' allowance. Similarly, the income threshold for carers' benefit has been increased to €332.50 per week. These improvements in the income supports available from the Department of Social and Family Affairs, with the improvements in home care and related services in recent years, represent a further realisation of the Government's vision of a co-ordinated approach to services and supports for carers in the community. The development of a national carers' strategy provides us with an opportunity to build further on these improvements and to consider other areas where progress can be made.

A priority concern in approaching this budget was to maintain the value of the lowest social welfare rates in keeping with the commitments in the programme for Government and the national action plan for social inclusion. The rates of payments to people with disabilities, the unemployed, widows and lone parents, to mention just a few of the groups, have increased by €12 or approximately 6.5%. The value of the qualified adult allowance for these payments is also being increased by €8 a week. As a result of the budget, a couple dependent on jobseekers' allowance with no other earnings will be over €1,000 better off next year, while a single unemployed person will gain by over €650.

These increases are well ahead of projected increases in both prices and earnings. Thus, for the fifth year in a row, social welfare rates have grown faster than prices and earnings. Since 2004, the lowest social welfare rates have increased by 58% compared to cumulative price increases of 15% in the same period. In 2004, the lowest social welfare rate of payment equated to 24% of gross average industrial earnings. It will now stand at 30%. These are significant achievements and a key priority has been to protect the value of social welfare payments.

The social welfare budget package sets aside nearly €148 million, or €194 million when the early child care supplement is included, to improve the range of supports provided for children. These include increases in child benefit of €6 for the first two children and €8 for the third and subsequent children and an additional €2 per week in the qualified child increase, formerly called the child dependant allowance, which is paid to all social welfare recipients with children. The threshold for family income supplement has increased by €10 per week for each child, which will result in payments increasing by €6 a week per child. These improvements will benefit some



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26,500 existing families and entitle a further 2,700 families to the payment. Other supports for children include improvements in the back to school clothing and footwear allowance and an increase of €100 per child in the level of the early child care supplement which is paid to families with children under the age of six.

The impact of these measures is best illustrated by way of an example. Take the case of a social welfare-dependent family with three children, one under six years of age and another over twelve years of age. As a result of this year's budget, the combined value of child support payments to that family will increase by €718 in a full year, bringing their total child income support to over €12,000 next year. This equates to an income support payment of €77 per child per week and represents an increase of over 6% in the value of their current payments.

The Minister for Social and Family Affairs is particularly pleased to be able to increase the widowed parent grant by €2,000 to €6,000. This is an important measure for the families concerned, giving them a timely financial boost at a time of bereavement and great personal loss which is frequently compounded by economic uncertainty and concerns about the future. The Minister is also pleased to have been able to assist the Family Support Agency to improve the range of services it supports, including in the area of bereavement and family counselling. Additional funding is being provided for the school meals programme, which has been greatly expanded this year to the benefit of some 175,000 pupils in 1,800 schools. Total expenditure next year will rise to €32 million and the priority will be to expand the scheme to a further tranche of schools in the Department of Education's delivering equality of opportunity in schools, DEIS, action plan.

Adequate income support is only part of the solution for people and families who are living in poverty. They need more than just money; they need a lasting solution to their difficulties and the necessary supports to help them make their way to a more promising future. That is why activation and participation in employment, education, training and personal development opportunities have become an increasingly important part of the Department of Social and Family Affairs's activities. To improve the effectiveness of these measures, it has been decided to amalgamate two initiatives run by the Department and to significantly increase the funding provided to them. The revamped activation and family support programme will have a budget of €6.5 million next year. It will provide funding for projects run by third parties to assist welfare recipients and members of their families to enhance their employability through education, training and personal development. It will also provide, or co-fund, training and development programmes for particularly disadvantaged social welfare

customers and their families, including very young lone mothers, other parents rearing children without the support of a partner, carers, Travellers and people with disabilities.

Provision has been made in the Department of Social and Family Affairs's administrative budget for the deployment of an additional 30 facilitators with clerical support staff next year as the first stage in a radical development of activation supports provided by the Department. Funded under the national development plan, this programme will provide for the individual case management of all social welfare customers of working age who are not progressing into employment or accessing training or employment opportunities. The approach will be proactive, outcome focused and specifically directed towards those who, because of their personal or family circumstances, face particular difficulties in engaging with the labour market.

The budget makes provision for other measures designed to assist people in the progression from welfare to work. These include an increase in the upper income threshold for entitlement to one-parent family payment and a reform of the method of assessing earnings for that scheme by disregarding social insurance and other employment related contributions. The Minister for Social and Family Affairs is increasing the cost of education allowance by €100 to €500 per annum.

I have not dealt with all the measures in the social welfare package; time prevents me doing so. This is a strong package of measures. It provides for a real increase in all social welfare payments. This accounts for at least 50% of the extra money made available by the Minister for Finance, Deputy Cowen, in yesterday's budget. It takes a decisive step forward in implementing several commitments in the programme for Government and clearly demonstrates the Government's commitment to protecting the most vulnerable members of society.

**Deputy James Reilly:** I asked the Minister a question and I would like an answer. Does he believe the income threshold for medical card holders at €184 per week is fair? I seek a simple "Yes" or "No" answer.

**Acting Chairman:** The question is inappropriate at this stage. The Minister had the option of talking about that matter.

**Deputy James Reilly:** I am sure the Minister would love to answer.

**Deputy Dermot Ahern:** If we had a lot more money from the entire scheme, we might be able to divide it up better.

**Deputy James Reilly:** "Yes" or "No" would be good enough for me.

**Deputy Dermot Ahern:** The average payment to a GP on the medical card system is €220,000.

**Deputy James Reilly:** How many people does the Minister pay out of his €250,000 salary?

**Deputy Leo Varadkar:** I wish to share time with Deputies Neville and Burke.

In a radio interview four years ago, then Minister for Finance, former Deputy Charlie McCreevy, told us there were only three socialists in the Dáil, one being the Taoiseach and another, he later explained, former Deputy Joe Higgins. Mr. McCreevy left us speculating on the identity of the third comrade. After yesterday's tax and spend budget we can be certain that Deputy Cowen has been unmasked, at long last, as the third socialist in the Dáil.

We have witnessed in the past year an extraordinary turnaround in the public finances, the worst in the history of the State. A €2.3 billion Exchequer surplus has been transformed into a €4.9 billion deficit. The Minister expects this deficit to rise to €5.8 billion in 2009, equivalent to more than €5,000 in borrowings for every family in the State. Over the past three years Deputy Cowen has ridden the roller-coaster of economic growth in revenue buoyancy. He used major increases in revenue from stamp duty, VAT and income tax, most of which were created by the debt-fuelled housing boom, a Government initiative geared to increase spending and cut taxes. With the downturn in the economy for the first time this Tánaiste, Minister and Government have had to make some real economic decisions.

He should have introduced a reforming budget that would have brought about real public sector reform, the insistence on a 2% efficiency target for every Department and State agency, the deferral of the pay hikes for senior Ministers and public servants and the allocation of resources only to those Ministers who were prepared to accept service targets in tandem with resources. He should also have insisted on a root and branch reform of the 400 or more quangos that are funded by the taxpayer. Instead of embracing and driving reform he opted to return to old fashioned tax and spend economics, borrowing €4.9 billion to plug the hole in the public finances. This old fashioned socialist solution did not work in the late 1970s under then Taoiseach, Jack Lynch or under Charles Haughey as Taoiseach, and it certainly will not work now. It will become very clear to everyone by the end of the year that the deficit will be even larger than the Tánaiste has projected. When we meet again this time next year he will not be able to afford to do the tax and spend Houdini trick all over again.

In examining some of the key points of the budget, one must comment on the 8.2% increase in day to day spending. That is not an investment in capital infrastructure but rather an 8.2% increase in day to day spending, equivalent to €4 billion in tax. Yet everyone knows there will not

be any real improvement in the public services with that money. In any other country, if the Government was going to increase spending by 8.2%, people would expect and get major increases in public services. If spending is to be increased by more than the growth rate, or more than inflation, one should be able to deliver real benchmarkable improvements in public services. Yet, in his budget speech, the Minister did not set out what those improvements would be and conveniently, he cannot be benchmarked against them. Most people will probably be worse off by this time next year as a consequence of this budget. According to the Minister's figures income tax changes will give an extra €2 to €22 per week to every taxpayer. It is pretty clear, however, that these increases will be wiped out, initially by inflation. I note the inflation target has been revised upwards by the Minister as a consequence of the budget. Motor taxes will increase by 10% and there are increases in hospital and accident and emergency charges. There will be increases in the excise duty on cheques and in the cost of medicines through raising the thresholds of the drug payments scheme, DPS. Some 750,000 people will be paying the higher rate of income tax of 41%. That is more than the one fifth of income earners suggested by the Taoiseach this morning. In fact someone who earns €13 more than the average industrial wage will be paying the higher rate of income tax. Anyone with a sense of justice can see how unfair it is for people on relatively modest incomes — families on €65,000, single people on €35,000 — to be faced with paying the higher 41% rate of income tax.

It is obvious that any attempt to drive public sector reform is missing from the budget. Take for example the 7% to 8% increase offered in the case of the HSE. The HSE could not deliver the same level of service this year as it did last year with 11% and 12% increases. How will it manage on a 7% to 8% increase without insisting on real reform? Something fundamental is missing in the budget too, namely the provision for the inflation rate in public sector pay rises that will happen as a result of social partnership. Also, where is the provision for the benchmarking increases? Many people such as SIPTU president, Mr. Jack O'Connor and other union leaders expect their members will do very well out of benchmarking, and yet according to the budget secondary school teachers' salaries will only rise by 5%. Given that a new secondary school is being built in my area and a number are under construction around the country, I do not see how the Minister, with a 5% provision, can deliver the benchmarking pay increases he promised — and should not deliver, by the way — and also provide for new teachers. The same argument applies to the Defence Forces, with 6%, the HSE with 4% and the Minister's Department, with 4%. Either people will have to take a pay cut in real terms or alternatively, these figures are not real at all. In the event, we will see supplementary Estimates and

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overruns later in the year as the Government is forced to pay out and increase the public sector pay bill yet again.

A few areas where spending did not need to be increased deserve to be commented on. For example, in the enterprise and employment area, there is an 11% increase for the Competition Authority. I support and am enthusiastic about the work of the Competition Authority, but what is the point in giving a body such as that an 11% increase in the budget if the Government ignores all its reports? Either it takes the Competition Authority seriously and increases its budget, or if not, its budget should not be increased. The same argument applies to FÁS, where €800 million is being spent. There is very little evidence that many of its initiatives are training schemes at all. There is little evidence that many of the training schemes actually move people into employment. Why was there not a full audit of how FÁS spends its money before agreeing to an increase?

As regards welfare, everyone welcomes the increases in pensions and I acknowledge what the Government has done in this regard in particular. However, there are large numbers of people in the State who do not need to be on welfare. If one takes the example of the Nordic countries, Norway, Finland and Denmark in particular, labour force participation excluding women in the home — I appreciate that in Nordic countries more women are in paid work — is much higher than in Ireland, because they do not have large numbers of people on invalidity and long-term unemployment benefit. In many cases people are on those benefits quite dubiously as it is decided they have a certain illness and they are effectively just written off because of social partnership and Government policy. They are just given €200 a week or whatever and forgotten about. Instead, we should be assisting people who can work by giving them the skills they need, using a carrot and stick approach, admittedly, to lift them out of poverty and welfare, giving the opportunity — and requirement — if they can work, to properly enter the workforce. In this way we can save money, create wealth and expand the labour force. Why do we accept that a country as wealthy as ours and an economy so strong should have so many people living on welfare? Certainly, there are people who need to be on welfare, but there are many who do not. It is not that people in Denmark or Norway are somehow sicker or more disabled than Irish people. There is a serious problem with our welfare system and there is no attempt to reform it.

Obviously we welcome the changes in stamp duty, although they are somewhat late. I have a real concern, however, as regards the Tánaiste's ability to become a Taoiseach. One needs a strong person as Taoiseach in this State, someone who will stick by his or her principles and not fall over when coming under pressure from the Opposition, the *Sunday Independent* and the build-

ers. Deputy Cowen has not taken many stands in his political career, but stamp duty was one of them. Yet, when he came under pressure he showed that he could buckle and that is not an encouraging sign for a potential Taoiseach who must face much more difficult challenges than those we have seen in the last ten years.

I want to mention some of the things Fine Gael would do differently, and that is crucial in this debate. Had we been in power up to now, we should have kept public spending under control and not allowed it to rise by 11% and 12% in the last few years. We did that when we were in power on the last occasion. Our tax reductions would have been much more restrained than Deputy Cowen's and as a result we would have built a much larger surplus, one that would now be used to stimulate the economy, instead of what the Minister is doing, namely, borrowing enormous amounts of money to provide such economic stimulus.

We would bring about real public sector reform, setting a 2% efficiency target similar to the UK, where efficiencies were squeezed and the numbers in administrative positions were reduced by 15%. As a result real improvements were delivered at the frontline in terms of nurses, teachers and policemen. We would change the way the budget works. Currently, each agency calculates how much it spent last year, works out how much it needs for next year and then gets an increase. One should start with zero. We would defer the pay hikes to the high earners in the public sector until they agreed efficiency targets and only give extra funds to Ministers who say what they will deliver with the money. They would not get any more money if they did not deliver. We would have a root and branch reform of quangos. A total of 450 quangos now exist, all of which have chief executives and press offices, and many of their reports are unnecessary. We would also involve the private sector in delivering some of the capital investment on a design, build and operate basis. This is the divergence in economic policy between the two parties in this House. The time has come for reform and we need a reforming Minister for Finance, not somebody who takes the easy options as the Minister did.

**Deputy Dan Neville:** I welcome the opportunity to contribute to the debate on the budget. Yesterday, I was extremely concerned about the absence of any reference to the delivery of resources for psychiatric services and suicide prevention. A Government commitment to ensuring our psychiatric services are supported or providing the resources required to bring them up to a level of modern efficiency was not mentioned on any occasion or in any supporting document. The fact that, each year, 500 people take their lives was ignored and no commitment was made to support provisions for suicide prevention,

research into why it happens or assisting those bereaved by suicide.

The public has no confidence in support services for people who are suicidal. According to a recent survey, only 7% of people stated that if they were in crisis, they would look to an organ of the State for support. Of those surveyed, 50% identified the Samaritans and 22% identified AWARE as services for people in crisis. These are non-governmental organisations. It is of concern that 28% of people stated they were unaware of any services available to people who were suicidal.

This is a serious indictment of the Government's concerns for people who are suicidal, in crisis and in need of support. Immediate investment should be made in psychotherapy and counselling services in all communities and this should be readily available as part of community-based psychiatric teams. We did not hear anything about this yesterday. I am concerned that while lip service is paid occasionally, resources are not supplied at the level required. Ten years ago, up to 10% of the total health budget was applied to psychiatric services. This has been reduced to 7%.

We urgently need greater psychological input in mental health care. In December 1984, a report, *Planning for the Future*, outlined the urgency required with regard to the input of psychological services in dealing with the treatment of mental illness. Last year, in a submission to the Joint Committee on Health and Children, the Irish College of Psychiatry stated that 83% of psychiatric consultants do not have access to a psychotherapist, 76% do not have access to a family therapist and 33% do not have access to an occupational therapist.

A senior consultant psychiatrist in the public service informed the Oireachtas committee that he has 480 patients with a staff complement of one community nurse, one social worker, two junior doctors, who change every six months, and one third of a psychologist. Mental illness treatment requires more time per patient than such a regime permits. Yesterday, the Minister in his budget ignored this area of urgent concern. The Government has no interest in or commitment to investment in developing mental health services. We urgently require balance of all disciplines involved in treating mental illness.

The Minister of State might state that I argue this on a regular basis. To support what I state and to show it is not only words or that only I say this, I will quote from the most recent report of the Mental Health Commission on this matter. This commission was established by the Government as an independent body:

Mental health services are managed at catchment level by senior management teams (SMTs) which consists in most cases of the clinical director, director of nursing and hospital manager. There were a few exceptions where the senior management teams were

multidisciplinary, one example being in the Mayo mental health services. Most senior management teams have no representations from disciplines such as occupational therapy, social work and psychology. While the vast majority of services have signed up to multidisciplinary team working at service delivery this is not reflected at management level. The Inspectorate was unable to obtain any logical reason as to why this was the case, but the apparent resistance to widening the senior management base is surprising. In view of this, the time when service users will be represented at management level seems very distant.

It was suggested in 1984 that service users be involved in management. This report states this seems distant:

Communication and being part of the decision-making process were two areas where there was evidence of failure of management. The majority of senior management teams did not feel that they were part of the decision-making process. There was little evidence of effective catchment management teams. Time after time the Inspectorate was informed by senior management teams of the lack of communication from local health managers. SMTs are rarely integral participants in the planning of mental health services. Many are informed of decisions about their service rather than being part of the decision-making process. Indeed, some senior management teams heard of decisions that were made for their services for the first time from the Inspectorate.

The senior management teams learned of the decisions from the inspectorate inquiring into how they manage when they should have been involved in making those decisions. The report further states:

The difficulties that the Inspectorate had in obtaining information about plans for catchment services mirrored the difficulties that senior management teams had in obtaining information about plans for their own services.

The inspectorate was unable to find out the full case because of the inefficiencies and type of approach taken by the roll-out of our psychiatric services. It is an indictment of the Government that during the past ten years, while lip service was paid to this, nothing has happened and resources have not been allocated. On numerous occasions, particularly over the past five and a half years, we heard in this House about the Government's commitment to multidisciplinary teams. The inspectorate reports that it is not happening:

In the majority of catchment areas, the Inspectorate was left with no clear idea as to the future of the service over the next five years. Therefore it appears that resources will continue to be allocated on an *ad hoc* basis,

[Deputy Dan Neville.]

with little contribution from the services themselves as to where resources are most needed.

It was quite evident that some senior management teams were not functioning and were not motivated in being part of the planning process. The Inspectorate was surprised at the lethargy demonstrated by some senior management teams which had not sought to have input into decision making. This could be looked on as a measure of the frustration that senior management teams feel about the future of the service and their role within it.

It is an indictment of any service if the management does not operate efficiently, is not in control, does not know what is happening, is not involved in decision-making and is not pivotal to how the service is run. I could quote from the report for half an hour but I have expressed the need for a hands on approach to ensure our mental health services are of concern to the Government and to the Health Service Executive. I cannot get a response regarding why the HIQA report on conditions in our hospitals, which was otherwise quite informative, ignored psychiatric hospitals. The conditions experienced by psychiatric patients should be just as deserving of scrutiny as those of general hospital patients. Did the Government fail to recommend that HIQA should investigate conditions in psychiatric hospitals because it was aware of the Dickensian conditions of some of them?

**Deputy Ulick Burke:** I thank my colleagues for sharing their time.

One would have expected the Tánaiste to reflect on the provisions of last year's budget before introducing the present one. A glaring example of his failure to implement the last budget was the provision for boosting tourism in rural Ireland. He announced tax incentives for tourism-related projects in the middle Shannon region, part of which lies in his constituency. After several letters were written by people, who are anxious to take the opportunity to develop tourism in this area, to the various Ministers with responsibility for implementing this scheme, the reply to a parliamentary question I put down last week revealed that guidelines have not yet been put in place for the implementation of the scheme by the Department of Finance or the Department of Arts, Sport and Tourism. Application forms are not yet available and the board which was to oversee the projects has not been appointed. The Government has not even sent the details of the scheme to Europe for ratification.

Development in rural Ireland, particularly in tourism, must not be a priority for the Government if the Tánaiste is not prepared to progress this scheme in parts of his constituency. A pilot scheme implemented in the upper Shannon region by the previous Minister for Finance kick-started development there but the Tánaiste has

neglected the middle Shannon region. Nothing has been done on the ground so where have the funds gone that were provided last year?

Several of the Tánaiste's proposals for the transport sector are welcome, particularly the western railway corridor between Athenry and Ennis. It is hoped that work will continue on this important part of the infrastructure of the west. However, if the Government, the NRA and local authorities throughout the country are serious about road safety, why did the NRA decide to withdraw 11 proposals to develop rest areas along national primary routes? It is a bizarre decision, particularly in the aftermath of last week's tragic accident in County Meath in which a family had to stop on the side of a national route and a child was killed when a van hit their car. If the Minister for Transport appreciates the country's concerns regarding road safety, I urge him to direct the NRA to change its nonsensical proposal. Much has been said about the matter and attempts have been made to address it but the 200 road deaths in the past five years which were attributable to driver fatigue make clear the importance of reverting to the original plan to provide rest areas. The reasons given by the NRA for its decision in terms of anti-social behaviour and even prostitution are ludicrous in the extreme. As long as it continues dreaming in that way, it is certainly not interested in road safety.

A number of Deputies have noted failures in areas of the budget, the first casualty of which is education. Recently the Minister for Education and Science directed that 30 school projects be halted. While she did not give a reason for her decision, the country's cats and dogs know it was because of inadequate funding. Now that additional funding for capital projects has been announced, will the aforementioned 30 projects be progressed? Many projects have been implemented in rural schools and efforts have been made to provide reasonable conditions for students and staff, but the limits to the funding provided must be revised so as to return the initiative to local boards of management. How will the Minister support the additional 13,000 students in the coming year with the resources available to her? She has hidden for the past two days because she failed at Cabinet to get adequate funding for education.

We were told that an additional €35 million has been provided for cancer care. I have asked the Minister for Health and Children about the funding available to hospitals from which cancer services have transferred. Have the funds and personnel for these services also been transferred and, if so, what will this entail? It is clear from the increase in the charge for accident and emergency services from €60 to €66 that the Government is attempting to create a smokescreen to allow it to introduce another dirty dozen cutbacks which will affect the old, the sick and the needy.

**Minister of State at the Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs (Deputy Pat Carey):** I wish to share time with the Minister of State at the Department of Health and Children, Deputy Jimmy Devins, Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment, Deputy Michael Ahern, and Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment, Deputy John McGuinness.

It was interesting to hear Deputy Varadkar refer to the role of the medical profession in the area of social welfare and disability. I suspect Irish people are as healthy as those in other nations. Perhaps the Deputy, in his role as a member of the medical profession, will inform the House how he proposes to reduce the number of people who are economically inactive.

**Deputy Leo Varadkar:** I would be pleased to do so if the Minister of State is genuinely interested in the issue.

**Deputy Pat Carey:** I would be very interested to hear the Deputy's proposals.

**Deputy Leo Varadkar:** We could adopt the Dutch certification model using independent doctors.

**Deputy Pat Carey:** In respect of the area for which I am responsible, I welcome the €12.5 million increase in funding for drugs programmes in 2008, which the Minister for Finance announced in yesterday's budget. This increase of more than 25% constitutes a major funding boost for drugs programmes next year and builds on increases in funding secured for these programmes in the past three years. It reaffirms the high priority the Government continues to give to tackling the drugs problem.

The 2008 allocation of €64 million, of which almost €56 million is current funding and €8 million is capital funding, will facilitate progress towards the fulfilment of drug-related commitments in the programme for Government. From the debate on the drugs strategy in the House last week, it is clear the Government approach enjoys cross-party support. I look forward to receiving the support of all Members in rolling out facilities to assist communities in addressing drug-related issues in their localities.

With respect to the work of drugs task forces, the additional funding will allow for further progress towards the full implementation of the agreed work programmes of the regional drugs task forces, the development and strengthening of local drugs task forces programmes and the full implementation of the emerging needs fund. The allocation will also cover the provision of more facilities and services for young people between the ages of ten and 21 years who are at risk of becoming involved with drugs.

Support, encouragement and confidence building for young people are vital. In my years as a

teacher and through my experience working in the youth and voluntary sector, I have witnessed at first hand the positive effects which can arise from giving disadvantaged young people extra support and encouragement at an early stage. The allocation will also facilitate the expansion of the operation of the fund to some further towns, primarily in Leinster. I will engage with the regional drugs task forces to identify the towns they consider most appropriate for the roll-out of this programme.

This funding will not only consolidate the valuable and ongoing work being done under the drugs initiatives but will provide funding to roll out those aspects of the implementation of the recommendations of the report of the working group on drugs rehabilitation, with its focus on the development of an effective inter-agency approach based on a continuum of care for the individual, which pertain to the Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs.

The tragic events of recent weeks have highlighted the increasing threat to society from cocaine misuse. The Government sets a high priority on tackling this issue. I intend to increase funding aimed at dealing with this threat through ensuring the implementation of the recommendations, as appropriate, of the report, *An Overview of Cocaine Use in Ireland*, published by the National Advisory Committee on Drugs in March this year.

Furthermore, I intend providing funding to initiate the development of a number of projects to tackle the drugs problem in Limerick city, based on the vision statements of the two Limerick regeneration boards which are due early in the new year. The operational timespan for the current national drugs strategy is drawing to a conclusion and I am initiating the process which will lead to the formulation of a new national drugs strategy for the period after 2008. This will be a collaborative exercise between Departments and agencies and the community and voluntary sectors. Many challenges will face us in the years ahead and for this reason I am anxious to become actively engaged with various interest groups. In particular, I wish to engage with young people in the coming year to establish how they believe they can contribute to addressing a difficult social issue. I expect the steering group will meet in the next two weeks to initiate the consultation process, after which we will enter full-scale consultations with the various stakeholders.

I acknowledge the deep interest and leadership Deputy Neville has shown in the area of suicide prevention. The Deputy made some interesting references to the lack of support services in the youth psychiatric area. From my engagement with the Health Service Executive, specifically its primary and continuing community care teams, I am convinced it is determined to ensure this aspect of care is addressed. Only last week, I saw a very good initiative which is operated under the

[Deputy Pat Carey.]

aegis of Arbour House in Cork. The facility, which is under construction in St. Finbar's Hospital in Cork, is a new centre of excellence that will provide integrated services and comprehensive care for a wide range of patients, including drug misusers and people affected by related problems.

We face many challenges in this area and I have no doubt the next strategy, which will extend to 2016, will require periods of review and evaluation, as has been the case with previous phases of the national drugs strategy. With considerable cross-party support in the House, it is possible to overcome these difficult challenges.

**Minister of State at the Department of Health and Children (Deputy Jimmy Devins):** I am pleased, as Minister of State at the Department of Health and Children with special responsibility for people with disabilities and mental health, to congratulate my colleague, the Minister for Finance, Deputy Cowen, on continuing the tradition which has built up over the years of providing funding each year in his budget for people with disabilities. The provision of this funding continues to support the national disability strategy launched in September 2004. This strategy reinforces equal participation in society for people with disabilities and provides for a framework of new supports for people with disabilities. The programme, with the enhancement of other key support services, are key factors in building the additional capacity required to ensure services best meet identified needs.

The strategy builds on a strong equality framework, which is reflected in a range of important legislation, and places the policy of mainstreaming public services for people with disabilities on a clear legal footing. Its main elements are the Disability Act 2005, the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act 2004, sectoral plans published in 2006 by six Departments, the Citizens Information Act 2007 and the multiannual investment programme for disability support services for the period 2006 to 2009.

In launching the national disability strategy the Taoiseach announced the Government's commitment to a multiannual investment for disability specific services over a five-year period. The Tánaiste and Minister for Finance, Deputy Brian Cowen, has consistently delivered the resources for people with disabilities since the launch of the strategy in 2004. The additional funding of €50 million provided in the 2008 budget is in line with the original multiannual commitment. The funding allocated in the budget is to meet the costs associated with a range of elements in the multiannual investment programme.

For each of the past three years, the investment programme funding has been used to create additional residential day and respite places for persons with a disability. We have been provided

with funding for 255 new residential places, 85 new respite places and 535 new day places in the intellectual disability and autism areas. In addition, the implementation of the plan to transfer persons with intellectual disability or autism from psychiatric hospitals and other inappropriate placements will continue to be progressed.

In regard to services for persons with physical or sensory disability we have provided funding for a further 80 new residential places and there are also resources for 250,000 extra hours of home support and personal assistance. The additional €50 million announced in the budget will continue to provide a baseline to considerably enhance the multidisciplinary support services for people with disabilities in line with the Government's commitment to build capacity within the health services and to deliver on the various legislative provisions in the national disability strategy that I have just outlined.

Since 1997 the Government has had a clear and effective strategy on the planning and delivery of health funded services for people with disabilities. The Government, through the strategy and, in particular, the funding measures I have outlined, is building on the very significant additional investment that has already been made in these services. In all, additional funding, amounting to €851 million, revenue and capital, has been invested in health funded support services for people with disabilities since 1997. This funding has also allowed for the commencement of Part 2 of the Disability Act 2005 which, as Deputies are aware, is a key element of the national disability strategy.

Part 2 of the Disability Act 2005 was commenced on 1 June 2007 for children under the age of five. This gives people with disabilities an entitlement to an independent assessment of health and education needs and a service statement identifying the services to be delivered. A system of complaints and appeals has also been established. This is a welcome significant step towards enhancing the level of support available to persons with disabilities.

This is the first time that an independent assessment of need, conducted according to standards laid down by an independent agency, the Health Information and Quality Authority, will be available. The implementation of the Act will also give us an accurate picture of service provision and of areas for improvement across the system into the future, through the provision of an annual report to the Minister, which will outline information on service provision and unmet need.

The mental health service is underpinned by comprehensive policy frameworks outlined in A Vision for Change and Reach Out. Furthermore it is supported by legislative reforms in the Mental Health Act 2001 and has been allocated substantial additional funding in recent years.

In 2008 we will reap the rewards of that additional investment. I am happy to report that the impact of increased funding in child and adolescent mental health services will be realised next year. The HSE is proceeding with the recruitment of eight child and adolescent multi-disciplinary teams, two for Dublin mid-Leinster, two for Dublin north east, two for the south and two for the west. As an interim arrangement 18 additional beds will come on stream in 2008.

The HSE has informed me it will fast-track the appointment of staff to facilitate the commissioning of these additional beds so that, by the end of 2008, there will be 30 beds in place. This represents a significant increase and is a most welcome development for such a vulnerable group. Meanwhile the construction of two 20-bed units will get under way, one in Cork and one in Galway.

In light of the information available around suicide and self harm, it has been agreed with the National Office for Suicide Prevention that an interim target for a 10% reduction in suicide should be achieved by 2010. In addition, a 5% reduction in repeated self harm by the same year and a further 5% by 2016 is the target. I accept that these are ambitious targets but I assure the House that I am committed to doing my utmost to ensure that they are achieved. To do so we must build on the success of the initiatives already in place. This work is ongoing and will continue in the coming year.

In regard to my brief in the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment I am delighted to inform the House that in regard to the continuation of existing programmes and schemes to promote FÁS training and employment services for people with disabilities, which include specialist training provision, supported employment, wage subsidy schemes and disability support and awareness, a total budget of €77 million has been provided in 2008 for these purposes.

I thank my colleague the Tánaiste and Minister for Finance, Deputy Cowen, for his continued support for people with disabilities and mental health problems.

**Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Michael Ahern):** This is a sensible, prudent and responsible budget which enables us to retain the gains of recent years and to consolidate and build for the future. By following the course outlined by the Minister for Finance, Deputy Cowen, our economy will continue to grow to the benefit of all our people. Certainly this is no time for pessimism and I find the negative attitude of the Fine Gael Party extraordinary. There is no basis for such pessimism. It is still unbelievable that after ten years in which 600,000 new jobs have been created, which is more than one in four of all jobs in the economy, Fine Gael should talk about a jobs crisis. Not only is it unbelievable, it is deplorable.

The ability of an economy to create new and better jobs to replace those that are lost is the real test of competitiveness. Last year total employment exceeded 2 million for the first time and net job creation in agencies such as the IDA and Enterprise Ireland was the highest since 2000. When the Fine Gael Party attempts to talk down this reality it is impossible to take it seriously. These are not the words of a Minister attempting to score partisan points. There is a real concern in the business community that we could talk ourselves into trouble. The small firms association said that, "the single most important thing required for budget 2008 is for the Government to instil confidence back into the economy in the budget speech and through prudent economic management going forward". It went on to say that, "We need the Government and its agencies to speak out in support of the economy and mitigate media reporting of us being on the verge of collapse as this the very thing that will bring us there".

This budget will instil the confidence called for by the small firms association. The Fine Gael Party is great to point out problems but very slow to point out solutions or to tell us what it might actually do if it had the opportunity. Last week the Fine Gael Party complained that public spending is at a level equivalent to 31% of GNP as opposed to 25%. This, according to Fine Gael, is a bad thing. Some 6% of GNP is in the region of €10 billion and as we all know the vast bulk of Government spending goes on health, education and social spending. Social welfare spending in 2008 will amount to €17 billion compared to €9 billion in 2002.

The Minister has provided for large increases to carers, pensioners and parents in recent years. Which of the welfare increases would the Fine Gael Party reverse? Where would it take the axe to spending? Would that axe include respite grant? We did not have one when that party was last in office. Fine Gael attacks on the level of public spending are just hollow rhetoric. We know only too well that whatever Deputy Bruton might say in the wake of a budget he will be contradicted by his front bench spokespersons. For example, Deputy Enright is disappointed that more has not been spent on the welfare budget. Likewise, Deputy Brian Hayes complains of only a 9% increase in primary funding and 5% in post primary. Deputy Bruton says we are spending too much while his colleagues say it is too little.

This country has a competitive economy and we can be confident in our ability to meet international challenges. That said, I am not complacent either. The world is ever changing and we need to be agile and flexible. Sustaining our economic growth will increasingly be innovation and knowledge driven. The value of this innovation triangle has been recognised at EU level through the substantial increase in funds for the Seventh Framework Programme and the creation of the European research area.



[Deputy Michael Ahern.]

There is also recognition at EU level of the need to intensify the pace of the Lisbon driven reforms and to make the EU more innovation friendly by creating comprehensive framework conditions for exploiting old forms of innovation across the policy spectrum. At a recent EU competitiveness council I fully endorsed the council's conclusion calling for a strong emphasis on the importance of science, research and development, innovation, skills, training policies and better regulations. These are the ingredients of modern competitive economies. We cannot always compete on cost but we can compete on the strength of our knowledge base, innovation culture and the skills of our people.

As a small open economy we are particularly vulnerable to the external factors that weaken our cost base. The solution lies in supporting innovation, improving the productivity of labour through balanced regulation, increasing knowledge and skills and in playing to our strengths by tapping into our innate ability as networkers and for building partnerships. Success does not depend on Government policy alone, it requires a joint commitment by enterprise, society and Government to promote innovation in every sphere of business and public service. As Minister of State responsible for innovation policy, I am determined to build a national innovation agenda for Ireland which will create a greater awareness of a demand for innovation throughout the economy. I will shortly publish a policy statement on innovation which will act as a guide to our approach in fostering innovation demand and an innovation culture in the economy and society. Current research already shows that our innovation levels are rising in terms of, for example, implementation of the strategy for science, technology and innovation, and we are heading firmly in the right direction in terms of meeting our Lisbon targets.

We have excellent entrepreneurship capabilities and support and are consistently performing in a top quartile in terms of rates of entrepreneurship. The development agencies provide essential business and other supports throughout the regions and will direct supports towards better exploitation of innovation, including eco-innovation and creativity, in both manufacturing and services.

We have consistently recognised the importance of building strength and capacity among indigenous firms. Consequently, we have helped those with high potential to upskill, invest in research and innovation and use the opportunities of globalisation to internationalise their operations. This does not include the focus on export markets alone, but covers technology acquisition, finding partners and other forms of international collaboration.

Effective networking is also important as a catalyst to change and innovation that is part and parcel of the approach to business supports by

our agencies, such as Enterprise Ireland. It also plays a key part in critical EU-funded programmes such as the seventh framework programme, or FP7, that is driving the research agenda across Europe and which will support our ambitious objectives to become a highly innovative and knowledge-driven economy.

I welcome the decision of the Minister, Deputy Cowen, to extend the research and development tax credits scheme for a further four years. This will encourage Irish business and research institutions to continue to build up the research and innovation base and progress towards the objective of the strategy for science, technology and innovation, namely, to put Ireland to the forefront in generating and using new knowledge for economic and social progress. I commend the budget to the House.

**Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy John McGuinness):** I commend the budget to the House. We have had a lengthy debate on what turned out to be a very prudent budget from the Minister, Deputy Cowen. It is a budget for its time and reflects what is needed for the economy as we approach a difficult period in 2008.

Deputy Kenny referred this morning to the public service and then attempted to drive a wedge between me and my party with regard to comments I had made.

**Deputy Tom Hayes:** Does the Deputy know something?

**Deputy John McGuinness:** I remind Deputy Kenny that my party is a broad church of thought and opinion, and that it has the internal flexibility to allowing the voicing of one's opinion, including on how one feels different Departments should be directed. His weasel words on my remarks did not work.

In his speech he showed no courage whatsoever with regard to putting forward a vision for this country and explaining where he believes either the Government or Opposition should be going. He said little or nothing of substance, yet he continued to chase lurid headlines and jump on bandwagons in an effort to gain some sort of notoriety for his party.

**Deputy Tom Hayes:** Deputy Kenny must have rattled the Minister of State, Deputy McGuinness, who seems to have listened to him.

**Deputy John McGuinness:** I listened carefully because I am not afraid to admit that some of his suggestions with regard to reform of the public service are absolutely necessary, and are similar to opinions I had voiced previously. However, he presented his opinion as if that opinion was only expressed by the Opposition, which is simply untrue. It has been expressed time and again by members of my party—

**Deputy Tom Hayes:** The issue is the Deputy's party is not doing anything.

**Deputy John McGuinness:** —and by Ministers, including the Minister for Finance. We all recognise that. It is a question of who is prepared to take the steps to bring about that reform.

**Deputy Tom Hayes:** They are not doing it.

**Deputy John McGuinness:** I say to Deputy Hayes and his party that my party is prepared to do it. Fianna Fáil and the Minister for Finance have indicated clearly the need for that reform. If all parties in this House were to recognise this and put action behind their words, they would support us in the effort to bring about the change that is necessary to create a dynamic public service that will deliver in this time of need.

This is not a criticism of public servants. It is, in fact, a liberation of those who serve in the public service. It gives them the opportunity to play a central role in the reform of this country. Together with the unions, the Opposition and the Government, we can bring about what is necessary in the context of delivering the policies and spend for this country that will make business prosper and give us a better quality of life.

Deputy Kenny referred to value for money, but he is not the first in the House to do so. It is an issue that has been taken up by the Committee of Public Accounts in the past five years, as Deputy Hayes will know. Considerable change has resulted from the work of that committee. Its members have highlighted the loss to the Government and the State which resulted from contracts not coming in on time, overspending on contracts and so on. Through the work of the committee, we have seen new contracts put in place and major roads infrastructure coming in on time and within budget.

We have also seen changes in the Department of Finance. No longer are the views of the committee simply expressed; they are minuted by the Department of Finance and a detailed, comprehensive response is received on the issues validly raised by the committee.

The Opposition should not be afraid to recognise the valuable work and achievements of the Committee of Public Accounts and the Government. That would take an Opposition which is not only there to oppose, but also to put forward policies and recognise where right is being done in the context of Government policy. In yesterday's debate, no reference was made by the Opposition to the 1,300 net jobs being created. What we had was a litany of misinformation and the misquotation of statistics, which were taken out of context and presented in a way designed to embarrass the Government.

**Deputy Bernard J. Durkan:** That would be disgraceful.

**Deputy John McGuinness:** Outside in the real world there is an acknowledgement of the success of Government policy in regard to, for example, the SME sector. Yet, on the other side of the House yesterday, there was nothing but criticism and no acknowledgement of the achievements of the Government and small businesses, which work to pay their taxes so they can be spent on projects designed for the betterment of the people.

**Deputy Bernard J. Durkan:** I hope the Government is not taking credit for that.

**Deputy John McGuinness:** It is a shame on the Opposition that it would not recognise what is happening and would criticise the constructive work that has been undertaken by the commercial sector in this country.

**Deputy Bernard J. Durkan:** We have moved from creating 75,000 jobs a year to creating 25,000.

**Deputy John McGuinness:** The Opposition criticised the constructive work being undertaken by the IDA and Enterprise Ireland, organisations which go to the coalface with Irish and foreign companies and impress on them the need to do more business in Ireland. Those organisations are successful in their efforts.

I have attended a number of trade missions since my appointment in July. I have worked with many small companies which supply software packages for security systems in world banks. Those small companies are represented in the context of the jobs they are creating at home. With Enterprise Ireland, they are doing a successful job for Ireland. However, there was no mention by the Opposition yesterday of the facts of the case, just distortion.

There was not one word from the members of the Opposition on the latest achievement of the IDA, namely, the investment of €200 million and the creation of 170 jobs at Merck Sharp & Dohme through the development of a 65-acre site in Carlow. They simply talked down the economy in an attempt to talk it into recession for cheap political gain.

**Deputy Bernard J. Durkan:** That is rubbish. The Government has been afraid to face reality for the past four years, which is why it is in this situation.

**Deputy Kieran O'Donnell:** The Government has mismanaged the economy.

**Deputy John McGuinness:** The members of the Opposition must learn from the facts of commerce. There is a clear story to be told but they did not tell it because they were afraid to do so.

**Deputy Bernard J. Durkan:** Nonsense. The only fear we know has been generated by the

[Deputy Bernard J. Durkan.]

Government, which made promises before the election it will not and cannot keep.

**Deputy John McGuinness:** They should have the courage to stand up and give support where it is necessary. They are afraid to do so because they are hurt by the facts. What they seem to forget is that the people know the truth; they know of the jobs we are creating and the tax they are paying, and they know they are successful, against the odds——

**Acting Chairman:** The Minister of State should address his remarks through the Chair.

**Deputy John McGuinness:** I am making my remarks. Those on the other side of the House refuse to listen to the truth and acknowledge what is happening out there. They do not understand that the people at the coalface——

**Deputy Bernard J. Durkan:** We do understand. We remember the Minister of State being out on the plinth criticising the Government not so long ago. Does he remember it?

**Deputy John McGuinness:** ——doing all of this business, are the ones who look at the House and tell us how foolish the Opposition look in the context of what is being achieved.

**Deputy Kieran O'Donnell:** Is the Minister of State claiming small businesses are not under pressure?

**Acting Chairman:** Please let the Minister of State continue.

**Deputy John McGuinness:** The Opposition refuses to listen to the truth or acknowledge what is going on. It does not understand that the people who are at the coalface, doing all this business——

**Deputy Bernard J. Durkan:** We understand it. We remember the Minister of State, not so long ago, out on the plinth criticising the Government.

**Deputy John McGuinness:** ——are the ones who come in here and tell us how foolish the Opposition looks, given what has been achieved.

**Deputy Kieran O'Donnell:** Is the Minister of State saying that small business is not under pressure?

**Deputy John McGuinness:** The sooner the Opposition starts to acknowledge all that, the sooner we will have better debate in this House. As regards value for money, what kind of example is Fine Gael setting when its Deputies seek electronic voting and then proceed to push everyone through the lobby?

**Deputy Bernard J. Durkan:** Nobody but a bunch of clowns would try to defend electronic voting.

**Deputy John McGuinness:** What example is Fine Gael giving concerning value for money when its Deputies bring ridiculous motions before the House and refuse to acknowledge the truth.

**Deputy Bernard J. Durkan:** I thought the Minister of State had a modicum of intelligence but I now know that he is trying to defend the indefensible.

**Deputy John McGuinness:** Fine Gael displays poor value for money, poor leadership and no vision whatsoever. The party's Deputies attempt to jump on every single bandwagon that is running.

**Deputy Bernard J. Durkan:** If his defence of electronic voting is like the rest of his speech, God help Ireland.

**Deputy John McGuinness:** The Deputy is the man who has most to say about everything, yet nothing to say about anything. I commend the budget to the House and I ask for a more constructive Opposition.

**Deputy Róisín Shortall:** I wish to share my time with Deputy Ó Caoláin.

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

**Deputy Róisín Shortall:** In the time available to me I wish to concentrate on the social welfare aspects of the budget. I assure the Minister of State that I will not take any of these facts out of context so maybe he will listen to what I have to say. His bombast seems to indicate that he thinks there are no problems. Yesterday's budget, however, is the latest in a litany of budgets that have completely ignored child poverty. I am referring to the poorest children whose parents depend on social welfare. Currently, the official recognition of such children's situation is the qualified child allowance, which amounts to €22 per week. Clearly, somebody in government came to the view that this payment was inadequate and that it needed to be increased. Having been static for many years, it was increased yesterday by the princely sum of €2 per week, bringing the qualified child allowance to a total of €24 per week.

Leaving aside child benefit, to which every child is entitled, the only social welfare payment available for children of adults who are dependent on social welfare is the qualified child allowance, amounting to €24 a week, or €3.43 per day. Will the Minister of State explain how on earth a parent can feed and clothe a child, as well as meeting all the other expenses, on €3.43 per day? That figure is an indictment of this Government.

It is a disgraceful response to the problem of child poverty.

The sum of €2, which is the cost of a sliced pan, truly represents crumbs from the rich man's table. I am genuinely concerned that there is failure to recognise the problem of child poverty at political or official level. We are a staggeringly unequal society. Some 96,000 children under the age of 14 are living in consistent poverty — that is, in a low-income household that is unable to afford adequate heat, clothing, substantial meals or other key basic necessities.

Child poverty is increasing. In addition, policy in this area is based on outdated research and perhaps proves that the whole area is over-researched. I would like any academic, social partner, civil servant or Cabinet Minister to show me the value of deliberately keeping the qualified child payment so low. What policy benefit can it possibly have? Has it stopped parents taking up employment? I do not think it has but, if so, where is the proof?

The reality is that one in nine children live in consistent poverty and it is undoubtedly related to this policy. The situation is far worse than those statistics suggest. The basic indicators do not include any measure of key indicators of poverty, such as lack of space to do homework, no washing facilities and foregoing medical visits. From now on the indicators will not even include debt problems, which should suit the Government nicely given that this area has been completely ignored in recent years.

Whatever measure one chooses, how can such a level of deprivation be acceptable, given the amount of State resources at the Government's disposal over the past ten years? I am not suggesting that income support is the only solution to the problem of child poverty but it is one of the principal ones. Welfare improvements for pensioners in recent budgets have shown what can happen when income maintenance measures are directed at specific groups. We should now place the same focus on children.

Budget 2008 has been found wanting on several other issues affecting children also. The rate of increase in child benefit in respect of the first two children is less than the current rate of inflation. The improvements in the back to school clothing and footwear allowance were paltry. They show a complete disregard for the costs faced by low-income families. Even within available resources, surely it would have been possible to match the qualifying criteria to that of the family income supplement. Is it any wonder that so many low-income children drop out of school early when such little support is available to them? Teenage children may eat like adults and the cost of clothing them is the same as clothing adults, yet a mere €3.43 is being provided per day. This puts pressure on teenage children in low-income families to leave school early to earn a living.

Paternity benefit was not mentioned in the Budget Statement despite promises to do some-

thing on that front. Like so many other promises in the programme for Government, it seems as if nothing will come of this proposal. The increase in the early child care supplement does nothing to make up for the fact that the boom is over and we have no State-funded preschool services.

Budget 2008 also fails to tackle the critical issue of refundable tax credits. This is a critical policy area in respect of taking low-income families out of poverty. It is an instrument that could be used to good effect, given our system of tax credits, but it has been ignored by the Government. The move to calculating income tax on a tax credit basis instead of a tax allowance basis has made no appreciable difference to workers. The standard rating of some tax credits could have been done quite easily under the old system. The Government has basically changed the method of calculating income tax rather than changing the calculation itself.

Without applying tax credits on a refundable basis, the move to tax credits has been largely meaningless. Without a refundable tax credit system, people outside the tax net, typically those on low wages in part-time, seasonal or term-time work, lose out on every euro in tax relief available to those inside the tax net.

Taking minimum wage earners and low-paid workers out of the tax net is not enough. Figures published last week show that 30% of all households at risk of poverty today are headed by a person with a job. The working poor need and deserve State assistance and the absence of a refundable tax credit system is preventing that from happening.

Tax credits are not the only elements of this budget that deserve our attention. Budget 2008 proves, for the few left who doubted it, that Fianna Fáil's 2007 election manifesto was a complete con job. Having had in its possession a detailed report on the social insurance fund, which clearly showed that the surplus was running out fast, it promised €645 million worth of cuts in PRSI rates and up to €2 billion worth of spending on contributory pensions. Those two promises simply could not be kept and, of course, they were not. What really should be happening on PRSI is tackling the poverty traps for low-paid workers. The Minister should be using some of the money gained from increasing the earning ceiling to introduce far better tapering arrangements for low earners, as suggested by the Combat Poverty Agency.

Budget 2008 represents another missed opportunity regarding supplementary pensions. This issue was not mentioned once in the budget, indicating an alarming lack of urgency on the Government's part. In spite of all the talk and hype about the pensions time-bomb, it is quite incredible that there was no reference at all to pensions in yesterday's Budget Statement. The Government published the Green Paper in October. Many of the issues raised in that paper warrant detailed consideration but there are

[Deputy Róisín Shortall.]

some issues that require urgent reform. Chief among these is the rich man-poor man approach to pensions policy, whereby the more one contributes to one's pension, the more the State gives one back.

The Government should have indicated clearly in the Budget Statement that, from next year, the pension tax relief system would be replaced with whatever is proposed at the end of the Green Paper process. Considering this budget is supposed to be concerned with securing our future, it is astonishing that pension provision does not deserve one mention.

Figures on RACs and PRSAs released to me in response to a recent Dáil question suggest there is a great pension divide. Of those earners who availed of tax deductions on their pensions in 2004, the top 17% took 64% of the tax relief available. The very highest earners gained 33 times more than those on average wages. On average, top earners reduced their tax bill in 2004 by more than €20,000, which is more than the value of two full State pensions. By contrast, the average worker reduced his tax bill by a mere €627. This system is completely unfair. It makes no sense in respect of either fiscal prudence or tax equity.

If the basic aim of pensions policy is to ensure that everyone has enough income during his retirement, why are we spending so much Exchequer funding on those who need it least? Current pension policy over-relies on tax relief. The Government should not be sponsoring a system that affords more help to a Michael O'Leary or a Sean Quinn than to the average taxpayer. Budget 2008 should have sent a clear signal that the system of tax relief would be replaced by much fairer arrangements. Unfortunately, it failed to do so.

Social welfare rates have generally been increased by €12 which, perhaps unsurprisingly, is only approximately half of the increase provided for in budget 2007. I cannot agree with the Government or the social partners that benchmarking the lowest social welfare rates to 30% of gross average industrial earnings is in any way sufficient. To do so is to suggest that €197.80 is enough to live on if one is single, suffers from a disability or is otherwise out of the workforce. It quite simply is not enough. In an Ireland in which grocery inflation rests at 4.4% and fuel costs are rising at a rate of 17% per annum, and in which the average electricity bill is approximately €150, it is simply not enough to expect one to survive on less than €200 per week. Could any of us in this Chamber really envisage being able to live on that sum?

I welcome the increase in the qualified adult allowance for pensioner spouses. This is an important issue and I acknowledge the generosity of the increase. However, the general increase in pension rates is much lower than expected. It seems the Government has ignored pleas from

groups representing the elderly to front-load the promised rate increase. If the increase were to be spread evenly over five years, it would amount to €18.14 this year. In other words, the Government has short-changed pensioners by more than €4 per week.

For the 14th year in a row, the living alone allowance has not been increased. Traditionally pitched at around 7% of the maximum State pension, it is now at less than half of this. If it had kept pace, the weekly payment would now be approximately €15.50, or roughly double the current rate. Claimants are effectively losing out on almost €8 per week in addition as a result of an unspoken, hidden Government policy. Almost 160,000 people receive the living alone allowance. Their costs are substantially higher than those for couples because the same heating, maintenance and electricity bills must be paid from one income instead of two. The Government has abandoned its policy in this regard by stealth and has abandoned the affected individuals in the process. It is long past time this issue was put back on the agenda.

In the programme for Government, Fianna Fáil and the Green Party promised to award the over-80s allowance to pensioner spouses. The cost of this is minuscule, and amounts to less than €3 million per year. However, the Government has failed to deliver on that promise in budget 2008. It is yet another broken promise.

The lack of progress in providing supports for lone parents is equally disappointing. The recent EU-SILC statistics show that one in three households in consistent poverty is a lone-parent household and that the level of poverty among this group is rising. Members of lone parent families have the highest deprivation levels, at almost 65%, and almost 41% of lone-parent households have experienced problems with debt.

While the Labour Party has some concerns about the Government's proposals on supporting lone parents, it supports their general thrust. We want to see activation measures for lone parents and a tougher line on maintenance payments. We also want key support services put in place so it will be possible for lone parents to move from welfare to work. To this end, there is a need for much-improved mentoring services involving key workers who would facilitate lone parents in their transition to training and education and in gaining employment. This latter area is particularly under-funded and nothing more than lip service is being paid to it at present.

Crucially, the Labour Party wants to see an end to the cohabitation rule. It makes no sense for the State to be actively encouraging parents to live apart. The Minister will be introducing a Bill in the Dáil next week to deal with budget changes and there is no reason he cannot tackle this issue in the process. Lone parents should be encouraged to move towards family formations that will be more supportive and helpful to their children. At present, ridiculous circumstances obtain

whereby parents are penalised financially through the tax and welfare system if they choose to live together or get married. I am concerned over the lack of progress regarding training and child care services. The Minister talks frequently about pilot programmes but it is over 18 months since the Government's proposals on supporting lone parents were published. It is not good enough that lone parents have had to wait so long and it seems they will have to wait until well into next year before any improvements are made.

Why does the Government continue to drag its heels regarding rent supplement? Government policy is to transfer claimants from the rent supplement scheme to the rental accommodation scheme, but there are already massive waiting lists for the latter scheme. Dublin City Council tells me 1,200 people are already waiting, while another 5,500 individuals may meet the eligibility criteria. Therefore, individuals will be stuck on rent supplement for quite a while. Some 33% of current claimants have claimed for longer than 18 months, so they are entitled. It is only the Government's foot-dragging that has prevented them from being taken out of the poverty trap in which they find themselves.

The situation of carers is only very marginally improved by this budget. Carers are still waiting for the great leap forward. The Government has already reneged on a commitment to publish a national carers' strategy by the end of this year. If carers truly were a priority for the Government and the Minister, then why has it not acted sooner?

*3 o'clock* The recent figures produced by the CSO highlighted a number of issues in regard to carers which are not currently being addressed by income maintenance policies or by services. I call on the Minister to introduce that promised strategy as soon as possible. I do not know whether any work has been done on it, but there is no sign of it being produced.

A number of carer issues have not been addressed, such as carers who care for two people and who continue to be discriminated against. The means test for the back to school allowance counts carers allowance as part of the qualifying material whereas FIS does not count in the same calculation. People who move to carers allowance are not awarded credits on that allowance.

The central message from this budget is that the poor must wait. As usual the poor will face the brunt of the downturn in the economy. I very much regret that during a time of plenty over the past ten years, the Government missed the opportunity to end poverty for good, particularly child poverty. It seems the poorest of the poor will pay the price for the Government's ineptitude.

**Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin:** Once again I record disappointment primarily at the failure of the Minister to include a number of essential measures in this budget, the 11th presented by

Fianna Fáil and the Progressive Democrats with the Green Party now added into the mix.

This budget is undoubtedly a bitter disappointment to those who were promised by this Government that more families would be entitled to the medical card. In the programme for Government, the Government parties promised to double the income limit eligibility for parents of children under six and treble it for parents of children with a disability. They have reneged on those commitments. To try to cover this broken promise, the Minister for Health and Children is supposed to be reviewing eligibility for the medical card. Why is a review needed to implement the commitment made in the programme for Government? If such a review is needed, why was the commitment made in the first place? The programme for Government promises first to index income thresholds for medical cards to increases in the average industrial wage; second, to double income limit eligibility for parents of children under six; and third, to treble the limit for parents of children with intellectual disability under 18. None of those things have been done. In fact, the medical card threshold is now lower than the lowest rate of social welfare. That is an inexplicable situation. Why it will take until next autumn to make a determination in regard to this area baffles me and many people across this State.

The Minister for Finance and the Minister for Health and Children did not need a further study to cost these commitments. In October 2005, the Minister for Health and Children was able to tell me in answer to a parliamentary question that it would cost €223 million to extend the medical card to everyone under 18. As a first step towards universal, single-tier health care, that has been Sinn Féin's demand for several years. However, guess which party demanded that in its 2007 pre-budget submission? It was demanded by the "add on" party, the Green Party. It called for the introduction of medical cards for all under 18s, rolled out to children of six years and under first. The symbol of the Green Party is a tree but sadly I note its policies are blowing away like autumn leaves.

Sinn Féin warned that the budget would contain hidden cuts and charges and we did not have long to wait to see that. The Minister for Finance was hardly off his feet before the Minister for Health and Children was over in Government Buildings announcing a package that will further penalise health service users. The 10% increase in hospital charges is disgraceful. The change in the drugs payment scheme will mean that non-medical card holders will have to pay more than €90, an increase from €85 per month, for medicines before benefiting under the scheme. Once again low to middle income families have been let down and are bearing the brunt of the inequity in our health services.

There is nothing in the budget to help create greater equity in health care and it does nothing

[Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin.]

to address the health crisis. The cap on the number of people employed in the public service remains. That cap hits the health services badly, especially in front-line care. There is no special additional allocation to phase in the 3,000 extra hospital beds required. There is no special allocation to provide additional single rooms and isolation units in our hospitals to combat the spread of MRSA and other virulent hospital-based infection.

The Minister for Finance left tax breaks for developers of private for-profit hospitals in place and the shameful co-location scheme will go ahead, funded by taxpayers' money and reinforcing the two-tier system. The Government claims that it will provide 1,000 public beds through the co-location scheme but it cannot, or will not, tell us how many per hospital. We know this figure is fiction anyway because many of the private patients it hopes to transfer to the co-located hospitals will not be suitable for transfer or for initial admission to private hospitals because those facilities will not be able to provide the full range of care they require.

The biggest percentage increases in health spending are interestingly enough 146% for inquiries, legal fees and settlements and 42% to the State Claims Agency for payouts in cases of clinical negligence. This reflects the crisis in our health services and its cost in monetary terms, let alone the massive human cost.

As my colleague, the Sinn Féin finance spokesperson, Deputy Arthur Morgan, said yesterday, this is a minimalist budget. The Government is hoping that successful lowering of public expectations will allow it to present this budget in a positive light but I warrant that the public will not be fooled. It is plain for all to see that this budget bares little or no relation to the promises made by Fianna Fáil in advance of the election. What has been given with one hand has been taken away with the other. It will make little difference to the vast majority of people struggling with increased costs of living.

While cutting taxes Fianna Fáil promised to increase spending. Sinn Féin argued that it simply could not be done. We pointed out that there was every reason to believe that the slowdown in the property and construction sector would result in a significant drop in the tax take. We highlighted the fact that this concern had been raised in the tax strategy papers presented to the Minister for Finance in advance of budget 2007.

This Government has a bad record of managing the public finances. It has a bad record of planning for the future needs of the people in terms of the increased capacity in public services that are needed and the revenue required to meet those demands. It has abdicated its responsibility to manage the economy and has allowed it to develop in an unsustainable manner.

There are many reasons to be disappointed by this budget, and it is not only in the area of health

care and child care needs. These include the increase in stealth charges; the failure to increase the qualifying adult social welfare rate to make it equal to 100% of the claimant's rate; the failure to increase the fuel allowance — all we have is a paltry increase of one week in the period for which fuel allowance is paid which is a shameful situation; the absence of a focus on retraining and up-skilling workers; the failure to introduce a cost of disability payment; and the failure to introduce a universal pre-school session of 3.5 hours per day, five days a week for all children in the year before they go to school.

There are many things in this budget that deserve to be criticised. What has been gained from the widening of the standard rate tax band, while welcome, will be lost again as stealth charges are increased. I have already alluded to the increased costs for health care access in terms of the drugs refund scheme and hospital accident and emergency attendance charges. Let us not forget that last night we saw the passing of a financial resolution that allowed for a 9.5% increase in motor tax for cars up to 2.5 litres and 11% for cars in excess of that. These are all stealth taxes hurting families struggling to make ends meet. It is shameful that these measures have been included.

Cash strapped local authorities will, inevitably, seek to increase service charges and fail to take estates in charge, leaving new residents with the additional burden of management charges. The Government seeks to give the impression that the budget will deliver on housing, but nothing could be further from the truth. We have no indication of the extent of the commitment in the 9,000 units promised as to what number will be direct build by local authorities and how much is dependent on Part V of the Planning and Development Act 2000.

The universally paltry increases in children's allowance and the early child care supplement do not go far enough for struggling families. The only way to solve the child care crisis is to build an accessible and affordable model akin to what is offered in many other European states, starting with free pre-school provision. That is an essential step and I commend it to the Minister for Finance in advance of next year's budget in the hope that he will yet realise the importance of this measure.

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Noel Dempsey):** With the permission of the House I will share my time with you, Acting Chairman, and Deputy Michael Kennedy.

This is my first budget as Minister for Transport and I am delighted to announce such favourable funding news for 2008. More than €3.8 billion is being provided to my Department, which will continue to deliver on the commitments made by the Government to further develop our transport infrastructure and services.

The funding being provided is unparalleled and the outlook is very positive for 2008.

Prior to this budget, the pre-budget outlook had already set the groundwork for maintaining existing levels of service in 2008. It had also provided for certain increases in funding, even prior to budget day. An additional €1.8 million was provided to the Medical Bureau of Road Safety to help meet an increased workload arising from the new mandatory alcohol testing. There was also an additional provision of €8 million for operational/unitary payments in respect of public private partnership road projects such as the M8 Rathcormac to Fermoy bypass and the N4 from Kilcock to Kinnegad. Increases were also included in the pre-budget outlook for CIE subvention, road maintenance and maritime transport and safety.

Budget 2008 provides for additional increases over the pre-budget Estimates of €599 million in current and €404 million in capital funding. These amounts reflect both the transfer of certain new functions to my Department from the Department of Environment, Heritage and Local Government and the honouring of previous commitments under our agreed capital envelopes.

In 2008, the main spending areas will be €1.3 billion for public transport, nearly €2.3 billion for national and non-national roads and almost €48 million to support maritime safety and the vital work of the Irish Coast Guard.

Of the €599 million increase in current funding, €565 million relates to the transfer of non-national roads functions and the associated provision from the local government fund. Some €12.7 million in current funding is being provided for vehicle and driver licensing expenses, another new function for my Department.

Budget 2008 provides an additional €20.7 million to the Road Safety Authority. Of this amount, more than €11 million is being provided towards the reduction of the driving test backlog. Following on from the recent changes to the driver licensing laws for learner drivers, the RSA and I have confirmed that all 122,000 applicants on the waiting list at the end of October 2007 will be tested by early March 2008 and that by the end of June 2008, all driving test applicants will be able to get a test on demand, that is, within ten weeks. This does not mean, obviously, there will be no waiting list at the end of June 2008. The increase in funding for the RSA will also provide an additional €5.9 million towards road safety promotion campaigns and programmes. The overall budget for the RSA in 2008 is almost €40 million, nearly double the provision in the pre-budget outlook.

The budget also provides for an increase over the pre-budget outlook of €74 million on national roads, bringing the total provision in 2008 to almost €1.6 billion. This will allow the pace and momentum already achieved in the national roads programme to continue. In particular, it will provide for the continued on-schedule deliv-

ery of the major inter-urban routes linking the country's main cities to Dublin, as well as important progress on other key national routes.

Progress will continue in 2008 on the inter-urban motorways, with the completion of the Kilbeggan to Athlone scheme on the N6 and the Carlow bypass on the N9. Further progress will be made on the N6 Galway to Ballinasloe scheme, the N7 from Nenagh to Limerick, the Limerick tunnel, the M7/M8 from Portlaoise to Culahill/Castletown, the N8 from Cashel to Mitchelstown and from Culahill to Cashel and the N9 from Waterford to Knocktopher. Today, more than 70% of major inter-urban routes are either open to traffic or at construction and all projects have completed statutory procedures.

On the M50, work will be completed on phases 1 and 3 of the upgrade project and work will advance on phase 2 during 2008. Barrier-free tolling will also be introduced in 2008. Other major schemes that will be brought to completion in 2008 will include the N4 Dromod to Rooskey scheme and the N51 Navan inner relief road. Work will continue on the M3 Clonee to North of Kells scheme and the N25 Waterford city bypass. The following schemes will commence in 2008: the N7 at Newlands Cross, the N7 from Castletown to Nenagh, the N8 from Mitchelstown to Fermoy, the N9 from Carlow to Knocktopher and the N9 from Kilcullen to Carlow.

Overall, the National Roads Authority is currently overseeing the construction of 23 major national roads projects, 21 of which are due to finish on or ahead of time. An example of the exceptional delivery now being achieved by the NRA is that of the five major road projects completed so far in 2007 all have come in on budget and on or ahead of time. For example, the N6 Tyrellspass to Kilbeggan scheme opened in May 2007 on budget and six months ahead of schedule.

Capital Exchequer funding of €53.8 million is being provided for the non-national road investment programme. This is only a small element of the State investment in non-national roads. In addition to Exchequer capital, almost €565 million will be provided from the Local Government Fund for the improvement and maintenance of the non-national roads network.

Budget 2008 provides almost €262 million in additional funding for public transport capital investment over the pre-budget outlook. This funding guarantees continued progress on expanding the Luas network. The extension of the existing tram fleet on the Tallaght line will be completed in mid 2008, bringing a 40% increase in passenger capacity per tram. Construction will continue on the Cherrywood and Docklands extensions. Construction may commence, subject to the grant of a railway order by An Bord Pleanála, on the Citywest extension and public consultation and planning work will continue on the planned Luas lines to Lucan, Liffey Junction and the Bray area. Planning and design work and the public private partnership process will con-



[Deputy Noel Dempsey.]

tinue on Metro North. An application for a railway order for the project will be made during 2008. Public consultation and design and planning work will continue on Metro West.

The transformation of the Iarnród Éireann network and services will continue. The Portlaoise train care depot will be completed and construction work will continue on the Kildare route project and on phase 1 of the western rail corridor. Main construction work will start on the Cork to Midleton rail line. The introduction into service of the 183 new intercity railcars will pick up pace in 2008 and will transform the intercity service. Planning and design work will continue on the Navan rail line and detailed design work will begin on the interconnector and associated electrification works.

Bus capacity will continue to be enhanced with the introduction of new buses and further bus priority measures through an expansion of the QBC network in Dublin and the introduction of new measures in other cities.

The budget also provides for a continuation of the regional airports capital investment programme to facilitate further progress on the roll-out of the €86 million multi-annual capital grant programme for these airports, which was approved by the Government under the Transport 21 framework. Total Transport 21 investment for 2008 will be more than €2.6 billion, which will ensure the programme will continue to be rolled out and that the transformation of our transport system will continue unabated.

As mentioned previously, the total allocation for the maritime safety sector in 2008 amounts to €48 million, comprising €8.8 million capital and €39 million current. This is a reflection of my commitment to modernise and develop the Irish Coast Guard and maritime administration. This will require a sustained effort within the Department of Transport over a number of years but my target is to ensure that we have a modern maritime administration on a sound legal footing and equipped to meet the needs of a 21st century maritime nation. In 2008, this will involve commencing the upgrade of our radio communications infrastructure and implementing the first phase of a Safe Seas Ireland project, which will meet our EU obligations in relation to vessel traffic monitoring and reporting. The Safe Seas Ireland project will provide a foundation for a single window for electronic delivery of services. The funding also underpins the emergency response capability provided by the Coast Guard helicopters and the national network of local volunteer units who work in close partnership with other agencies and services.

This continued level of heightened investment supported by the 2008 budget demonstrates our commitment to the ongoing transformation of our transport systems and services. The high quality transport network being developed under Transport 21 is contributing significantly to

national competitiveness, job creation and the achievement of more balanced regional development.

**Deputy Seán Ardagh:** I am delighted to contribute to the debate on the budget and on this financial resolution. This budget is a positive demonstration of the competence and management ability of the Government under the stewardship of the Taoiseach, Deputy Bertie Ahern, and the Tánaiste and Minister for Finance, Deputy Brian Cowen.

The world and his wife knows these are challenging times, particularly in areas of climate change, the cost of energy and interest rates, all of which are outside our immediate control, yet in a masterful and calming way the Minister has addressed these issues as well as the national economic and budgetary matters that affect us all. It is generally accepted that the 2008 Budget Statement is crafted in a masterful way as befits the reputation of the Tánaiste. It has been very well received by the majority of the population, mainly because it addresses so well the issues in the minds of citizens. The Tánaiste has previously said in debate not too long ago that the Government represents the citizens, not the vested interests. The 2008 budget is a financial plan as a result of which the country and its citizens will benefit, not only in 2008 but in the years ahead.

There is no doubt that the major item of discussion and importance in the budget is the fundamental change in the stamp duty regime on residential property. Looking at the various media reports on television and radio and in the press, there has been an excellent response from all the stakeholders, from the sellers and buyers of houses and from agents and financiers. I look forward to all these stakeholders engaging in a very active housing market that I hope will re-emerge in the not too distant future.

The elderly have been particularly well looked after again. The term “qualified adult allowance” is near the end of its useful life, and not before time. It is hoped that next year it will be gone and that every person — this applies in particular to women — will be entitled to their pension in their own right, not because they are the spouse of another person. People, men and women, will receive a pension because they are over the age of 65 years.

In regard to the budget, it has always been the mantra of the Government that we must maintain and sustain the economy to continue in the direction it is going and not do anything that would in any way put it off track. In regard to the changes in income tax this year, the Tánaiste, in ensuring that the various increases, the widening of the tax bands and the increase in personal credits are in line with inflation, has done what is required and necessary in this economy, particularly when there are items outside our control which could influence matters.

The Tánaiste has always shown particular care and concern for the disabled. In that regard the exemption for the incapacitated child, which has increased from €3,000 to €3,660 is welcome. In the area of interest rates, we have no direct ability to change or differentiate in regard to what is charged. That is now largely a matter for the European Central Bank. I am delighted that the Minister for Finance has substantially increased interest relief for first-time buyers by 25% from €8,000 to €10,000 for single people and from €16,000 to €20,000 for married people. It is not difficult to see the necessity for this, given that €20,000 is practically equivalent to €2,000 per month for a mortgage repayment in respect of interest alone, and that is not uncommon today.

The tax allowance in respect of rent paid by certain tenants has not been taken up to the extent it could be. More publicity is needed so that more people will take up the allowance they can get in respect of the rent they pay. The rent a room scheme is particularly attractive now in that the threshold has been increased from €7,500 to €10,000. I am particularly interested in publicising the rent a room scheme because in the constituency I represent, Dublin South Central, there are a number of areas where a significant number of elderly people live on their own in three or four bedroom houses with large gardens. Many of these people would benefit greatly by having a lone parent and their children or some other people living in the house with them. There is a possibility for the owner of a house to accrue rent of up to €10,000. Many people want to live on their own and have no desire to have other people living with them. However, for many senior citizens who are living alone there is an option that should be publicised, which could be made attractive. It could be suggested by both the HSE and citizens information centres to try to generate more housing of this type for people who need it and at the same time benefit senior citizens. I am also delighted that citizens information centres are getting more finance in this budget to enable them to give more information to citizens on an ongoing basis.

The question of VAT registration thresholds for small and medium enterprises has been increased by a very small amount, from €35,000 to €37,500 for services and €70,000 to €75,000 for supplies. In the UK the figure at the bottom level for supplies and for services is well in excess of €100,000. I cannot see why we do not have similar figures for that here.

There are two items I want to mention before I finish, one of which is the differentiation between non-contributory pension, contributory pension, disability payments and deserted wife's allowance. By 2017 we should aim to have one State payment of €400 for all these people, which would be sufficient to cover all their needs. This would reduce the bureaucracy in regard to State payments. We are moving towards a citizenry-type of republic and if a citizen earns income he

or she should pay towards that whereas if one does not earn an income one cannot do that. I am delighted to have contributed to this debate.

Debate adjourned.

## Ceisteanna — Questions.

### Priority Questions.

#### Air Services.

1. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Transport the further steps he will take beyond altering the Aer Lingus articles of association to protect Aer Lingus Heathrow links to Dublin and Cork Airports; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [33197/07]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Noel Dempsey):** Arrangements to safeguard Heathrow slots are built into the company's memorandum and articles of association of Aer Lingus. The effect of these arrangements, at present, is to provide for the possibility that any disposal of Heathrow slots by the company can be prevented by 30.2% of the votes cast at an extraordinary general meeting. Some 25.2% of the shares in the company are held by the Minister for Finance on behalf of the State and I understand that the ESOT holds 12.5% and Ryanair 29.3%. The remaining 33% of shares are held by various private bodies and financial institutions.

Also, under the memorandum and articles of association, the State is entitled to appoint three directors to the board of Aer Lingus. Currently, there is only one State-appointed director serving on the board and it is proposed that two further appointments be made in the near future. The State appointees will seek to ensure that all future decisions of the company that have implications for wider Government, aviation or regional development policies are considered and decided at board level. This will give the State appointees the opportunity to raise the public policy implications of each decision and to ensure the full commercial implications for the company are taken into account.

**Deputy Fergus O'Dowd:** The Minister's reply is inadequate, particularly given the fact that, on 7 October, he told *The Sunday Tribune* he would immediately appoint the directors. We are now in December. Is it not a fact that there have been vacancies for State nominees on the board since October 2006? It is a measure of the failure of this Government and of the Minister that he has failed to act.

The Minister did not respond to the specific question I asked, which was what further steps he would take. He said he was going to appoint directors with a new mandate. However, what

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mandate did his current board member have? The fact that two seats have been left vacant means the Minister did not use his mandate.

Everybody seemed to know about the transfer of slots from Shannon, such as the Civil Service, Dublin Airport Authority and Aer Lingus, except the Minister and his predecessor. Does that not represent a complete failure of the Government?

**Deputy Noel Dempsey:** As I said to the Deputy, the appointment of directors will be made in the near future. As I have told him previously, the question of whether the directors had been appointed would not have affected this decision. On the question of what further steps can be taken, that is the only one we can take. Some people seem to have great difficulty getting into their heads the fact that Aer Lingus is a private company, not a semi-State company controlled by the Government or the Department of Transport. It is what it is. The decision has been made and we are satisfied that the alteration to the articles of association to protect the Heathrow slots from disposal are robust. However, we cannot go any further than that.

**Deputy Fergus O'Dowd:** The articles of association state that if the Heathrow slot was sold or leased, for example, to British Midland, and was moved to Belfast the Minister would intervene, yet the same thing has happened with regard to the slot in Shannon. The primary purpose, as stated by the then Minister for Transport, Deputy Cullen, when he first proposed the sale of Aer Lingus, was to protect the national and regional interest. The Government has failed to do that.

The Secretary General of the Department of Transport said, in an article in the *Irish Independent* of 29 November, that the Government would be helpless if Aer Lingus moved more airport slots. Is that not an absolute admission of the failure of the Government, particularly given that Deputy Denis Naughten, the Fine Gael spokesperson on aviation, secured a commitment from the Minister to a White Paper on how the slots would be accounted for as part of the privatisation of the company?

**Deputy Noel Dempsey:** The holding of shares in a company does not give the holder the right to run the company on a day-to-day basis. The Government's shareholding does not confer any right to influence commercial operations in the company. It would, therefore, be totally inappropriate for a Government to intervene directly in the commercial decisions of the company. Aer Lingus must now operate in a very competitive environment and act in a commercial manner. The directors must ensure it does so and that is the reality we must face. There is no place to hide as regards competition in the aviation sector.

As I said previously, the reasons for launching the IPO are well known. It was a decision that

had to be made to ensure there was an Aer Lingus at the end of the day. I have no doubt that, in two or three years, the Deputy would be talking about the failure of Government policy on Aer Lingus if we had not injected the necessary capital to allow it to compete in the sector in the future.

### Driving Tests.

2. **Deputy Thomas P. Broughan** asked the Minister for Transport the number of people who have the new learner permits driving licences; the number who will have the new learner permits by 30 June 2008; the estimate of the number of people who will still have provisional driving licences after 30 June 2008; the number of citizens currently on the driving test waiting list; the way he will ensure the Road Safety Authority's guarantee of a driving test by 30 June 2008 for all provisional driving licence holders; his target for the number of driving tests to be carried out per week over the next eight months to clear the waiting list backlog; the number of provisional driving licence holders in total who will sit their driving test by 30 June 2008; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [33023/07]

5. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Transport the progress that has been made in testing those on their provisional licences before 30 June 2008 since his statement on 28 October 2007; the additional resources he has committed to reach his target; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [33200/07]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Noel Dempsey):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 2 and 5 together.

Responsibility for driver testing was transferred to the Road Safety Authority in September 2006, under the Road Safety Authority Act 2006 (Conferral of Functions) Order 2006. The arrangements for testing, numbers of candidates and licences are therefore a matter for that agency.

The new framework for the reform of the provisional licence system and for the changeover to a learner permit system, introduced by me in October, is the first step in a fundamental reform of arrangements for the formation and licensing of young drivers. This reform is a major element of the new road safety strategy and one which holds out the promise of a significant dividend in terms of reduced deaths and injuries in this most vulnerable category of young drivers.

Following the changes to the driver licensing laws for learner drivers which were introduced in October this year, both I and the RSA have confirmed that all 122,000 applicants on the waiting list at the end of that month will have been tested by early March 2008 and that by the end of June 2008 all applicants for a driving test will be able to get a test on demand, that is, within a ten-week

period. This does not mean there will be no waiting list at the end of June 2008.

I have also requested that the RSA ensure that all 120,000 people who were holders of second provisional licences at the time the changes were introduced in October will have been offered a test before the end of June 2008. As we know, from that time, these drivers will be required to be accompanied by a qualified driver, a requirement which applies to all other learner drivers in any event. The national vehicle and driver file, NVDF, section of my Department, based in Shannon, is directly assisting the RSA in this objective.

Since its establishment in September 2006, the RSA has introduced a number of measures to reduce driving test waiting times, including contracting SGS Limited to provide additional driving tests on its behalf. Over the last year or so, the average waiting time for a test has come down by about one third and the RSA continues to drive that waiting time down. Additional testers have been recruited by SGS Ireland, the first cohort of which have commenced training in recent days. A large number of applicants responded to the SGS recruitment campaign and SGS is confident it will find significant numbers suitable for rapid training and deployment. The RSA and SGS will ensure that these additional testers come on stream between now and next March. At that time, the capacity of the testing service in terms of numbers tested per week will have increased by approximately two thirds.

I confirm that the RSA has carefully examined the pattern of application and pass rates, and has taken into account the significant spike in applications which has occurred in recent weeks, but which is tailing off. Having considered all factors, the RSA continues to believe that the undertakings given will be honoured.

As regards the issue of resources, the amount of funding to be made available to the RSA in 2008 amounts to €39.8 million, which includes an additional amount of €11 million to help address the driving test waiting list in 2008.

**Deputy Thomas P. Broughan:** The RSA stated a few days ago that it would publish a guarantee that all second provisional licence holders would be given a test by 30 June but since then there has been no word or publication to that effect. I note that the Minister is shifting responsibility carefully, once again, on to the Road Safety Authority.

Yesterday, the Minister provided an additional €11 million in the budget, but the Budget Statement states, in the section on transport, that the target date of ten weeks will be achieved at the end of 2008. Therefore, there is a discrepancy between what the Minister told the House in his speech on the Financial Resolution a few minutes ago and what he told the House in response to this question.

Given the considerable public interest in this and that he is Minister for Transport, I do not see why he cannot give details of facts and figures on the numbers of testers and tests. Is it not still the case that around the country there is a significant backlog of waiting times for tests? For example, I note that in Athlone, Skibbereen and Raheny in my constituency, the waiting time is still 28 weeks. In Clifden, County Galway, people face an astonishing wait of 39 weeks for a test. In Wicklow town, the waiting time is 29 weeks. Is this not astonishing, five weeks after the Minister's incredible *faux pas* at the Hallowe'en break?

On the testing that has been carried out, there seems to be an incredible discrepancy between the percentage of applicants passed by testers of the Road Safety Authority and by testers of the contractor company, SGS. I understand SGS, for example, has an average pass rate of 62%, which ranges from 58% in Drogheda to 64% in Naas, 78% in Charleville and 81% and 84%, respectively, in Nenagh and Cahir, whereas the pass rate in the RSA centre in Carlow, for example, is only 42%. The Minister will be aware that the Comptroller and Auditor General drew attention to the regional discrepancy in testing a couple of years ago. Does this concern the Minister?

Mr. Bobby Dunphy, from the Leas-Cheann Comhairle's constituency, contacted the media last week about concerns relating to the standard of testing. Given that the number waiting for a test shot up to 158,000 and the number of provisional licence holders is approaching 500,000, can the Minister guarantee that everybody on a second or subsequent provisional driving licence who wants to do a test will have been tested by 30 June because that is the matter for which this House will hold him responsible?

**Deputy Noel Dempsey:** It would suit Deputy Broughan to hold me responsible for something which I did not promise but I am not going down that route with him.

**Deputy Thomas P. Broughan:** The Minister just made a promise.

**Deputy Noel Dempsey:** Neither am I shifting responsibility to the RSA. The RSA has had responsibility for this since it was set up.

On the question about facts and figures which Deputy Broughan requested, I do not make decisions about parliamentary questions, nor do I make the rules up in this regard. If Deputy Broughan wants those facts and figures, I found, even before I came into this job, that the RSA is more than obliging in providing as much information as possible to Members of this House and that is the route to go.

**Deputy Thomas P. Broughan:** This is Dáil Éireann.

**Deputy Noel Dempsey:** There are long waiting lists——

**Deputy Thomas P. Broughan:** On a point of information, the Labour Party had approximately seven questions ruled out and it is not acceptable to hear this kind of guff.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** If Deputy Broughan allows the Minister to conclude his reply, I will get an opportunity to call him again. The Minister, without interruption.

**Deputy Noel Dempsey:** We do not have a monopoly on guff here. If you give it, I will give it back to you, do not worry.

**Deputy Thomas P. Broughan:** The Minister started it.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** I would be obliged if the Minister would refer through the Chair and not engage with any individual Member.

**Deputy Noel Dempsey:** I would not engage in guff with the Chair.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** I thank the Minister.

**Deputy Noel Dempsey:** Deputy Broughan's final point about the waiting list is true and nobody has ever tried to deny it. The waiting lists in various areas are published. That is why we are strengthening the RSA. That is why we took in the contractors. The Department's testers within the system have responded magnificently to the commitments the RSA has put in place to deliver on these, and they have increased their output. I acknowledge that and I acknowledge the trade union for being so co-operative. My commitments, which I outlined in my answer to Deputy Broughan, are ones that we can stand over and no doubt the RSA and the testers will deliver on them.

**Deputy Fergus O'Dowd:** Recently, I received a report of tests being cancelled in Raheny where people, who had test appointments and were ready to go, were notified by telephone that no tester was available. There may be an issue with that.

I agree with Deputy Broughan. While the Minister has accepted this mammoth task of meeting his deadline of 30 June, at the same time a question to his Department has been disallowed in respect of the standards of testers and the pass rates. The Minister should be responsible for the efficiency and effectiveness of those tests and the differences that arise between the RSA testers and the SGS. I will give three examples. In Finglas and Fonthill in Dublin, where the RSA and the SGS tested approximately 5,000 applicants each, the pass rate is 18% higher with SGS,

which is a significant difference. In Limerick, where slightly fewer people were tested by SGS and 3,500 were tested by RSA, the difference in the pass rate is 19%. In Naas, where the RSA pass rate is 50%, the SGS pass rate is 14% higher. Allowing for the fact that there may be reasons that the SGS is getting applicants who would be longer on the list and longer waiting to get their tests initially, and who would therefore have had more driving experience, nevertheless, this variation is a matter of deep concern.

I spoke to the Road Safety Authority and I acknowledge that it is extremely helpful, but I am still concerned. I ask the Minister to discuss the matter with the RSA. There must be accountability to the Minister and, through him, to us on this testing issue. It may appear to some that a person going to the SGS rather than to the RSA has a much better chance of passing and that is not acceptable. We need the Minister to be accountable here for those issues.

**Deputy Noel Dempsey:** Constituents of mine have had tests cancelled. It happens occasionally. A driver tester may not know he or she requires sick leave until the last minute and people must be contacted. There are a variety of circumstances where a test must be cancelled. What Deputy O'Dowd outlined in the case of Raheny has happened in other test centres but it is not a general practice.

On the questions that have been disallowed, I wrote to a number of Deputies who raised this matter with me. From recollection and reading through written parliamentary questions, I thought the matter was allowed.

The matter was raised by me with the RSA, which replied stating that it is satisfied that there is no great discrepancy. When one looks at the overall pass figures around the country, there is no imbalance between them. If I understand correctly what the RSA stated, the SGS sample to date is a small one. The RSA will obviously keep the matter under review, as I will.

**Deputy Thomas P. Broughan:** I did not get a chance this morning to raise this with the Ceann Comhairle, but the Leas-Cheann Comhairle also has an intense interest in Dáil reform. Approximately seven questions on a variety of matters such as PPPs in transport were ruled out. These are matters one would think are this Minister's responsibility.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** If the Deputy sends them to my office, I will ensure the Ceann Comhairle receives them.

**Deputy Thomas P. Broughan:** Given that 40,000 people are on their fifth provisional licence, is the Minister sure that all those at the top end of the provisional licence scale will be in a position to undergo a test by 30 June and how emphatic is he about that deadline?

**Deputy Fergus O'Dowd:** I welcome the Minister's commitment to keep the testing rate, as between the RSA and SGS, under review. When he has a definitive response to it, will he circulate correspondence on it?

**Deputy Noel Dempsey:** We have confirmed that all 122,000 applicants who were on the waiting list at the end of October, when we made the changes, will have been tested by early March 2008, presuming they all turn up. They have been offered a driving test, to be completed by March 2008. All applicants for a test will be able to get a test on demand — that is, within a ten-week period — by the end of June 2008.

**Deputy Thomas P. Broughan:** How many tests will be held each week at that stage?

**Deputy Noel Dempsey:** Approximately 10,000 tests will be held each week at that stage.

### Public Transport.

3. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Transport his views on the future of the Government subvention to CIE and in particular to Dublin Bus; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [33198/07]

**Deputy Noel Dempsey:** The 2008 Estimates provide for an Exchequer subvention to CIE of €313.4 million, including €81.8 million for Dublin Bus. This provision represents an increase of nearly 65% on the 2000 provision of €190.183 million. This growth in the annual compensation paid to CIE towards the operating costs of its public service obligation services has been complemented by a major increase in capital investment, including an investment of more than €460 million this year in railway network upgrades, new rolling stock, the commencement of work on the western rail corridor and the Kildare route and the purchase of new buses for Dublin Bus and Bus Éireann. Therefore, it is clear that the Government has been and remains committed to maintaining a high level of capital and current investment in the upgrading and operating of public transport infrastructure and services.

It will continue to support strongly the provision by CIE of bus services in the Dublin area through Dublin Bus, as well as a comprehensive network of other public transport services. I am reviewing the arrangements for the provision of the subvention to CIE to take account of the recently adopted EU regulation on public service obligations.

**Deputy Fergus O'Dowd:** The Supplementary Estimate for the Department of Transport, which was announced yesterday, revealed that there was an under-expenditure — a return to the Exchequer — of €55 million this year. The Government has failed to spend that money, which it intended to invest in public transport. It

could have used the €55 million to put 196 additional buses on the streets of Dublin and our other cities and towns. It is unacceptable for the Minister to suggest he is doing the best possible job for consumers. Perhaps we should reform the 1932 Act, in line with many of the commentaries of the Minister and his predecessors, to provide for more effective decision-making on public transport. Can the Minister give his views on opening the market and increasing competition? Such measures would give consumers more choice and lead to better buses and cheaper fares.

**Deputy Noel Dempsey:** The relevant figure for public transport is €58 million. As the Deputy is aware, a ten-year envelope for transport projects, including public transport projects and roads projects, is provided for under Transport 21. The €58 million that was not spent has not been lost to Transport 21, as arrangements are in place to ensure it can be spent at a later time. It was not spent this year because of delays associated with railway orders and consultation on public projects. It was anticipated that land would be bought to facilitate the development of certain public transport projects, but that did not happen as a result of delays in the planning process. I assure the Deputy that this money has not been lost to public transport. There would not be much point in providing 196 extra buses in the absence of additional bus drivers to drive them.

A number of the buses provided under Transport 21 are in operation, in line with the requests made to the Department. Some 100 buses have been replaced with new buses, all of which will be brought into operation when the recruitment process for drivers has been completed. I reiterate my previous statements about the 1932 Act, which is in need of reform, as Deputy O'Dowd said. I will concentrate initially on producing the Dublin Transportation Authority Bill, which will affect public transport services in the greater Dublin area. I will transfer my attention to amending the 1932 Act as soon as the DTA Bill has been published and is being discussed in the House.

**Deputy Fergus O'Dowd:** A sum of €55 million was not spent. The Minister is announcing extra public transport funding even though he did not spend the money he was given this time last year. That is the point I am making. Some 196 buses could be provided from this year's under-spending. Perhaps it could be used to invest in other quality indicators relating to bus services, such as the development of competition in the market. The Minister did not address that issue when I raised it. These funds could be used to pay for better service indicators, such as real-time information. The Minister could invest this money in improving the quality of service. He could do a great deal with this money. Deputies on both sides of the House who live just outside Dublin have made the case for park and ride facilities —

[Deputy Fergus O'Dowd.]

no such facilities are available as things stand. The Minister has not provided for integrated ticketing. The Government's public transport policy is a failure. The Minister cannot deny that he had to give back €55 million.

**Deputy Noel Dempsey:** It might have suited the Deputy to repeat the incorrect statement he made earlier. I suppose I will repeat the answer I gave then. There are very good reasons the €58 million was not spent. One does not lash money around for the sake of it. It would be wrong to spend this money on 196 buses because they could not be brought into operation this year or next year in the absence of drivers.

**Deputy Fergus O'Dowd:** What about competition?

**Deputy Thomas P. Broughan:** What about the money being spent on the West Link Bridge?

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** We have gone over time on this question.

**Deputy Fergus O'Dowd:** The Minister is avoiding answering my question about competition.

**Deputy Noel Dempsey:** On the quality of services, there is a memorandum of understanding between the Department and CIE. The integrated ticketing project is proceeding apace. There would be no point in spending the €58 million on that project, given that its total final cost will be €49 million. It would be rather silly to spend money on a project that does not need money at this point in time.

**Deputy Fergus O'Dowd:** The Minister did not spend the money on anything.

**Deputy Noel Dempsey:** The money is safe.

**Deputy Fergus O'Dowd:** The Minister has failed.

**Deputy Noel Dempsey:** The envelope that is available under Transport 21 will be used during the window for that project, which lasts until 2015.

**Deputy Fergus O'Dowd:** I give the Minister nought out of ten.

**Deputy Noel Dempsey:** It is not lost.

#### Road Safety.

4. **Deputy Shane McEntee** asked the Minister for Transport the reason for the delay in receiving a new legal blood alcohol recommendation as the revised target time differs from what was announced by his Department at the road safety strategy launch; his plans to introduce new legislation to provide for a new legal blood alcohol

level; the role his Department had in setting up the committee to recommend a new blood alcohol level; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [33199/07]

**Deputy Noel Dempsey:** The Road Safety Strategy 2007-2012 identifies the need to legislate for and introduce a reduction in the legal blood alcohol level content for drivers, but it does not specify what the level should be. I am awaiting the advice of the Road Safety Authority on the matter. I am aware that the authority has sought the advice of its policy advisory panel and expects that recommendations will be made to its board in early 2008.

The advisory panel, details of which are published in the road safety strategy, was independently established by the Road Safety Authority. The panel will take into account known driver behaviour, past offending rates, analysis of Medical Bureau of Road Safety data, enforcement practicality and best international practice. Its advice on the most appropriate blood alcohol content level will be aimed at delivering the optimum road safety dividend. The target completion date in the strategy for the reduction in the legal blood alcohol content level is the second quarter of 2009, to allow for the enactment of legislation and the adaptation of enforcement technology. As I mentioned at the launch of the new strategy, I intend to complete the implementation of this measure earlier than 2009, if possible.

**Deputy Shane McEntee:** I wish the Minister well with his allocations under the Vote of the Department of Transport. It will be money well spent, regardless of whether it has to be borrowed, if it leads to safer road and rail facilities. I wish the Minister well — the M3 will be finished shortly, please God, which might bring many of the campaigns against it to an end. I do not doubt that I will meet the Minister at tomorrow's meeting with the road safety officer for in County Meath, Mr. Michael Finnegan. Perhaps every county should have a road safety officer, and the Minister might look at that. When I contacted Mr. Tom Dowling about appointing such an officer in County Meath, he had the ball rolling within three weeks. The Minister and I know that Mr. Finnegan is probably the best road safety officer in the country. It all leads to the one thing at the end of the day.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** It is Question Time.

**Deputy Shane McEntee:** I know it is, but it is Question Time in respect of safer roads.

**Deputy Thomas P. Broughan:** It sounds like Meath County Council.

**Deputy Shane McEntee:** I want to get to the point. Sometimes, I am a bit slow in doing so.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Unfortunately, the time is ticking.

**Deputy Shane McEntee:** In respect of our question, I am a bit like a dog with a bone, as the Minister knows. If I had not seen the recommendation that the blood alcohol limit be lowered from 80 mg to 50 mg given to the Government in a document on 17 May 2007 by the Road Safety Authority, only to find it omitted when we went into our briefing, I would not be that dog with a bone.

It is in everyone's interest. The Minister and everyone here knows that if the level is reduced from 80 mg to 50 mg, we will reduce road deaths by 20%. By delaying it until 2009, 120 people will die on our roads.

As road safety spokesperson for Fine Gael, I have said that I will never play politics with my position but somebody has played politics with that position on the Minister's side. We got the gist of it on the day of our briefing when we were told about the effects it would have on rural life. Why was this not implemented on the same day as something that could not have been implemented? Now it will be implemented after the local elections in 2009. It could have been done based on the recommendations of 17 May. Why was that not done? It is terrible and it makes a mockery of the Road Safety Authority and the whole idea of saving lives. Only two other countries have not reduced the limit from 80 mg to 50 mg. It is not in my or any other rural Deputy's interest to say this but our young people have said it quite clearly in the poll that was carried out. Young people want it so why did the Minister not act on the recommendations of the Road Safety Authority?

**Deputy Noel Dempsey:** The only recommendations on this matter I received from the Road Safety Authority were contained in the road safety strategy published at the end of October. The Deputy is referring to a draft document that was for discussion and part of a series of discussions that took place in respect of all the road safety strategies and all the 126 recommendations.

I was not and am not privy to what happened with the Road Safety Authority in those discussions. However, I presume, as I said before in the House, that a number of drafts on a number of different issues were brought up initially, discussed and then decided upon at a later stage. The Road Safety Authority advised me that it wanted a bit more time and expertise to decide the optimum level to which this should be reduced.

These are sensitive areas for some people. Some people will say that they are in favour of reducing limits and forcing drivers on a second provisional licence to be accompanied by another driver until one actually does it. I am not referring to the Deputy, who has been very strong in

this regard, but some people take that attitude. One of the remarkable things about road safety is that everybody believes it is the actions of the other person that cause the problem rather than their own actions. This is externalisation.

As soon as I get that report — we will probably even discuss it at the committee with the Road Safety Authority because we said we would do that on a quarterly basis or thereabouts — we will bring it forward and legislation will have to be put in place. It is not my desire to delay it and the quicker we can get it done, the better.

*Question No. 5 answered with Question No. 2*

### Other Questions.

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#### Aviation Regulation.

6. **Deputy Emmet Stagg** asked the Minister for Transport if he plans to reform the Commission for Aviation Regulation; the changes he is considering for the Commission for Aviation Regulation; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32802/07]

**Deputy Noel Dempsey:** EU legislation relating to air navigation services, known as the Single European Sky, SES, legislation, requires that there be functional separation of the activities of air navigation service provision and regulatory oversight of those services. This requirement for functional separation has been implemented by the Irish Aviation Authority.

However, in implementing SES legislation, most EU member states have provided for institutional separation of air traffic management service provision and regulatory functions. Ireland is currently one of only four member states not to effect full institutional separation.

My Department is reviewing whether changes are necessary in the Irish context. As part of the ongoing review, the possibility of incorporating the Commission for Aviation Regulation, CAR, into a new regulatory structure is under consideration. In addition, as the regulatory framework for all civil aviation in the EU develops, the role of the Commission for Aviation Regulation will be kept under ongoing review.

**Deputy Thomas P. Broughan:** This question was prompted by the fact that the chief executive of Ryanair, Michael O'Leary, has said that the budget of CAR should be slashed and its staff numbers cut by half. Does the Minister agree with this view? Alternatively, is it the case that additional resources should be given to CAR? I understand that something like one half of its staff are busy with various lawsuits emanating, in particular, from Ryanair. How does the Minister view its current operational level?

Is the Minister concerned that recent statistics show that Irish airlines are the most complained



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about airlines in Europe, accounting for one quarter of all passenger complaints in the EU, with 70% of those, in effect, relating to Ryanair? Does the Minister welcome the fact that Cathal Guiomard, the Commissioner for Aviation Regulation, published an interesting advertisement in national newspapers today which has the heading "Air passengers have rights" and which shows the rights to which air passengers are entitled, such as sustenance and accommodation where there are overnight delays on flights? Does he welcome the fact that the commissioner has now issued 53 final warnings to carriers flying out of Irish airports to ensure that passengers receive their full rights?

**Deputy Noel Dempsey:** I, of course, welcome any action taken by the regulator to ensure that airline customers get the kind of service they should receive. If I thought the regulator's office was overstaffed or overpaid, I would do something about it. I have no plans to do that. As I said in the body of the answer I gave, we are looking at whether we should continue with the current situation where safety and regulation are kept together. We are one of four countries where this pertains. Most other countries have gone for the full separation. If that arises, obviously, there might be some need for rearranging or reorganisation but that would be done in that kind of context. I am sufficiently satisfied that the commissioner needs the staff he has and that he is doing a good job.

**Deputy Thomas P. Broughan:** In respect of the budget, did the Minister put in any additional resources? My final point may touch on another question.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** I would rather the Deputy did not make that point.

**Deputy Thomas P. Broughan:** Did the Minister give any additional resources to CAR, taking into account inflation, in the budget?

**Deputy Noel Dempsey:** I gave no resources other than resources for ELS. There have been discussions in recent years and the number of staff has gradually increased, as Mr. O'Leary has noticed. It is at about optimum level. Obviously, if more responsibilities were given to it, we would have to review that. If changes were made and some functions were taken away, one might give it other ones. I am satisfied that it has sufficient staff to look after the area.

### Light Rail Project.

7. **Deputy Jan O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Transport his views on proposals for the development of a light rail system for Limerick city; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32798/07]

48. **Deputy Deirdre Clune** asked the Minister for Transport the steps he has taken or intends to take to conduct a feasibility study into developing a Luas style light rail transit system for Cork and other cities outside Dublin and a timetable for same; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [30363/07]

**Deputy Noel Dempsey:** I propose to take Questions Nos. 7 and 48 together.

My Department has agreed with Limerick local authorities that the terms of reference for the proposed Limerick planning, land use and transportation study will include an examination of the feasibility of introducing light rail transit and-or bus rapid transit. I understand that Limerick local authorities hope to engage consultants by the end of April 2008 to work on this study.

The Cork local authorities have, in recent weeks, commissioned consultants to update the Cork area strategic plan. At the request of my Department, the terms of reference for this update include a requirement that the review of the transportation strategies should include consideration of the feasibility of introducing light rail transit or bus rapid transit.

My Department is in discussion with the local authorities in Galway and Waterford about arrangements for studies, similar to those for Cork and Limerick, to be carried out in their areas. I raised the matter with Galway City Council recently.

**Deputy Thomas P. Broughan:** I warmly welcome the Minister's reply. Has he seen the proposals for Limerick published in the *Irish Examiner*? This proposed a line from Raheen through Castletroy and Cahirdavin, linking to UL. Is that the approach we could pursue in Limerick and Cork, where the Green Party made a commitment to a Cork Luas before the election?

I was shocked to receive a circular from the track and signalling reports of Iarnród Éireann. The report, WC 3270 of 11 November 2007, states that signalling on the Limerick to Foynes line was to be cut forever. If it was to be reconnected it would cost €2 million to €3 million. Is the decision to disconnect the Limerick-Foynes rail link from the national network totally opposed to policy in respect of Transport 21?

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** The Deputy is going outside the question.

**Deputy Thomas P. Broughan:** It is the same thing because this line could be part of the Limerick regional system. It is an astonishing decision in light of the Minister's comments on encouraging rail freight.

**Deputy Noel Dempsey:** The Department has agreed with the Limerick local authorities that the terms of reference of the land use and transportation study will include this study on light rail

transit and rapid bus transit. Not much progress has been made on priority or quality bus corridors. The council is willing but the public is not responding. Much work remains to be done.

I have not examined the detail of the proposal but I am committed to seeing these studies finished and action happening. In anticipation of an increase in population the area strategic plan of Cork is being updated and will be completed by July 2008. That will give Cork an opportunity for new public transport systems.

I was impressed with Galway because the local authorities have a clear idea of where to go. We referred previously to the bus strategy. A dedicated unit has been set up to make progress on the issue and is part financed by my Department. I asked officials in my Department to invite the four managers to my Department to let them know my commitment to this issue.

**Deputy Fergus O'Dowd:** I welcome the commitment and determination of the Minister, local authorities and statutory bodies to provide adequate public transport systems outside the city of Dublin. The footprint of cities such as Cork and Limerick has changed, with fewer people living in the cities and more living on the outskirts. We need a proper transit policy. I welcome Deputy Clune's question and the response.

I received the same e-mail as Deputy Broughan from the United Kingdom. I checked it out and discovered there has not been a train to Foynes in 20 years. The matter did not have the urgency I thought it did.

We need a proper public transport policy in our cities. Everyone must work together. The Minister suggested the public does not want it but this may change when people see the effectiveness and cost comparisons. Quality bus corridors and public transport are the only way forward in view of carbon emissions from cars.

**Deputy Noel Dempsey:** I agree with Deputy O'Dowd. There is a focus on these four cities because they are cities and because of commitments in the programme for Government. I encourage as many local authorities as possible, in places such as Drogheda, Dundalk and Navan, to consider these opportunities. The scenario has changed fundamentally. The footprint of Cork city, to which Deputy O'Dowd referred, is replicated across the country. The public transport providers, from management to drivers, must come to terms with this and become more flexible in how they provide services to customers.

**Deputy Thomas P. Broughan:** I accept that Foynes was on a care and maintenance contract. I have had this discussion about rail freight several times since representing the Labour Party in this portfolio. When Todd Andrews slashed the rail system, major elements of the programme were crazy. We are the posterity that must redo what he destroyed. Should the Minister not ask the

chief executive, Dick Fearn, and Dr. John Lynch what they are up to in removing a link that could have been reactivated?

**Deputy Noel Dempsey:** I will raise the matter. I did not mean to ignore the question. I will not discuss the decision but, more generally, policy on rail freight is a matter I will raise.

**Deputy Fergus O'Dowd:** I agree with the Minister's point on examining other cities and towns. In Drogheda, where I live, the main street has been pedestrianised. People must realise that we can no longer bring cars into the centres of cities and towns. A few years ago in San Francisco I noted that no planning permission is granted for buildings with car parking provided. Instead, a contribution is made towards public transport. That city has an effective underground system. We must forget about cars. Strategically located car parks around town centres, which should be tax incentivised, would make a big difference.

**Deputy Noel Dempsey:** I agree.

#### Airport Development Projects.

8. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Transport his plans for the operation of terminal 2 in Dublin Airport; if the operation of this terminal will be put out to tender; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32938/07]

**Deputy Noel Dempsey:** The Government decision of May 2005 on the aviation action plan envisaged a tender process being held in relation to the operation of the second terminal at Dublin airport. Now that the planning issues relating to the terminal have been settled and construction has started, I anticipate that the design and running of an appropriate tender process will proceed next year. The tender process will have to be structured so as to ensure the schedule for the opening of terminal 2 is adhered to.

**Deputy Fergus O'Dowd:** This is an issue raised by the Commission for Aviation Regulation in its submission to the Department. The terminal will carry 15 million passengers per year and, including the associated works, will cost over €600 million. It will be a unique location, one of two in Europe where one can clear US customs. It is important that it is run effectively, whether by a designated air carrier or a private consortium linked to transport carriers. It is important the Minister provides us with a timetable for the process. When will he advertise for tenders for the project?

**Deputy Noel Dempsey:** Drafting of the tender documents is already under way. It is intended that this documentation will be finalised by the first quarter of 2008. The procedure should take approximately 12 months. The first part of 2008 will largely be taken up with the design of the

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tender process and various other procedures that have to take place, including notifications to the Official Journal of the European Union, and so on.

The question raised by the Deputy is also a matter of concern for me. T2 is scheduled to be operational in early 2010. The tender process is being geared towards ensuring that this will not be held up by a delay in appointing the operator.

**Deputy Thomas P. Broughan:** The Commissioner for Aviation Regulation, Cathal Guimard, stated that airport charges are likely to rise by 22% between 2010 and 2014 to pay for T2. Does the Minister expect that this will happen and will these increases be similar to those that occurred recently in respect of long-stay charges? When T2 is operational, will there be any excess capacity? Has the Department considered what will be the ultimate size of the development? The authorities at Heathrow have stated that its passenger numbers will increase to 100 million from 67 million. The numbers travelling through Dublin Airport are rapidly heading towards 30 million. Has any long-term thinking been done in respect of this matter?

**Deputy Noel Dempsey:** The Commissioner for Aviation Regulation has not made a decision in respect of charges post-2010. He has indicated that the T2 project will have some impact but it would not be right for me to second guess him. The commissioner's aim is to ensure that the airport can operate in the most economically efficient manner possible. He also has a role and a remit in the context of protecting consumers. On the one hand, the airlines have stated that the increases he is giving are too high while, on the other, there are those who say the needs of consumers are not being adequately considered. The truth probably lies somewhere in between. One can never win when one is a regulator.

I am informed that the Deputy's figures in respect of capacity — namely, that passenger numbers at the airport are heading towards 30 million — are not incorrect. The airport is being developed in such a way as to allow it to cater for this number of people by 2015 or thereabouts. The total capacity should be approximately 33 million. As we near that, and even with second runways, and so on, it would be necessary to query how much more capacity could be added. The latter will be considered as part of a process that will be entered into at that point. The capacity being provided will be sufficient for the short to medium term and there are those who would say that it will also probably be adequate for the longer term.

The Deputy also referred to excess capacity. It would be reasonable to ask what constitutes excess capacity. If we complete the various envisaged projects and five or ten years' worth of spare capacity is created, we must ask if this is this

excess capacity or is it merely planning for the future. The debate and arguments in respect of this matter have been ongoing for some time. I tend to favour the view that infrastructure should be provided, to the greatest extent possible, in anticipation and without wasting taxpayers' money.

### Public Transport.

9. **Deputy Deirdre Clune** asked the Minister for Transport the number of buses he will provide to the Cork area under Transport 21; the number of those that are replacing old buses; the number that will be extra buses over the current level; the timetable for their delivery; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [30362/07]

**Deputy Noel Dempsey:** My Department approved total funding of €73 million — in September 2006 and April 2007 — towards the purchase of 235 new buses by Bus Éireann. I understand that Bus Éireann is in the process of taking delivery of the new buses on a phased basis. The deployment of buses, including the new vehicles, is a matter for Bus Éireann and I have no function in the matter.

**Deputy Fergus O'Dowd:** Will the Minister indicate how many of these are completely new buses not meant to replace older vehicles?

**Deputy Noel Dempsey:** I understand that of the 235 buses, 166 are replacement vehicles and 69 are new. A total of 117 are expected to be delivered by the end of December. The balance will be delivered early in 2008.

### State Airports.

10. **Deputy Frank Feighan** asked the Minister for Transport the progress to date in the restructuring of the State airports; the date he foresees independent Cork and Shannon Airports; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32906/07]

54. **Deputy Tom Hayes** asked the Minister for Transport his views on the future of Cork Airport and the management of its debt; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32930/07]

68. **Deputy Emmet Stagg** asked the Minister for Transport when Cork and Shannon Airports will become fully independent; the issues that have still to be resolved in statutorily separating Cork and Shannon Airports from the DAA; the position on the burden of debt on Cork Airport; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32801/07]

**Deputy Noel Dempsey:** I propose to take Questions Nos. 10, 54 and 68 together.

The State Airports Act 2004 provides the framework for the establishment of Shannon and

Cork as independent airports. Under the Act, both the Minister for Finance and I must be satisfied as to the state of operational and financial readiness of the three airports before any vesting of assets can take place.

The timing of airport restructuring will depend on creation of the appropriate conditions that will ensure the financial sustainability of each of the three State airports. The restructuring process will require coordinated strategies to achieve the operational and financial readiness of each airport. In this regard, the Dublin Airport Authority, DAA, has a key role to play in finalising the financial framework and co-ordinating the individual business plans for the three airports that will enable separation to take place.

The Shannon Airport Authority, SAA, recently submitted its draft business plan to the DAA and I understand that discussions have commenced between the DAA and the SAA on the content of the plan. In parallel with this process, I expect a similar engagement to occur between the Cork Airport Authority, CAA, and the DAA relating to the Cork Airport business plan, a draft of which was submitted to the DAA in recent days.

The debt issue is clearly crucial to the Cork business planning process and there will have to be agreement on this point between the Cork Airport Authority and the Dublin Airport Authority before the Cork business plan can be completed and submitted to the Minister for Finance and me. The Government's position is that the funding of the new terminal and other works at Cork Airport will have to take account not only of what is commercially and financially feasible for Cork Airport, but of what is commercially and financially feasible for the Dublin Airport Authority.

Subject to satisfactory progress being made on the plans, I await the DAA's overall considered views on airport separation to enable the plans to be examined by the Minister for Finance and me. Only then will I be in a position to consider the timing and sequencing for the restructuring of the three State airports.

**Deputy Fergus O'Dowd:** The independence of the State airports is a serious issue, particularly as it relates to their future financial viability. The critical issue that arose in respect of the Shannon slots and the role of the Dublin Airport Authority in not informing its subsidiary, Shannon Airport, as to what was happening has raised serious questions regarding the future of the region. If the Shannon Airport Authority had been independent, I presume the Minister's Department would have contacted it and alerted it to the significant changes that would result from the decision made by Aer Lingus.

The State Airports Act has been in place for three years. That is a long period for this matter to have dragged on. That Shannon Airport is not independent has brought about serious reper-

cussions for it in the context of the Aer Lingus decision. It is unforgivable and unacceptable that the Dublin Airport Authority did not inform Shannon as to the nature of that decision.

It is intended that these airports will compete for new business, particularly in the context of the open skies policy, in the future. The Shannon region is believed to be under significant threat unless a viable business plan is brought forward in respect of its airport. In addition, everyone, including the Government, must row in and draw up a new overall plan in respect of Shannon and Cork.

It was announced in budget that funding for regional airports will increase by approximately €20 million. Is any of that money meant for either Shannon or Cork? I accept that neither of them might be perceived as regional airports.

**Deputy Noel Dempsey:** The amount in the budget for regional airports does not apply to Shannon and Cork Airports, which are State airports. The Shannon Airport Authority has submitted its plan and the Government could do nothing about restructuring until it was submitted. Discussions have taken place between the SAA and the DAA, with progress being made. If agreement is reached, the DAA will make a submission to the Government and the Minister for Finance and I will consider it. We will make a decision without undue delay. The same procedure applies to Cork. The CAA has to submit its business plan, which I think has been done. The DAA will then have a look at it.

There are two quite distinct issues involved for these airports. Shannon Airport is as it was, but there has been substantial investment in Cork in the past few years. Without taking the land into account, the assets there are valued at €360 million and the discussion has been about the wish of the CAA to be debt free. From the point of view of the DAA, there are huge investments that must be made in Dublin and it cannot agree to a plan which affects its financial status and business borrowing. The DAA must provide the facilities at Dublin Airport. I hope that both sides can come up with an agreement.

**Deputy Thomas P. Broughan:** Is it not the case that the board of Cork Airport has submitted a plan that would include carrying a debt of €60 million? Some board members are anxious that the debt would be no more than €20 million. Has the Minister any definitive information in that regard? Is it not the case that the DAA wants Cork to carry up to €100 million in debt?

The Joint Committee on Transport spent about four hours last week examining the debacle about Shannon Airport. It is one of the great mysteries of our time that when the Minister met four aviation area principal officers for a couple of hours upon taking up his new role, the Shannon slots issue did not come forward for discussion. It is an incredible mystery and we may never get to

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the bottom of it. Given that we are in the situation we find ourselves, why did the Minister not respond yesterday in the budget to the €53 million package put forward by the Shannon business community? Deputy Jan O'Sullivan has raised it many times in the House. That money would be used for route support or marketing support and it would enable Shannon Airport to be in the position where it can become truly independent and viable. We searched the whole budget for that €53 million and went through all the related Departments, yet we could not find any of the money. I thought this would be one of the positive aspects of yesterday's budget, but there was nothing.

Many of us in Opposition, with very little resources, have been trying to tease out the possibility of having some kind of PSO in conjunction with the British Government, as part of the development of the peace process, whereby if Belfast was to be facilitated, Shannon could get back some of its slots. We believe that this is possible under European legislation. Deputy O'Dowd and one of his colleagues have argued this very strongly.

Is the Minister aware of the concern expressed by many workers at Shannon Airport that if the independence of the airport is handled badly, and if the Government fails to support Shannon properly in its future plans, we could end up with vicious cost cutting in the future? This will have grave repercussions for the jobs of workers in Shannon, which has always been a growth centre.

**Deputy Noel Dempsey:** The report to which the Deputy refers was drawn up by groups in the mid-west as part of a consultation process on a document prepared by the Department of Transport on foot of the open skies policy. It was basically a request for €44 million in market support and €9 million in route support for Shannon. I have explained on many occasions that it cannot be done because it is against EU state aid rules to provide any money for a scheme of that nature.

**Deputy Thomas P. Broughan:** How can the French do it? Monsieur Sarkozy would do that.

**Deputy Noel Dempsey:** It is illegal and we would not get away with it. The €44 million sought in market support is equivalent to the entire Tourism Ireland budget. We are providing about €2 billion in transport infrastructure in the Shannon region. About €13 million is being provided for broadband roll-out. The DAA has invested about €100 million in Shannon Airport in the past four or five years. The area is being well supported.

The matter of a PSO for the Shannon to London route is being pursued by the Department with the EU. We must first find out whether the EU would favour this kind of route. The normal PSO is from peripheral regions within a

country. We would have to get approval from the British Government for this and I am not sure how forthcoming that would be for flights into London Heathrow.

**Deputy Thomas P. Broughan:** The Transport Minister there is an Irish woman.

**Deputy Noel Dempsey:** Shannon Airport Authority wants independence and provided we can come up with a plan, it should get it. It must stand on its own two feet subsequently. There will be an open, competitive environment and restrictive practices of any nature will have to end.

**Deputy Fergus O'Dowd:** I think there are 252 PSOs allowed in Europe at the moment. There is no reason Shannon cannot have one. Notwithstanding the fact that it is a State airport, Shannon is a badly served region in terms of connectivity.

**Deputy Noel Dempsey:** We have six of those PSOs on different routes, so we are familiar with the concept. However, they are basically from peripheral regions within the country to a more centralised location. From that point of view, it is different because we would have to get approval from another Government if flights were going to another jurisdiction. That is only the part of the process.

#### Road Traffic Offences.

11. **Deputy Michael Creed** asked the Minister for Transport the progress to date in the implementation of penalty points to those who hold non-Irish driving licences; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32890/07]

34. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Transport the steps he will take to attach penalty points to persons holding a licence other than an Irish driving licence; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [28597/07]

**Deputy Noel Dempsey:** I propose to take Questions Nos. 11 and 34 together.

I am conscious that enforcing penalties for road traffic offences on foreign registered drivers raises many legal, organisational and procedural issues, which make it very difficult for any one State to enforce such penalties. For that reason, my Department is pursuing this question at European, British-Irish and North-South levels where mutual recognition and cross-border enforcement possibilities are under consideration. Work is ongoing.

All drivers are subject to road traffic law and it is a matter for the Garda Síochána to enforce the law. As foreign licence holders do not have an Irish driving licence record, penalty points incurred in this State are recorded against that person on a separate record in the national driver file. Under the Road Safety Authority Act 2006

(Conferral of Functions) Order 2006, SI 477 of 2006, the Road Safety Authority has responsibility for ensuring penalty points are endorsed on a licence record. Data on penalty points is held on the national driver file.

**Deputy Fergus O'Dowd:** This is one of the most serious scandals in the country. Some 100,000 drivers, mainly from the North and the UK, are not subject to penalty points. When I drive to Dublin on the M1 every day, cars from Northern Ireland drive at unbelievable speeds. They are taking over the roads with impunity. What is the Minister doing about it? I am not satisfied he is doing enough. The Automobile Association recommended the Minister take driving licences from people not from the State and create a parallel account of their driving in the State. It is unacceptable and leads to many crashes.

Approximately 15% of cars from out of the State have no insurance compared to an average of 6% of Southern cars. They cause mayhem on our roads and the Minister is not acting quickly enough on this. I have attended the British-Irish Interparliamentary Union, which published a brief report on it last week. It is not good enough. We must deal with it. It is putting lives in danger. Most Northern drivers I see on our roads could not care less when they drive in this jurisdiction.

**Deputy Noel Dempsey:** In my experience when I was Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government people in Northern Ireland say the same about drivers from the Republic driving in the North.

**Deputy Fergus O'Dowd:** I accept that.

**Deputy Noel Dempsey:** It is not only Northern drivers coming South but Southern drivers going North.

**Deputy Fergus O'Dowd:** I am concerned about trapping them here.

**Deputy Noel Dempsey:** Northern Ireland has the lead role for transport matters in the British Irish Council, BIC, and the authorities in that jurisdiction are taking the lead in considering this issue. I have been trying to arrange to meet my counterpart in the UK. Deputy Broughan seems to know him, so he might put in a good word for me to meet the UK transport minister in January to try to move on mutual recognition of disqualifications.

**Deputy Thomas P. Broughan:** The Minister has recently inherited the national driver file. Is there a system whereby all foreign drivers will be on it? How will electronic tolling operate for Northern drivers?

**Deputy Noel Dempsey:** When somebody is convicted we have a file created on the national

driver file and that person's name, conviction and penalty points are entered in it.

**Deputy Thomas P. Broughan:** Could we have all the 100,000 people who drive here regularly on the file?

**Deputy Fergus O'Dowd:** That is the AA's proposal.

**Deputy Noel Dempsey:** This proposal is similar to that of the AA. I saw the article by the AA and it was sent to us as a statement for strategy. I have asked my Department staff in Shannon to examine that to see how we can improve the data and information. I would be grateful for any suggestions anybody comes up with on this. When people come in with a licence they do not have to record it here, neither do we have to have ours recorded when we go to the UK, or anywhere else.

*Written Answers follow Adjournment Debate.*

#### **Adjournment Debate Matters.**

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** I wish to advise the House of the following matters in respect of which notice has been given under Standing Order 21 and the name of the Member in each case: (1) Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin — the need to repeal the Planning and Development (Strategic Infrastructure) Act 2006; (2) Deputy James Bannon — the application by a school in County Westmeath for a new school building; (3) Deputy Joe McHugh — the number of drift net fishermen who have been paid by the Loughs Agency to date; (4) Deputy Jimmy Deenihan — the need to send a technical team to a school in County Kerry; and (5) Deputy Joe Costello — the need to construct a Luas line from the city centre to Liffey junction via Broadstone-Grangegorman.

The matters raised by Deputies James Bannon, Jimmy Deenihan, Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin and Deputy Joe McHugh have been selected for discussion.

#### **Financial Resolutions 2007.**

##### **Financial Resolution No. 5: General (Resumed).**

Debate resumed on the following motion:

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.

—(Minister for Health and Children, Deputy Mary Harney).

**Deputy Michael Kennedy:** I am pleased to speak in this debate on our budget. It is a pro-

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gressive, socially caring and innovative budget and has been generally well received by the public and business. I congratulate the Minister for Finance, Deputy Cowen. The Minister, Deputy Noel Dempsey, appeared in the House just a while ago. The €4 billion package for transport is impressive. Developing our infrastructure across the country is very important. It is correct to borrow for infrastructure if necessary and the majority of our people and public representatives accept that. Transport is vital to the economic well-being of our country. For businesses large and small and commuters a good road infrastructure is essential. The budget for our national roads is €2.3 billion while local authorities have €600 million. That will be welcome across the country, including my constituency, where many roads need money spent on them. I particularly welcome €1.3 billion for public transport. Last night I heard Deputy Burton denigrate metro north. My constituents in Dublin North and the people in the rest of Dublin cannot wait to get metro north up and running. I hope Deputy Burton is listening. Next year a railway order will be made and metro north will proceed. Hopefully Deputy Sargent and I will have the pleasure of taking the first train from Swords.

**Deputy Trevor Sargent:** Hear, hear.

**Deputy Michael Kennedy:** The social welfare package is generous and affirms Fianna Fáil as the party of the people. It proves that the Taoiseach is the real, and perhaps only, socialist in the Dáil, other than the Acting Chairman, Deputy O'Connor. I welcome the overall package and the €14 and €12 increases to our senior citizens and people with disabilities. We have made great steps on the qualified adult allowance and this is particularly welcome. A couple will receive an increase of €41 per week and there are 42,000 such couples countrywide.

I am delighted we have reduced the stamp duty rate. I made many representations on this. Deputy Cowen was consistent and said he would do this when the time was right. The cooling of the housing market has given us the opportunity to reduce stamp duty rates. That has been broadly acceptable among the public and the building trade. For the benefit of the Opposition I point out that the Fianna Fáil manifesto—

**Deputy Jimmy Deenihan:** We appreciate it.

**Deputy Terence Flanagan:** We thank Deputy Kennedy.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Charlie O'Connor):** The Deputy without interruption.

**Deputy Jimmy Deenihan:** Deputy Kennedy is being positive. We must acknowledge that.

**Deputy Michael Kennedy:** The Fianna Fáil manifesto provided that if there was a reduction in GDP we reserved the right to alter stamp duty, which I am delighted the Minister for Finance has done.

I particularly welcome the five-year clawback, which is now reduced to two years. It was an issue on which I had received many representations and I am delighted the Minister listened to me and to others.

On schooling, Dublin North, which is the Minister of State, Deputy Sargent's area, and mine, is the fastest growing region imaginable, with thousands of new pupils coming on stream. I am delighted the Minister for Education and Science, Deputy Mary Hanafin, has a large budget and that provision will be made in 2008 for an extra 12,000 school places. On top of that there is a €900 million budget for special educational needs and we welcome that, in particular. It is worth pointing out that some 17,000 staff are now engaged by the Department on special educational needs,

As Vice Chairman of the Joint Committee on Arts, Sport and Tourism, Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs, I am delighted to see an allocation for development of the overall Government programme in this area. The Arts Council will receive €85 million, €3 million of which will go towards a budget for touring projects. In sporting terms, while I did not have the degree of success on the playing fields as Deputy Deenihan did, as a former player I have a particular interest in sport. It is gratifying to see a budget of €357 million for the sports capital programme. I particularly welcome the fact that €20 million will go towards swimming pool development. In Dublin North there are two projects on hold, one in Skerries and one in Balbriggan as well as the upgrading of the swimming facility in Portmarnock. Equally, some €83 million will go towards Fáilte Ireland and tourism is now the single biggest industry in Ireland. It has eclipsed the building industry. Something in the region of a quarter of a million people now work in tourism, and we believe a budget commensurate with that is worthwhile.

I welcome the fact that 5,500 new affordable homes countrywide will be provided for. Again, Dublin North has the fastest growing house building programme. We should get our share of that and I shall make demands in this regard. Some 9,000 social units are to be built countrywide, which will be well received as will the 4,500 relating to rental accommodation.

As regards overall aspects of the budget I am disappointed with the Opposition, particularly Fine Gael. If Fine Gael Members read their papers and listened to their constituents, they would see that this budget has been welcomed right across the entire spectrum by ordinary people and the business community. I suggest that Deputy Deenihan has a look at today's papers, if he gets the opportunity between my contribution

and his. All the leading economists have said it is a good budget, as did the Institute of Chartered Accountants in Ireland, the Irish Taxation Institute, the Small Firms Association, the Irish Exporters' Association, the Irish Homebuilders' Association and many more bodies. They have all said this was a good budget, prudent and responsible for the time——

**Deputy Terence Flanagan:** What about the ESRI?

**Deputy Jimmy Deenihan:** Who said it was bad?

**Deputy Michael Kennedy:** Fine Gael Deputies have been spilling a gloom and doom for decades and regrettably continue to do so. We create a net 1,400 jobs per week, despite the losses which are regrettable.

**Deputy Jimmy Deenihan:** How many are being lost?

**Deputy Michael Kennedy:** We live in the global economy and there will be job losses, but we have a net gain of 1,400 per week. It is time Fine Gael Members realised that and stopped the doom and gloom and trying to talk down the economy. We need to move forward with the economy and if necessary we need to borrow for infrastructure, which this Government is doing. I am very proud to be a member of the Government party and to recommend this budget to the House.

**Deputy Jimmy Deenihan:** I want to clarify one point. The highly respected ESRI, in its commentary on the budget said that generally it was not good for the property market.

**Deputy Michael Kennedy:** Trade people say it is good and they are better placed to comment.

**Deputy Jimmy Deenihan:** I am somewhat amazed that for the first time since I came into this House, economic commentators are welcoming the borrowing of such a large amount of money, €5 billion. It is the highest ever in the history of this House and I am very concerned about that. What the Government has done in recent years is skilfully transfer State borrowing to personal indebtedness. The result is that on a *per capita* basis, this country is the highest borrowed jurisdiction in the world, I understand. As Deputy Kennedy knows, most houses are bought with borrowed money and an average house is worth about €100,000 to Revenue, which is really borrowed money. So the Government was really using that borrowed money to fund several projects over the years, some of them good, but more of them wasteful.

This economic activity was not based primarily on what we were selling abroad. Some of it was but much of it, especially that represented by stamp duty and other taxes from housing, was

based on borrowed money which will have to be paid for by individuals in the future. I hope they are in jobs which will last, but they may not be. We on this side do not want to be prophets of doom and gloom. I have been in the House for 25 years and I have always been very positive. However, I have an obligation to be realistic as well and practical wherever possible and to support good proposals. Certainly I am very worried about this budget. It was skilfully portrayed to the media and there was a good deal of briefing beforehand. Obviously one could see the spin doctors were very busy. There was a good deal of selective leaking of evidence for the past month or so. What I am concerned about is that——

**Deputy Michael Kennedy:** The Deputy wants no road, no rail.

**Deputy Jimmy Deenihan:** ——there is such an acceptance of this huge borrowing. Whereas one time borrowing was a bad word, now it is suddenly becoming fashionable, and that is dangerous.

**Deputy Michael Kennedy:** What about infrastructure?

**Deputy Jimmy Deenihan:** The national debt, back in 1977, stood at around £4 billion. By 1981, under a Fianna Fáil Government, it had trebled to £12 billion, and as we are always reminded in this House, it doubled between 1983 and 1987.

**Deputy Michael Kennedy:** It was £29 billion.

**Deputy Jimmy Deenihan:** The Deputy is wrong.

**Deputy Michael Kennedy:** It was £29 billion in 1987 under the Deputy's Administration.

**Deputy Jimmy Deenihan:** It was not. It was £23 billion to £24 billion. To say it was more is the type of inaccurate information on which the Deputy and others like him have been briefed by his party for several years, so that they go around giving people inaccuracies. I would use the other word, but I am not allowed to, in the Dáil.

**Deputy Michael Kennedy:** It is on the record.

**Deputy Jimmy Deenihan:** It is not. The Deputy should go away and check it out.

**Deputy Michael Kennedy:** Deputy Deenihan should do it.

**Deputy Jimmy Deenihan:** The Deputy should do it, since he brought it up.

**Deputy Michael Kennedy:** It was the Deputy's Government, who issued the statistics.



**Deputy Jimmy Deenihan:** The Deputy is telling untruths to the House. He should go away and clarify that. There is a spokesperson present from the Department of Finance who might be able to clarify the figure for the Deputy. It doubled to about £23 billion at that time.

**Deputy Michael Kennedy:** The Fine Gael-led coalition doubled it.

**Deputy Jimmy Deenihan:** We did not, and since then, whatever gains have been made through various tax bonanzas, paybacks from DIRT and other schemes, from the sale of State assets and so on, have all been squandered. I have a statistic here, which Deputy Kennedy, who is so well-briefed by his party, will no doubt deny, that shows the Minister for Finance, Deputy Cowen, has turned a €2.3 billion Exchequer surplus into a €4.9 billion deficit. I am sure he will deny that too.

This is the worst decline in Exchequer finances in the history of the State. If I were a respected financial analyst or commentator, I would be careful about welcoming this type of economics. The Minister will increase current spending by €4 billion and capital spending by €1 billion. This is where the borrowings will go. It is all in one envelope of money and it is fine for people to state the €5 billion is going to roads and infrastructure. It is not. A total of €4 billion will go towards current funding because of a lack of proper management of the economy. People should be honest about this aspect.

I welcome the development regarding stamp duty. It is in line with the Fine Gael proposal prior to the last election on which we ran our campaign. We were criticised by the Minister and several others at the time. However, it is a similar proposal giving similar results to house buyers.

The issue of motor tax is worrying. We are one of the highly taxed countries in Europe with regard to purchasing a car or at the petrol station. We probably have a better regime than Northern Ireland because they come across the Border to buy petrol, but, generally speaking, the Irish motorist is treated extremely unfairly and possibly penalised more than anybody else in Europe.

Irish people have a major dependency on the motor car and other vehicular travel, particularly those in rural Ireland. The Government has forgotten and rejected this fact. Dublin and a place such as Kerry on the western seaboard are like two different countries. When one leaves Kerry Airport in Farranfore to come to Dublin, one imagines one is arriving in another country. Yesterday, a group from Valentia Island was here. Fianna Fáil closed the train link from Valentia Island to Caherciveen and closed the turf burning station. Now, the Government proposes to close the coastguard station which is the last thing they have. No doubt it is based on sound economics on Fianna Fáil's side.

A total of 750,000 tax payers will now pay the top rate of tax. This was not the commitment given prior to the election. My area of responsibility is defence but, prior to the last election, I was spokesperson on the arts. The Arts Council was promised approximately €87 million. It sought an increase of €20 million to continue existing programmes. It received an increase of 3% which amounts to approximately €2 million. Many artists and groups throughout the country are disappointed in this regard.

The night before the budget we recognised the work of the former Minister for the Arts, Sports and Tourism, Deputy John O'Donoghue. I have no problem with this and glorious statements were made about the flowering arts. However, this is the Government's response to the Arts Council recognition of the former Minister. It was full of pious platitudes but with no delivery.

With regard to the defence budget, the Reserve Defence Force allocation has decreased by 17%. The Government has succeeded in discouraging young people from joining the Reserve Defence Force and, as a result, the numbers are declining. An article on this was published in *The Sunday Tribune* last weekend. One reason for this is to save money and this is reflected in the decrease of 17%. This, in itself, is an acceptance of defeat.

On previous occasions, I raised as a major issue the matter of the Army Equitation School. This is one of the few such establishments remaining in the world. Our military personnel perform throughout the world on behalf of the country. They have been great ambassadors for the Irish horse. The budget allocates the school €300,000 to buy horses. Patrons have given them horses on loan. If we want our riders to have proper horses and to win Olympic medals, we must fund them. We have lost our own breeds through exportation. However, the Army Equitation School must buy Irish-bred horses and cannot obtain the class of horse necessary to win Olympic medals. We do not have a horse breeding policy and the entire matter is in a shambles.

Before Deputy Kennedy criticises Fine Gael, he should look into his own heart and his side of the House.

**Deputy Michael Kennedy:** I reflect what people tell me and I ask Deputy Deenihan to do likewise.

**Deputy Jimmy Deenihan:** Deputy Kennedy reflects how well he has been indoctrinated by his colleagues since he came into the House.

**Deputy Michael Kennedy:** I am in the party.

**Deputy Brian Lenihan:** When one has faith, one does not need indoctrination.

**Deputy Jimmy Deenihan:** I watched the debate on the monitor. When one sees every Minister on script attacking what Fine Gael states, it means

we are succeeding. The latest opinion poll had Fianna Fáil at 32% and Fine Gael at 31%. Next time it will be reversed and we will be ahead. People on this side of the House are performing well and connecting with the people.

**Deputy Michael Kennedy:** They are not connected on the budget.

**Deputy Jimmy Deenihan:** Our party has good days ahead. Deputy Kennedy should clarify the matter of the national debt because he got it wrong.

**Deputy Michael Kennedy:** Deputy Deenihan should read *The Kerryman* and *The Corkman* on Saturday when he goes home.

**Deputy Terence Flanagan:** Will the Acting Chairman advise me when ten minutes are up?

**Acting Chairman:** I do my best to look after the Fine Gael benches.

**Deputy Terence Flanagan:** I welcome the opportunity to speak on the financial motions before the House. The budget for 2008 is one of the most disappointing of the past ten years. We have a lack of investment in education, health, transport and the social economy. This has been a dull and uninspiring budget from a Minister happier to take the easy option rather than drive change. This budget represented a test of leadership for the Minister for Finance, Deputy Brian Cowen, which he failed.

Ordinary families and small businesses will pay for the incompetent management of the public purse we have witnessed under the Minister for Finance, Deputy Cowen. We had the hypocrisy of pre-election promises made by this Government on tax cutting, when voters were grossly misled on the state of the economy in the recent general election. However, since the summer, the Minister for Finance, Deputy Brian Cowen, was dampening people's expectations and spoke about delivering a tight budget.

He strenuously tried to dampen down expectations, created by his party, with its unrealisable pre-election promises. In advance of the general election, Fianna Fáil promised 2,000 extra gardaí, 4,000 extra teachers, 1,500 extra hospital beds, 2,000 extra consultants, tax cuts, PRSI cuts and affordable housing. The deceit with which the election was won was a carbon copy of the general election win in 2002. It is clear for all on this side of the House to see that tax cutting proposals, which were never viable, had to be abandoned in the face of a €2 billion shortfall in tax revenues. Despite much talk about value for money, no mention was made in yesterday's budget of how value for money will be achieved.

The budget is a bitter disappointment to those who were promised by the Government that more families would be entitled to the medical

card. In the programme for Government, Fianna Fáil promised to double the income limit eligibility for parents of children under six and treble it for parents of children with a disability. Fianna Fáil has reneged on this commitment. The Government could well afford to extend the medical card to all children under 18. Once again, low to middle income families have been let down and are bearing the brunt of the inequality in our health services.

As we enter 2008, we can look back on a record of broken promises, failed policies and missed opportunities. Instead of using the benefits of recent wealth generation to help those most in need, Fianna Fáil and its recently acquired partners, the Green Party, have merely ensured a continuation of health, education and other quality of life disparities between those in need and those who have benefitted from a Government intent on promoting a culture of greed. I am confident the electorate will pass its judgment on this when next afforded the opportunity.

The Tánaiste has turned a €2.3 billion Exchequer surplus into a €5 billion deficit because of the sloppy, self-indulgent and wasteful way he has spent money for the past two or more years. This is the worst decline in Exchequer finances in the history of the State and it needs to be debated. How and why did this happen? Six months ago, the Tánaiste stated he would entirely wipe out Government debt, yet we are borrowing €5 billion. This is nothing but incompetence on his behalf. The borrowed money will be spent on the €4 billion increase in current spending and €1 billion increase in capital spending.

As Deputy Bruton stated yesterday, the Tánaiste is a great man to have around six months after a property crash. While reform of stamp duty is welcome, it comes six months too late. Even with this new tiered stamp duty system, house buyers may still hold back on purchasing in the hope that property prices will drop further in the near future. For the past six months, economists and property specialists have been calling on the Tánaiste to introduce stamp duty reforms but he did nothing. With the number of people having their homes repossessed increasing by 20% over the past year and the majority of these repossessions being pursued by sub-prime lending firms, hard pressed mortgage holders will no doubt welcome this news.

According to the latest ESRI-Permanent TSB house price index, house prices have declined by 4.7% in the past 12 months, which is to be welcomed for those looking to purchase their first property. However, nurses and fire officers are still priced out of the property market and the reforms will not do much for them. Under the new residential stamp duty regime a typical house buyer in Dublin purchasing a house costing €400,000 will save €10,750. However, had Fine Gael been in Government, the house buyer would have saved €15,000.

[Deputy Terence Flanagan.]

The Government has delivered half the number of social and affordable units it promised at a time when 310,000 homes are vacant. What plans has the Tánaiste to ensure that the thousands of people on housing waiting lists find homes in the near future?

Higher hospital and drugs charges will take another €50 million out of the pockets of families. The Minister for Health and Children has given up on the most vulnerable in society by imposing stealth taxes in accident and emergency units and hospital bed charges and by raising the bar on the drug refund scheme from €85 to €90 per month. Her stubborn refusal to increase the income threshold for medical cards, which currently stands at €184 per week for a single person — €13.80 lower than the social welfare payment — means that people who have the misfortune to earn more than half the minimum wage will be denied medical cards. That is nothing short of scandalous.

The Government's neglect of mental health and suicide prevention measures was perpetuated by the absence of these vital issues from the budget announcements. One in four people will suffer from some form of psychiatric illness in his or her lifetime, so this issue must be taken seriously. It is reported that 500 people take their own lives and 80,000 attempt suicide or self-harm annually. These grim facts appear to have escaped the Government when it outlined its spending plans for the year ahead.

After ten years of the Celtic tiger, do we have leading edge infrastructure, a world-class health service or efficiency in the public service? Unfortunately, the answer is "no". The Tánaiste has blown a huge tax bonanza and he has spurned every opportunity for public service reform. This budget avoided the hard decisions and there has been no fresh start because the talk of budget reform is hollow. Once again, ordinary families and small businesses will have to pay. This has been a dull and uninspiring budget from a Tánaiste happy to take the easy option rather than show leadership in driving change. Budgeting in boom times is easy work but it is more demanding to produce budgets in tough times. Much more could have been achieved yesterday than this disappointing budget which will have no lasting impact.

**Deputy Fergus O'Dowd:** I welcome the opportunity to speak on this important debate. The Minister for Transport made a very poor statement and I would give it a D or maybe an E if I was marking his report. Undoubtedly, the public will give him a no-grade when he goes to the polls. Transport is a key part of our society in terms of how we live and work. A measure of its importance is how well the spatial strategy works. The big picture should be proper reform of how we control growth and improve underdeveloped

areas but the Minister's statement did not address these issues.

He spoke at some length on road deaths and I welcome the additional funds for the Road Safety Authority, the independence and commitment of which I acknowledge. However, European statistics on road deaths reveal that the reduction in deaths in Ireland since 2000 has been 10%, whereas countries such as France, Luxembourg and Portugal have decreased road deaths by in excess of 40%. Further progress has been made in Ireland over the past several years but we are not reducing the death rate sufficiently compared to elsewhere. Since 2000, the number of additional cars in Ireland has increased by approximately 99% but the corresponding increase in Portugal is in the region of 168%. Portugal has progressed further than us in terms of saving lives.

The Minister has failed to reduce the alcohol limit for drivers. The initial proposal by the Road Safety Authority was a reduction to 50 mg per 100 ml blood alcohol but that no longer appears in the road safety strategy and will not be the Government's target until after the next local election. The Government is procrastinating on introducing the necessary changes. Public opinion is more advanced than the Government on this issue and this House would support an immediate reduction to 50 mg.

Many of us like to park outside Leinster House and we cannot all be like the Minister of State at the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, Deputy Sargent, in terms of bringing our bicycles on the train. However, we should travel here by public transport and, in order to provide a good example, we could set a target date, such as 2009, beyond which we no longer park outside Leinster House. We must travel to work by public transport if at all possible. I challenge the Green Party Ministers to set such a target.

The issue of park and ride is relevant to the capacity of Dublin to take increasing volumes of traffic. The city cannot accept the current unacceptable volumes of traffic for much longer. When I visited San Francisco some years ago, I investigated that city's traffic planning and its public transport system, which is more developed than ours. Planning permission is not given in cases where parking is provided and the policies of the city authorities are public transport orientated. At some point, Ireland must adopt a similar approach.

The planning and spatial strategies in our cities are wrong, with fewer people now choosing to live in Dublin, Cork, Limerick, Galway and other towns and cities and an increasing number moving to the outskirts of urban centres. A fundamental reassessment of public transport options in our cities and towns is required. Access to the main street of my home town of Drogheda is now restricted to pedestrian traffic and public transport vehicles only. This is a major change for residents of the town.

We must take a lead by making radical changes in our lifestyles, consumption of scarce resources and carbon footprints. No such changes are evident in the budget. While the Fine Gael Party welcomes the steps taken by the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government, Deputy John Gormley, in the area of vehicle registration taxation, the 9% increase in road tax for smaller cars does not encourage the use of less polluting transport. While the increase in road tax is greater for larger cars, the changes do not discriminate sufficiently in favour of smaller vehicles.

The Government lacks credibility. Its spatial strategy has failed, it has still not reduced the legal alcohol limit for drivers and it has failed to tackle the problem whereby 100,000 people from outside the State who have committed road traffic offences cannot be given penalty points. Those who regularly use the M1 constantly see drivers from the North travelling at incredible speeds with impunity.

A recent report showed that the number of people travelling by bus has declined in recent years. Bus travel must be made more attractive by increasing the number of quality bus corridors. We need many more public transport initiatives. Despite having Green Party Ministers at the Cabinet table, €55 million allocated for public transport initiatives one year ago has been returned to the Exchequer. The Government has failed to meet its own targets. A sum of €55 million would cover the cost of providing 196 new buses.

It sounds fantastic when the Minister informs us in his Budget Statement that he has allocated millions of euro in additional funding to various Departments. However, Ministers are failing to deliver on promises because some of these allocations are not fully spent. A good Government would not allow €55 million allocated for public transport initiatives to be returned to the Exchequer.

Part of the problem with public transport in the capital is that Dublin Bus has a virtual monopoly. While some private operators offer services, we need more new routes opened up to competition to allow residents of the new urban areas growing on the outskirts of Dublin to get in and out of the city. Greater competition is needed on transport routes, particularly new routes. Competition will foster greater efficiency in Dublin Bus and encourage private operators to enter the market. In addition, consumers will have better choice and more transport options. Giving buses priority at traffic intersections is a key factor in encouraging people to use buses and improving their efficiency.

**Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform (Deputy Brian Lenihan):** I propose to share time with the Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources, Deputy Eamon Ryan, and the Minister of State at the Department of

Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs, Deputy Conor Lenihan.

During the debate on the pre-budget Estimates, we took stock of the scale of expenditure in the different sectors and, more important, the depth and breadth of the services being delivered by Departments. The decision of the Minister for Finance to reform the system for the presentation of the public finances is a fundamental one in respect of this budget. The traditional Estimates process has been abolished and this year, for the first time, the budget day announcement clearly singled out the additional expenditure on which the Government is embarking in its financial plans next year. This is a sign of a reforming Minister for Finance.

We often heard about reform in financial procedures from the benches opposite but we have a Minister who is implementing reform in this area. The manner in which the budget was presented reflects great credit on the Minister because he has implemented a reform which eluded many of his predecessors.

I am pleased to set out in some detail the Estimates for the justice and equality sector, taking into account the budget day additions and expenditures announced by the Minister yesterday. While these figures sound impressive on their own, what matters is not the magnitude of the resources but what is being achieved with them. I share the view emphasised by the Minister for Finance and, I was pleased to note, Deputy O'Dowd, that we need to obtain value for money at all levels of public expenditure and deliver better and more effective public services. One of my key concerns is to drive this objective throughout the work of the justice and equality sector.

My priority and that of the Government in deciding where to add to funding for existing services has been to focus on the fight against crime and to extend the effective capacity of organisations at the heart of this effort. Beginning with the Garda Síochána the resources provided for 2008 have been increased by 11%. This funding makes it possible to continue Operation Anvil on a national basis and implement other intensive policing activity, with particular emphasis on tackling organised crime and road safety enforcement. It will provide for 15,000 Garda members as well as a greatly increased civilian cohort, including 300 civilians for Garda stations outside Dublin. This human personnel is being matched by an investment of more than €100 million in leading police technology, including a new, state-of-the-art digital radio system, an automatic number plate recognition system and an IT based major incident system. There will be continued expansion of the successful CCTV programme.

Less high-tech but no less essential support services are also to benefit, with funding for Garda station maintenance increased by 14% and clothing and accessories by 35%, as anti-stab and ballistic vests are delivered to serving members

[Deputy Brian Lenihan.]

for their protection in frontline duties. It bears repeating that this enormous investment is taking place in parallel with a major modernisation programme designed to support the Garda in dealing with the complex challenges it faces. Other key agencies involved in tackling crime at every strategic level are receiving substantial investments. The best possible technical and forensic insight to detect and prosecute crime is essential. With this in mind, the forensic science laboratory is to be modernised and co-located with the Garda technical bureau in new facilities adjacent to the Thornton prison site. Funding has also been provided for additional scientists and analysts at the laboratory. A new facility for the Office of the State Pathologist is also in development, with funding provided in 2008 for this purpose and the recruitment of additional pathologists.

I draw attention to the provision of additional funding for the first full year of operation of the national office for the prevention of domestic, sexual and gender-based violence, Cosc. Particular circumstances apply in crimes of this type and a whole-of-government approach is required to tackle it and make proper provision for its victims. I am pleased there is now in place a dedicated resourced office with the key responsibility of ensuring the delivery of a well co-ordinated response to domestic, sexual and gender based violence. The agency is not separate from the Department but an integral part of it, with its own distinctive brand and identity.

I have also provided for a major expansion of staffing in the probation and welfare service, with the recruitment of 70 additional personnel. This will complement a substantial programme of strategic restructuring and refocusing of the service's work to contribute to a reduction of offending in our communities. Of note also is the provision of €50 million, or an increase of 19%, for the youth justice service, which like the probation service has a vital role to play in addressing offending in our society. This new service brings responsibility for young offenders together under one roof for the first time. A badly needed programme of rejuvenation for youth detention and training facilities is under way and the number of youth diversion projects has been increased to 93 with more to come. The same strategic rationale applies in this instance as with the probation service. Timely, targeted and well thought out interventions at an early stage have the capacity to yield a preventative return long into the future.

More generally on the justice Vote, overall funding is up 7% and, in addition to the items I have mentioned, this is being applied in a targeted fashion at a number of priority items. These include an 11% increase in funding for the Legal Aid Board to bolster its capacity to provide legal services to persons of modest means throughout the country. The board has made substantial progress in achieving this objective in recent years

and is playing a leading role in promoting alternative means of dispute resolution.

Funding under the broad equality heading has again been extended under the justice Vote and includes a substantial provision for the new office of the Minister of State with responsibility for integration as well as an increase of more than €2 million for gender mainstreaming and positive action measures for women. Of note also is the additional funding provided for the national property services regulatory authority which will be placed on a statutory footing in legislation due to be published in 2008. A new code of practice for the property service industry and a public register of licensed auctioneers and estate agents have been introduced. The establishment of the authority was one of the key recommendations of the auctioneering estate agents review group. It will act as a centrepiece for sound regulation in this field.

Overall funding for the Irish Prison Service is set to increase by 11% in 2008 with the building programme enhanced by an increase of €10 million in funding. This will yield an additional 320 prison spaces. Provision has been made to extend a range of measures introduced this year to combat organised criminal activities in prisons. These include an additional 178 personnel to establish an operational support group, specialised in searching for illicit materials, as well as drug dog units and airport style search facilities to be installed in all closed prisons.

The net estimate for the courts is up 4%. It includes funding for new stenography services and for additional support staff to support the appointment of additional judges. The Courts Service has delivered important service improvements in recent years, in particular by reducing court waiting times. These enhancements will be helped by the Estimate provision this year.

The property registration authority which was established last year and has taken responsibility for the Land Registry and the Registry of Deeds is to receive an increase of funding of €2.6 million, mainly to provide for 40 additional staff to support a greatly increased demand from the public for its services. Major investment in the digital mapping project will also continue in 2008 and will, as the culmination of a range of IT initiatives, deliver substantial efficiencies for the public into the future.

I reiterate my intention to ensure we get the best possible return for the public's investment in the justice sector. This will require careful management of the resources allocated and a focus on value for money, but the priorities I have outlined should give a good indication of what can be delivered with these resources.

**Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** It is a privilege to be here to speak on the budget, sandwiched as I am between the Lenihan brothers. Little did I ever think I would end in such a

privileged position. I am very glad to share these benches with my colleague Ministers.

**Deputy James Bannon:** It is a change from where the Minister was last year.

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** It is indeed. Change will be the content and the subject of my speech.

**Deputy James Bannon:** I will accept change.

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** Change is coming and change is something we need to welcome and steer in the right direction. There is no doubt we are facing into difficult and different economic times globally from what existed during the past ten or 15 years. It is clear from the broad economic picture that what we have seen in recent years is a very significant increase in energy prices, in oil and gas, in the international markets, which is feeding through with a number of different effects.

**Deputy James Bannon:** Oil is down €20 a barrel today.

**Acting Chairman:** The Minister, without interruption.

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** That is good news. Oil prices will go up and down but, in general, the characteristics of the global economy in recent years are that high energy prices have, in turn, led to high flows of money between the oil producing companies and the rest of the world, but they had a considerable inflationary effect. The way in which the world economy works in an integrated way has led to interest rate increases in a number of countries which, in turn, may be one of the forces which has triggered some of the recent credit crises. We have to be aware of the possible threat that exists from credit markets tightening up. The evidence to date is that it is the inter-bank market that is primarily affected and that it is not necessarily constricting corporate credit excessively but it is something we have to watch for. I make this point given that we are facing difficult economic times because I am old enough, as is my colleague, the Minister of State, Deputy Conor Lenihan, with whom I was in college, and we are the same age, to remember the last time we faced into difficult international circumstances. The circumstances were similar in the early to mid-1980s where high, rising energy costs led to a global economic shutdown. The response in this country at that time — most of us here are old enough to remember it — was flight.

**Deputy Michael D’Arcy:** No.

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** I exclude Deputy D’Arcy from my comments. The response at that time was evacuation from the country. There was widespread emigration to other economies, to America, Australia——

**Deputy Simon Coveney:** The present time is comparable.

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** The point I am making is that our response this time, as a people and as a country, will be different for a number of reasons. We are more confident, more capable and have more resources and better infrastructure to allow us face a difficult economic climate if it exists. I believe the budget indicates a steering of the economy in the right direction and indicates a response that is appropriate. The budget indicates that the new Government is setting a different and an appropriate course for the economic conditions that exist, which are different from those we faced during the past ten or 15 years.

I commend the Tánaiste and Minister for Finance, Deputy Cowen, on the course he is taking and the broad direction he is setting the economy and our society in this budget. It fulfils three policy objectives he set out in a recent Indecon speech on the overall direction of the economy. He said at that time that our policy response was in a ten-year horizon, which is the appropriate time for us to look at it, to get productivity, equity and the environment working together. They are three policy goals which complement each other. This budget does that. When one looks in a strategic ten-year sense at the direction it is taking, it achieves all three objectives.

The increased investment in capital expenditure, up to 12% growth, which by any standard on a high base is a significant commitment to our productivity agenda. That capital deepening — the words used by the Minister, Deputy Cowen, in his speech — is absolutely appropriate as it allows us to trade through a difficult economic period. In a sense one could take the word “productivity” and substitute the word “efficiency”. Energy efficiency will be one of the main areas in which we can achieve productivity. This approach is the right way to proceed.

The budget shows concern for equity and that in any difficult economic times we cannot leave the most vulnerable behind. I support and commend the fact that half of the additional funding that was available went to pensioners, those in receipt of social welfare and those who were not able to trade their way out of difficult economic times. That is an example of equity that the Green Party is pleased to support and to deliver in government. This budget shows, for the first time, an important commitment to the environment. It is a historic start where green policies that have been espoused for 25 years by my party are being put into action. It is a historic occasion where there is a clear indication of a strategic change of direction by the State to steer the country in a greener direction. Changes in the motor taxation and VRT system, of the nature we have introduced——

**Deputy James Bannon:** That is Fine Gael policy the Minister is adopting.

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** —are of fundamental importance because they show there is a mental change. There is a recognition that we have to set policies which steer the country to a cleaner, greener future where we reduce our CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. I commend the Minister for his support and on the introduction of a range of different measures, which is the start of a process we have to go through of decarbonising our economy. In my Department, the increased investment the Minister for Finance has allocated, which includes a 25% overall increase in spending, a 43% increase in energy spending, a similar large increase for environmental issues, such as inland fisheries, increases for key infrastructure issues and important capital issues such as broadband—

**Deputy Simon Coveney:** The Minister is just plugging the hole in broadband created by the Government.

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** That investment by the Minister for Finance and ourselves fits exactly into the overall strategy on improving our productivity, providing social equity and tackling environmental issues.

**Deputy James Bannon:** This Minister took €10 million from broadband just weeks ago.

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** I look forward to using that 43% increase in the energy budget to provide for significant new development and supports in the ocean energy area, where we may have an opportunity to set an international example and to lead. I look forward to being able to deploy such a budget in the further development of the greener homes scheme to make sure new technologies we might want to introduce and support can have extensive support.

**Deputy James Bannon:** His first act on taking over as Minister was to cut the grant.

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** I look forward, as a Green Minister in Government, to establishing a new home insulation grant which will provide an innovative new approach to helping householders do what is difficult at present, namely, to know the right thing to do to make their houses energy efficient.

I look forward to being able to amend the refit schemes in the area of electricity and to support new offshore wave and wind and other biomass energy projects.

**Deputy James Bannon:** What of all the hollow block houses the Government allowed to be built in Dublin?

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** I look forward to working with the Minister for Finance on spending the €1.7 billion to which he referred yesterday on electricity and gas networks so we can turn key businesses like the ESB and Bord Gáis towards this crucial new agenda, which is to reduce our use of energy to achieve the productivity gains to which the Minister referred. I look forward to working in Government to deliver broadband in a way that allows our society to become innovative and clean in how we do our work.

**Deputy James Bannon:** Who is stopping the Minister delivering but himself?

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** I visited Google last week at the invitation of the company to talk with them on a number of issues in this area. It was interesting to note that despite the company having 1,600 staff, there were just 20 car parking spaces at its plant, half of which were empty, whereas there were hundreds of bicycles lined up outside. I said to myself — that is the future; that is where we will go as a city and country because that is what the world will want in terms of economic development.

**Deputy James Bannon:** The Minister on the bike.

**Deputy Simon Coveney:** That is okay if the person lives in Dublin 4.

**Deputy James Bannon:** The Minister wants everyone to live in the city.

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** That is an attractive example of what can be done when we steer this economy in a greener direction.

I look forward to working within the budget increases that have been allowed to TG4 to deliver programming which allows us to look back at ourselves and our country, as well as to question, entertain and look outside. I look forward to working with RTE. I commend the budget increases we are allowing it through the licence fee increase in order for it to help us move towards a digital television future which frees up spectrum for other technologies, innovative developments and economic progress.

I look forward to working with the chairmen of the fisheries boards, including the Central Fisheries Board and the Regional Fisheries Board. My Department has an integral role in environmental protection, just as it has in terms of social and economic development.

This budget shows clearly that there is an interconnection between our economy, society and environment. All three go together. Progressing our environmental agenda will be good for our people and the economy. The budget steers us in that positive direction. I commend it to the House.

**Minister of State at the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform (Deputy Conor Lenihan):** It is an honour to speak alongside my former UCD college mate, the Minister, Deputy Ryan. It is a particular privilege given that this year we have seen an historic partnership alliance formed between Fianna Fáil and the Green Party. When I was in college with him, I never expected the Minister would be on this journey with me but I am glad he is——

**Deputy Simon Coveney:** He was slow enough to hold the Government's hand.

**Deputy Conor Lenihan:** ——and that today he has deliberately chosen to point to the Minister, Deputy Cowen's, groundbreaking Indecon speech, which indicates that the future for this country is about productivity, equity and the environment.

I take the opportunity presented by this debate to congratulate the Green Party on the success it has achieved in negotiating a programme for Government that steers the Government in a new, cleaner environmental direction. We should give credit to the Green Party. It is fair to acknowledge it has championed this issue over many years and is now delivering on its many promises. It wanted to force the political system, including Fianna Fáil and many other parties, to take this issue seriously. I congratulate it on what it has already achieved in Government and look forward to another five years with it following the next election.

**Deputy James Bannon:** Wishful thinking.

**Deputy Conor Lenihan:** In framing the budget, the Minister, Deputy Cowen, had to look at what is an uncertain picture for the global economy. On the one hand, there are the fears, instability and uncertainties released by the sub-prime issue, first in the United States and then across the world banking sector, some of which remain. On the other, there are the positive developments in the global economy, particularly in China, Brazil and the central and eastern European economies, which are growing. Nonetheless, uncertainties remain and the budget reflects this fact. We do not know where the global crisis engendered by the sub-prime crisis will end but we hope there will be a positive landing and the world will not be pushed into recession.

The budget reflects the different funding picture that faces the Exchequer due to the slow-down in the residential property market. In holding the growth in spending at 8%, the Minister has done well on the current spending side. It is important, as we look toward a lower trajectory of growth in the economy, that we get public spending under control. The Minister's new device with which to achieve this, namely, the idea of pinning Ministers to their statements of spending while providing existing levels of

service, is a positive development. In many ways it is long overdue that we would address the underlying reform issues that face us with regard to the public services generally, in particular public spending and how it is derived.

In his financial planning for the year ahead, the Minister is correct to put the emphasis on the capital programme, which has been allocated a significant and positive 12% increase. We are embarking on the biggest infrastructural spending programme ever seen in the State. It is genuinely historic but we need to achieve value for money in an effort to maintain our position as a successful, competitive international trading economy that makes us, according to some estimates, the fourth richest country in the world.

The Minister is managing the transition from very high growth in the domestic economy to a lower but healthy and sustainable level of growth, when one compares it to other countries in Europe. He is managing this transition but he is also managing a new transition for the economy in which it will become a value-added economy. We will have to invest in training, research and development, infrastructure and our people in the coming years if we wish to consolidate the level of affluence we have achieved in the past ten years.

The budget provisions do much to assist us in our new growth path. The economy is in good health. Growth of 3% is a strong level and twice the European average, while the harmonised index of inflation is at 2.4%, which is also positive as it is important to have a low inflation environment in order to implement our economic policies.

Given the need to pare back on Exchequer spending due to the residential construction slow-down, some people became too despairing about the state of the economy. Some 24,000 new jobs will be created next year, which is a very positive net figure. The Minister was correct to put the emphasis on keeping 32,000 people out of the tax net. It is important we protect and insulate the vulnerable, such as those on social welfare payments and very low incomes, from higher taxes and a predatory approach by the State to their incomes. It is important also that those on average industrial earnings were kept at the standard 20% rate of tax. This is what the Minister set out to achieve in the budget and he has done so. The Minister's stamp duty reform has the great value of simplicity and immediacy. One of the problems that has beset the Government with regard to the controversy surrounding such a proposed reform is that the public did not have certainty with regard to the tax regime. The Minister has now provided for that in the residential property area, which is important. Some of the statements that were made both inside and outside this House over the past year did not help to stabilise the market. In fact, they had the opposite effect of destabilising the market. Opposition parties have to take some of the blame in that regard for what



[Deputy Conor Lenihan.]

I call wild, populist declarations with regard to stamp duty.

**Deputy Simon Coveney:** The Minister is implementing, more or less, what we have proposed.

**Deputy Conor Lenihan:** I hope these measures will engender an element of confidence on the residential side. One of the key issues in restoring confidence in the house building sector is to tempt people into the market who have been postponing the decision to buy because of a perception that prices will fall lower. If we can tempt even a small element of them it will stimulate more house purchases. At the other end, we must hope that the stamp duty reform regime the Minister has put in place will also prevent some builders from stopping supply coming into the market. There is evidence that some builders are not taking the discount on house prices, but prefer to sit on houses in the hope of eventually getting the asking price. A certain element of discounting needs to occur so that people can be confident, albeit taking a discount on house prices and thus releasing them onto the market in the hope that, of itself, such moves will stimulate further purchase activity. Hopefully that will happen.

While I am not expressing Government policy in this personal view, I hope the Minister will examine whether stamp duty reform could be brought to bear on the non-residential sector of the construction industry. There is some evidence that commercial property transactions are being held back because of the stamp duty issue. Some developers to whom I have spoken in recent weeks have mentioned that as one of the factors that may be inhibiting transactions and trade in the commercial property sector. I do not know and I will leave it as an open question, but I am sure the Minister will take it into consideration when he plans further measures.

I thank the Minister, Deputy Cowen, for the generous allocation to me as Minister with responsibility for integration. The sum of €9.2 million is a substantial allocation which will allow me to begin my work on the integration agenda. Because this is a budget debate, I will confine my remarks on integration and immigration to the strong economic reasons for such a ministerial portfolio, as well as cross-departmental action. Across our society we need to take the issues of integration and immigration seriously. The ESRI estimates that migrants contributed at least 2.5% to our GDP in recent years. Migrants in Ireland are predominantly able-bodied workers aged from 18 to 44, and they form a dynamic and productive part of our workforce. Interestingly, in many cases, in that particular age cohort, they are predominantly better qualified than Irish citizens. They are more likely to be degree holders, for example, and have a potential to add further to the productivity of our economy in future. One of the challenges for this Government and its suc-

cessors will be to maximise the potential productivity that migrants bring to our country. They are predominantly over-qualified for the jobs they currently fill and therefore a key challenge will be to ramp up the levels of English-language tuition for such adults so they can access it and will not be inhibited in any way from rising up the career ladder. That is one of the challenges facing my departmental remit.

There is a twin paradox in the labour market as it is currently constituted. On the one hand, 10% or 12% of our population comprises migrants who are over-qualified for the jobs they hold. At the same time, however, 300,000 of our indigenous Irish population are under-qualified for the fabled jump they must now make to achieve the high value-added economy to which we aspire. These are important challenges which we can face up to. The budget gives us the platform to do that. Ireland is facing a major challenge in the years ahead. We will see closures and low value-added employment leaving the country.

**Deputy James Bannon:** Some 2,300 have left this month alone.

**Deputy Conor Lenihan:** We must make this leap into the higher value-added traded services and manufacturing. That will be a big challenge for the Government and society at large. The Minister for Finance, Deputy Cowen, is the ideal man to lead that change and lead this country into a bright future where there will be plenty of employment. Hopefully, my children and grandchildren will never have to face the prospect that the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, and myself faced when we left college in 1984. At that time, the majority of our colleagues were emigrating to London and other places.

**Deputy Simon Coveney:** I wish to share time with Deputies Bannon and D'Arcy.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy John Cregan):** Is that agreed? Agreed.

**Deputy Simon Coveney:** I am glad of the opportunity to speak in this debate. There was a time when the Minister of State, Deputy Conor Lenihan, would use a ten-minute speech to try to goad the Opposition, but he seems to be maturing as a Minister.

**Deputy Conor Lenihan:** I thank the Deputy.

**Deputy Michael D'Arcy:** Mellowing.

**Deputy Simon Coveney:** Or mellowing in an attempt to be taken seriously perhaps. As regards the budget, the two big ideas were stamp duty and VRT reform. It is worth pointing out that Fine Gael has, by and large, welcomed stamp duty reform. It is a relatively simple and straight-forward measure, which is similar to what we pro-

posed before, during and after the election. For previous speakers to suggest that Fine Gael has been acting irresponsibly because we called for a just stamp duty reform for over a year, is stretching credulity to say the least. For a year in the build up to the general election, the Minister for Finance and the Tánaiste we at odds over stamp duty reform. In many ways that contributed to so much confusion and hesitancy in the housing market. I hope we now have a clear view as to what will happen with stamp duty. The previous speaker's comments on the potential for stamp duty reform in the commercial sector were not overly helpful. The last thing we need in any other sectors is confusion that is not based on sound planning for stamp duty reform. Let us try to leave it to the market at this stage.

I wish to concentrate on the areas for which I have responsibility, including climate change, carbon emissions, energy, communications and natural resources. Ireland should be aiming to lead the world in tackling carbon emissions. We should be highly ambitious as to what can be achieved here. Ireland is privileged to have wind, wave and tidal resources that are unparalleled anywhere else in Europe. We also have a climate where biomass can be grown more efficiently than in most other European countries. We have natural competitive advantages that remain as yet untapped or partially tapped in the case of wind resources. If the Government, including its Green Ministers, and the Opposition are serious in trying to make an impact on global climate change, we should be able to speak credibly at international climate change conferences on issues, including carbon emissions and greenhouse gases generally. Currently, we have no such credibility. The country has had ten years of prosperity, opportunity and economic growth, but we have done little or nothing to prepare for the challenges we now face, including the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions. We are well above the targets to which we are committed in the European Union under the Kyoto Protocol. The Minister of State does not need me to reel off the figures in this regard time and again.

In principle, I strongly welcome the Minister's announcement on carbon budgeting and the approach whereby the Government will measure its own performance each year and indicate the sectors that are producing emissions and the sectors that have improved. We will judge the Government on its performance and not on its words. We will be able to hold the Ministers for Agriculture and Food, Transport, Environment, Heritage and Local Government, and Enterprise, Trade and Employment to account over their efforts to lower greenhouse gas emissions. The only way one can do so is to have accurate figures. To be fair to the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government, Deputy Gormley has given us some figures to work with, which I welcome as a first step.

There are some problems relating to how we started off with carbon budgeting and there are three scenarios we need to consider in this regard. The first is the "do nothing" scenario, which is essentially the one that has obtained for the past ten years, apart from some promotion of wind generation over the past 12 months. The second concerns the full implementation of the recommendations of last year's climate change strategy and the third involves making the extra changes required to achieve an average annual reduction in carbon emissions of 3%, as set out in the programme for Government.

One problem with the speech on the budget by the Minister, Deputy Gormley, was that he did not provide figures for the "do nothing" scenario. Doing so would have served as a serious reality check, particularly for his Fianna Fáil colleagues, who need to change their mindset fundamentally if we are to have a green economy. The Minister stated that even if we implemented in full the measures contained in the National Climate Change Strategy, we will still emit an average of 3.2 million tonnes more per annum than the amount agreed to in our Kyoto commitment, at a total cost to the taxpayer of between €150 million and €325 million, depending on the terms the National Treasury Management Agency is able to negotiate. This is the agency that purchases carbon credits to offset our pollution.

The Minister outlined the additional emission reduction measures he proposes under the national climate change strategy to achieve the annual emissions reduction target of 3%. However, in his calculations he is taking for granted that the targets under the strategy will be achieved. This is clearly not the case according to the evidence before us. Although the strategy was announced as late as last April, we are already falling behind on the targets we have set, in addition to falling behind on commitments made in previous climate change strategies. This is why the Minister's speech this morning is not as credible as it should be.

The only step the budget proposes in terms of transport is to rebalance vehicle registration tax, as discussed and welcomed by all. Last April the national climate change strategy announced the publication of a sustainable transport action plan before the end of 2007 but there is no sign of it yet. All the Minister did in this regard was make an announcement on 4 December that he will prepare it for some date next year. The national climate change strategy states that CIE is required to have all its vehicles using a 5% bio-fuel blend but there has been little progress on this issue in the eight months since the publication of the strategy. The latest update suggests that the Department is working with CIE to establish how these targets can be achieved in the shortest timeframe possible. However, we were supposed to have achieved them by the end of the year. The Minister lacks credibility when he

[Deputy Simon Coveney.]

provides us with emissions reduction figures based on such vague timeframes.

The top priority of the national climate change strategy in terms of reducing transport-related emissions is a modal shift to public transport as part of Transport 21. This priority appears to be in tatters given what the Minister for Transport, Deputy Noel Dempsey, said today. He confirmed time and again on radio that there will be a deliberate bias in favour of building roads between cities between now and 2010. Where is the green monitoring of strategic development within Government?

I welcome the fact that an additional €7 million has been allocated for research and development in respect of wave energy. However, I would like a further allocation to be made. Unfortunately, there seems to be no additional funding allocated for other renewable sources such as wood biomass. Surely it makes sense in Ireland to replace peat with wood biomass, which is carbon neutral and can be grown very efficiently on bogland from which peat is derived.

I welcome the lightbulb initiative but we could be even more aggressive in this regard. I would not be averse to placing a levy on non-sustainable lightbulbs to subsidise the cost of more environmentally friendly ones. I welcome the fact that we are dramatically increasing capital expenditure on grid development.

My views on the Government's performance on broadband are well known. When the Minister states an extra €10 million has been allocated in the budget to promote the roll-out of broadband, he is deliberately misleading the House. He took €10 million from the broadband budget in 2007 and all he is doing with the extra allocation is increasing the figure to match the one that existed at the start of this year before he took the money to spend it on the greener homes scheme.

There is no additional funding in the budget for next-generation broadband roll-out, which is now needed desperately. In addition to making broadband available, we need high-speed broadband. We do not have it at present. There is no capital allocation in the budget for the nationwide roll-out of much-needed, high-speed next-generation broadband, as there should be under the national development plan. The Acting Chairman, Deputy Cregan, knows well that we will be discussing these issues again at a meeting of the committee he chairs.

**Deputy James Bannon:** Even more than ever, the actions of the Government leave me outraged. By what distorted thinking can it be considered logical that its Leader deserves a pay increase 60 times greater than the amount given grudgingly to the elderly in the budget? The elderly are the very people who brought the country to a level undreamed of in their youth and who elected the Government that now insults them with a €14 increase if they are lucky to have a

contributory pension or a miserly €12 otherwise. This is a drop in the ocean and pretty sick when one thinks of the increase of €700 to €800 per week that the Taoiseach is pocketing. Instead of providing for the anticipated increase of €20 per week for old age pensioners, which is hardly above the rate of inflation, the Minister for Finance had the nerve to throw a miserly €14 at pensioners who, by their hard work, created the Celtic tiger, while at the same time copper-fastening the €800 increase for his leader. What makes the Taoiseach worth six times the rise granted to elderly people? A rise of €14 is miserly and would hardly buy a drink for the Taoiseach but this is what pensioners are expected to take as their annual increase.

I tabled the following parliamentary question in the hope the Government would have some heart and reward elderly people. I asked the Minister for Finance, in light of the fact that one in five pensioners is at risk of poverty and given the undertaking in the programme for Government to increase the basic State pension to €300 at least by 2012, if he is prepared to ensure this provision is front-loaded and not drip-fed at the rate of €20 per year and if he will make a statement on the matter. Far from conceding or even hearing, the Minister has reneged on his promise to increase the pension rate by €20 a year until 2012. That is a shame on the Minister for Finance and a greater shame on the Taoiseach who has destroyed the moral integrity of the highest political position in the State, threatened the core of our democracy by his actions and yet considers himself worth 60 times the value to be paid to elderly citizens.

This Government has ignored the marginalised, the poor, the ill, the disabled, the elderly and their carers. It has done very little to lift older people out of the poverty trap and leave them comfortable in their retirement. The cost of disability payments is not included in this budget.

Of particular concern to me is our heritage which is an important aspect of environmental protection. Conservation of our heritage adds to our quality of life, culture and education. Heritage is strongly linked to tourism and is a cornerstone and legacy of the tourism industry with cultural and heritage sites having a crucial role to play in extending the tourism season. How does the Minister for Finance respond to the protection of our heritage? He gave little recognition to the important role it has played, and will continue to play, in shaping the country in which we live.

There is a need for an integrated approach and greater co-ordination at Government level and between Departments and local authorities for an improvement in awareness levels concerning heritage generally and a recognition of the important part it plays in our economic development. The small increase allocated to the Heritage Council is to be welcomed on the principle that every little helps but it is way below the margin to enable our built heritage to survive for gener-

ations to come. Once lost, rare architectural sites and buildings can never be replaced.

In this regard, I highlight the courthouse in Castlepollard, County Westmeath, the Fr. Matthew Hall in Athlone, the famed jealous wall site in Belvedere House, Mullingar, and the 17th century Foxhall monument in my parish of Legan, County Longford, which is not only unique in Ireland but in Europe. These are all under threat on the Minister's watch.

The Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government spoke glowingly in his budget speech of what he plans to do in regard to parks and wildlife with the large sums of money which the Minister for Finance has given him for that very purpose. Strangely, not one figure was mentioned. Our Green Party Minister certainly does not appear to have green fingers. If finance is needed, which it is, then the parks of this country will certainly not be blooming.

Where is the input of the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government to be seen in this budget? Shortly after entering office, he promised he would review the policy to protect our architectural heritage. In case it has slipped his notice, such protection requires funding and this has slipped through his fingers. A mere 14% increase in funding to the Heritage Council is not exactly anything to boast about.

The environment portfolio in general has suffered at the hands of a supposedly Green Minister. The budget lacks strong green initiatives. Raising car tax, copying Fine Gael's policy on VRT and the re-announcement of the over-hyped commission on taxation are not exactly what we would have expected from a Green Party Minister. While welcome, and certainly supported by Fine Gael as we were the first to propose such a policy, the VRT changes are long overdue and should have been introduced this time last year.

I hope the commission on taxation, when it gets over the continual re-launch process, will give lie to the old saying that actions speak louder than words and will produce some results. Replying to an Adjournment matter of mine last month, the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government said there is huge potential in the area of renewable energy and that he wants to see the Government deliver on that potential. There are no prizes for guessing how it delivered. Funding for energy efficient initiatives was slashed by 50%. Six months into Government, the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government and the Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources have made no noticeable contribution to meeting our Kyoto targets and once again the taxpayer will be forced to carry the can to the tune of €10 million in carbon credits.

Measures, if one could call them that, to support our farmers are conspicuous by their absence from this budget. As we all know, farming is riddled with bureaucracy, which is driving an ever-increasing number of farmers off the land.

Unlike what is taking place in other countries such as New Zealand, the budget does nothing to encourage young people into farming and fails to address the suspension of the farm improvement scheme. It shamefully fails to address the lack of pension cover for farm spouses and some older farmers. This budget shows no evidence of a commitment to the future of the agriculture sector. Rural Ireland is disproportionately affected by continuing job losses in manufacturing — 500 jobs were lost in Abbott in Galway and 32 jobs are likely to go in my county of Longford this week — and in agriculture because of unbalanced regional development.

Targets for decentralisation have not been met. It has certainly not gone ahead as promised and has been doomed to failure from the outset. Decentralisation has proved to be an empty promise and will go down in history as the most significant of all the broken promises of this Government.

Economic development in rural Ireland is being stifled. It is said we are heading for a vibrant knowledge-based economy and yet the budget did nothing to advance this aspiration. There is no investment in the next generation of broadband. Lasting damage will be done to our competitiveness unless there is large-scale investment in the next generation of networks but that aside, every household in the country deserves a broadband connection.

Indicative of the hidden nature of this Government was the extraordinary direction by the Minister for Education and Science to remove my colleague, Deputy Brian Hayes, the Fine Gael spokesperson on education, from her education budget briefing this morning. Even she must be able to calculate that the cat is already out of the bag and the meagre provision for education has been seen by all.

I listened to the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform and I am sick and tired of hearing this Government downplay the drugs problem. We can no longer ignore the extent of this problem and the Government must take strong action to tackle this lethal epidemic which has beset this nation.

**Deputy Michael D'Arcy:** I am pleased to discuss the first budget since I became a Member. I am concerned about the borrowing of approximately €5 billion for 2008. Department of Finance projections for recent years have not been very accurate. What I describe as the Cowen budgets have, so far, been inaccurate to the extent that from 2004 to 2006, they have underestimated the tax take by about €5 billion. The Government's numbers were incorrect to this extent. In 2007, the Department underestimated the numbers by €1.75 billion so, hopefully, the numbers with which we have been presented will be somewhat accurate or more accurate than they have been in the past number of years.

[Deputy Michael D'Arcy.]

The Minister for Finance did what he had to do. He was absolutely obliged to go forward and borrow moneys to keep the national development plan on track and to continue the current day-to-day spending that must be continued in respect of health, education and other Departments. The question I pose is whether the Minister was prudent in his previous budgets. Should he not have set aside moneys and slowed the economy so as to ensure that when the day which we all knew was coming arrived, we would have the cash we needed? I likened the Irish economy to somebody riding a bicycle down a hill as hard as they possibly could but being afraid to touch the brakes because they were going too fast. We are, to some extent, in a speed wobble. Nobody really knows where or when we are going to come out of that wobble. Will it be a crash? If so, what will be its extent? We just do not know.

As I stated, my concern relates to borrowing €16 billion in the next three years. I am worried that this is where we must go when one considers where we have been in the past three to four years.

I will touch on some of the numbers within the budget in respect of our source of income — where the moneys are coming from and where the stream is coming into Revenue. VAT is the largest contributor within the State. The 2008 projections are for €15.15 billion in VAT. That is an increase of about €700 million from 2007-08. VAT moneys are now greater than income tax. The scenario whereby the tax take from products or labour sold or traded is greater than income tax does not happen in very many economies. It worries me for the simple reason that the small amounts of moneys — €12 and €14 per week — that have gone to pensioners and upon which my colleagues have touched will be eaten up very quickly by the increase in VAT.

In terms of the other Departments that have received moneys, as my colleague, Deputy Bannon noted, there was practically nothing relating to agriculture. Given world prices for grain and dairy prices, one would have considered that this economy might have received a bit of a boost. We have always seen that farmers here are excellent spenders. However, there has been no reinvigoration of that market. I am sure the Acting Chairman will agree on a point I have previously raised with him concerning a land-based payment in respect of the bio-fuels sector. Competition from the cereal sector has been very significant in that the margin per acre for cereals is now much greater than it is for bio-fuel crops. We have heard much talk about the Green imprint on this budget but this imprint should have touched upon the land-based payment. If we do not continue to support the burgeoning bio-fuels sector, it could fall by the wayside very quickly.

Fine Gael has long argued that stamp duty badly needed to be reformed. The Minister held

the position, which was consistent, that he would not be the Minister for Finance who would reform it but he did. He was left with absolutely no other option. He was obliged to move. However, I have a particular concern about it. He has reorganised the bands, which is very welcome, but we do not know whether the reorganisation will be a real help to the market. For example, the stamp duty on a house, property or unit — whatever one wishes to call it — priced at €250,000 will be slightly less than €9,000. To be frank, the markets are dropping by €9,000 every six months for those houses. I do not know if this is correct but the cumulative effect of the drop in the market prices and the reduction in stamp duty, which will be small and will not amount to €9,000 for a small unit, might be enough to stimulate it. However, I am concerned that it is a minimalist approach. The Minister could have been braver and done more in trying to reform this sector.

I made a submission in respect of stamp duty applying to sites in a letter I wrote to the Minister. Anyone who buys a property will get the benefit of the €125,000 exemption, with the exception of the person who purchases a site. This is something that must be examined. Many rural Deputies, of which I am one, know this is something we need to consider. It is just an oversight on the part of the Minister but it badly needs to be addressed.

**Minister of State at the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government (Deputy Tony Killeen):** I wish to share time with Deputies Mansergh and Finian McGrath and perhaps another Deputy.

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

**Deputy Tony Killeen:** I welcome the opportunity to speak briefly about the budget and will concentrate on those areas for which I have responsibility in conjunction with the two Ministers from the Green Party — the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government, Deputy Gormley, and the Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources, Deputy Ryan.

In respect of water services infrastructure, which is a hugely important element of the work of the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government, I welcome the fact that a 10% increase is provided for the water services investment programme for 2008. This is enormously important in a programme that has been rolled out very strongly over the past two or three years, initially in the greater centres of population in response to difficulties relating to the transposition of European directives and water standards arising from them. The programme is gradually being extended. The current programme for the next three years, which was announced by the Minister for the Environment,

Heritage and Local Government in September, will include provision for all areas with a population of over 1,000 and a great many under that. This 10% increase will enable us to undertake the kind of works which would be required at the current level through 2008. It comes on the back of an additional allocation of €50 million, which was budgeted for and went through committee on Tuesday last.

Drinking water standards are hugely important. Wastewater treatment plants and treatment plants for the water supply are one of the critical elements in this area. Ultimately, the new wastewater treatment plants play a critical role in protecting and preserving the quality of rivers, lakes, estuaries and marine waters and are hugely important.

We must also bear in mind that water conservation measures are hugely important. They have gradually been advanced by the Department over recent years. I understand that the average usage per person is as much as 140 litres per person per day in some areas, but over 250 litres in other areas. Water conservation is one area where we are trying to make progress and where we are working closely with local authorities in various schemes to achieve it because it is not in our interests to spend huge amounts of money on treating water which is subsequently wasted either at the level of the consumer or, sometimes, at the level of the network. Tremendous work is underway in addressing those networks which need to be updated.

The revised drinking water regulations were made earlier this year, with a view to ensuring that all drinking water supplies are consistently monitored and supervised and that where quality problems arise, measures are taken to systematically address them. The Environmental Protection Agency has responsibility for monitoring and enforcement of public water supplies operated by local authorities. Local authorities, in turn, have responsibility for those schemes operated voluntarily by the group water schemes sector. Under the new regulations, those monitoring programmes by the local authorities are subject to approval by the Environmental Protection Agency. We will see a major increase in the amount of monitoring. Arising from this, problems will emerge about which we would not have known.

We will have a campaign to ensure quality in all public supplies and private group water scheme supplies. The Waste Water Discharge (Authorisation) Regulation of 2007 was recently signed into law. These regulations provide for authorisation by the EPA of discharges from local authority waste water treatment works and collection systems released to all types of receiving waters. The EPA will monitor compliance with the regulations and will prosecute offences including any failure of local authorities to comply with conditions attaching to an authorisation.

The budget for the fire services has increased by 15%. It is operated by 37 local fire authorities and the strategy of the Department is to assist and support local authorities in the role of protecting people, property and local infrastructure in fire and other emergency situations.

Continued participation in EU civil protection matters will also feature prominently in the work of the section. The 2008 fire services capital programme will provide funding for the construction and upgrading of fire stations and the procurement of fire appliances and specialised equipment. There has been a significant increase in capital investment in the fire services and this will continue in the 15% increase in the provision for this year. Over the past nine years, €165 million has been provided in grants to the fire services, a considerable increase on previous years. I hope it will continue for a number of years into the future.

The fire services change programme is being implemented. The two year phase has been completed and options for further development of the fire and emergency services will be informed by the findings. The implementation programme for the new framework for major emergency management was approved by Government on 30 May 2006. The 2008 fund will provide for a central fund for regional steering groups to support and assist them in carrying out tasks assigned to them under the framework for major emergency management as well as the organisation of information seminars to assist and support local authorities in their efforts to prepare and update major emergency plans.

I welcome the provision of €54 million for broadband infrastructure. I also welcome the move towards next generation networks and the commitment to energy research. We can take advantage of the wind, wave and tidal resources outlined by Deputy Coveney. If properly harnessed these could put us in a prominent position to produce energy. We must have energy conservation and efficiency measures, such as the building energy efficiency ratings. These contribute to a lower requirement for energy that is becoming more expensive, such as when oil hits \$100 a barrel.

**Deputy Martin Mansergh:** I congratulate the Minister on an excellent budget that has given the economy a renewed sense of direction in more challenging economic circumstances. The Minister's approach reflects the underlying strength of the economy, the objective being to keep employment high and taxes low.

**Deputy James Bannon:** That is an ambition.

**Deputy Martin Mansergh:** In more difficult times we are making good use of the reserves and strength built up. There has been criticism from the benches opposite of the resort to very limited borrowing, less than 1% of GDP. Not a single

[Deputy Martin Mansergh.]

commentator, as far as I am aware, shares the Fine Gael view on this subject. The AIB Global Treasury Economic Research review of the budget states:

The move to a budget deficit should not be viewed as a cause for concern given the marked slowdown in the pace of economic activity, sharp fall in property related tax receipts, the very low level of the national debt and the fact that there is a very large current budget surplus. Indeed, fiscal policy should be counter-cyclical and thus stimulatory, if at all possible, during an economic slowdown. Thus, we would not have favoured an overly restrictive budget today and are not bothered by the deficit target.

One will find the same remarks made by other economic consultancies.

**Deputy James Bannon:** Did they not say he was a bit late?

**Deputy Martin Mansergh:** The Fine Gael spokesperson spoke about this as the worst deterioration in the public finances. The problem is that nobody believes him. The worst deterioration in the public finances was when the national debt doubled from what was then measured as £12.7 billion in December 1982 to £25 billion in March 1987.

**Deputy James Bannon:** Alan Dukes's Tallaght strategy turned this country around.

**Acting Chairman:** Deputy Mansergh without interruption. Deputy Bannon has already made his contribution.

**Deputy Martin Mansergh:** I did not breathe a word when Deputy Bannon spoke even though I disagreed with much of what was said.

**Deputy James Bannon:** Deputy Mansergh was asleep when I spoke.

**Deputy Martin Mansergh:** I am delighted that the national development plan is being maintained. Public investment is very important and is key to the future development of the economy. The Minister mentioned one of the major projects in south Tipperary, the completion of the Cashel-Mitchelstown road. I am equally pleased at the considerable extra investment in public transport, which I consider to be equally essential.

There are no negatives in this budget. Those on the minimum wage have been kept out of the tax net, those on the average industrial wage will remain on the standard rate. This morning a point was raised about minor increases in health charges.

**Deputy James Bannon:** It was 10%.

**Acting Chairman:** Deputy Bannon should resist.

**Deputy Martin Mansergh:** As a result of the Minister's reform, the Book of Estimates is being published with the budget and those changes always accompany the publication of the Book of Estimates. The concentration of tax relief is on those at the lower end of the scale, which is the consistent pattern of the Tánaiste since he took over as Minister for Finance. One of the most interesting tables in the Minister's speech, on pages C19-21, shows how much the average tax rates on annual earnings on all levels of income have declined in percentage terms from 1997 to 2008. What was a substantial tax burden is now much more limited.

I welcome the stamp duty reform, although the Minister is correct to be critical of the impact of some of the debate on the housing market. Anomalies are being corrected and the burden reduced. Affordability for young people has improved through a mixture of a drop in price, increased mortgage interest relief, stamp duty reforms and, perhaps, falls in interest rates.

In the area of social welfare I welcome the increase in the dependent allowance. From next year, spouses will receive full payment, the same as the pensioner. I am pleased that the commitment to overseas development assistance is being maintained.

The *Irish Farmers' Journal* acknowledges that a number of anomalies in the farm sector are being corrected. It is not as much as it would like but, unlike the benches opposite, it acknowledges the improvements made. Tipperary is pleased to have 45 decentralised jobs and expects over 200 within a few years. As far as Tipperary is concerned, decentralisation is working well.

**Deputy James Bannon:** What about the 10,000 promised?

**Acting Chairman:** Deputy Bannon had his opportunity and should allow Deputy Mansergh to continue.

**Deputy James Bannon:** That buachaill in front was full of it three years ago.

**Deputy Martin Mansergh:** I am glad that significant increases of 12%, 7% and 5% have been allocated in respect of first, second and third level education, respectively, with capital spending up 8%.

**Deputy James Bannon:** That will not even pay for—

**Acting Chairman:** Deputy Bannon should allow Deputy Mansergh to continue, without interruption.

**Deputy Martin Mansergh:** In light of some of the pressures faced by schools, these increases are necessary.

I and my colleagues on the Government benches are extremely happy with the budget. When the country was previously in difficulty, budgets tended to be quite tough. However, because of the underlying strength of the economy, it has not been necessary to be draconian in this instance. As an official put it to me earlier, squirrels put away nuts for the winter. We have been able to take out and use some of those nuts now that they are needed.

**Deputy Charlie O'Connor:** I wish Deputy Mansergh had not set me the challenge of trying to come up with a better analogy than that which he just used because I will not be able to do so. However, I must inform Deputy Bannon — I do not want to upset him in this regard — that the famous speech on the Tallaght strategy was actually made in Templeogue by that good man, Alan Dukes, who I always admired.

I wonder if Fine Gael Members listened to the Taoiseach's fine contribution earlier, particularly where he stated that this is the first of five budgets. Perhaps that accounts for their grumpiness. I ask Deputy Bannon not to rise to the bait I have set because I am not as good as others at dealing with hecklers.

**Deputy James Bannon:** The Deputy should wait until the Mahon tribunal concludes its deliberations.

**Deputy Charlie O'Connor:** I was proud to listen to the contribution of the Minister for Finance, Deputy Cowen, when he introduced the budget. I applaud the Minister's efforts and I am glad he listened to people such as me. Deputy Michael Kennedy suggested that I am on the socialist wing of Fianna Fáil. I was not afraid to speak up for my beliefs on social inclusion policies at our parliamentary party meeting. I am strongly of the opinion that we should cater for those who are more vulnerable, particularly at times when the economy is facing challenges.

I do not wish to make too many political points but I am not going to take a lecture from those on the Opposition benches who do not remember — it does not suit them to do so — decisions taken in the past which led to people being deprived of money. During the period in question, benefit entitlements were so meagre that they made absolutely no impression. That is not to say I do not have ongoing concerns, of course I do. I see the challenges ahead and I am concerned about the future direction of pensions policy, which is an important matter. I would like the Minister for Social and Family Affairs, Deputy Cullen — he did a good job this week — to examine the position as regards back to school allowances, in respect of which further improvements could be made.

A number of individuals brought to my attention in recent days the fact that people who obtain good increases in their social welfare benefits are often ambushed by local authorities, which present with new rent assessments. Someone must grasp the nettle and take action in this regard.

Highlights of the budget include the changes to stamp duty, provisions to reward work, income tax changes and improvements relating to child care. The latter will provide supports for hard-working families. I welcome these various improvements.

The Minister referred to Tallaght and the Luas. His colleague, the Minister for Transport, Deputy Dempsey, mentioned the provision of almost €260 million in additional funding for public transport capital investment over the pre-budget outlook. He went on to point out that this funding will guarantee continued progress on expanding the Luas network. I strongly support this development. The extension of the existing tram fleet on the Tallaght line will be completed in mid-2008, bringing a 40% increase in passenger capacity per tram. As a Dubliner, I am pleased that construction will continue on the Cherrywood and Docklands extensions.

I must, however, challenge the Minister regarding the proposed building programme as far as construction on the Luas extension through Tallaght is concerned. As stated on previous occasions, the Luas is an absolute boon to my community because it brings many people to Tallaght and allows them to enjoy the great facilities there. However, as the Minister indicated, there appears to be a problem. I call on him to ensure there will be no delay in respect of the Luas extension through the estates of west Tallaght to Saggart and Citywest. I hope many colleagues will support me in this regard.

I could spend all day discussing with the Minister of State at the Department of Finance, Deputy Noel Ahern, who is present in the Chamber, the need for a new Garda station in Tallaght. I hope the Minister of State will not object to my mentioning this matter, in respect of which I have been strongly campaigning. Other colleagues in the House are not afraid to refer to their local communities and the priorities relating thereto, and I take this opportunity to do so as well.

Previous speakers criticised the Government's drugs policy. There will always be challenges to be faced in that regard. However, I am a strong supporter of the Minister of State at the Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs, Deputy Pat Carey. I was present in the Chamber last week when the Taoiseach took time out of his busy schedule to make a fine speech on the drugs policy. His doing so was a great compliment to the House and to the Minister of State, Deputy Pat Carey. It is important that Members should continue to inform the Government that drugs programmes should be properly funded.



[Deputy Charlie O'Connor.]

The drugs problem represents a challenge to all our communities and we should continue to fight against it.

I look forward to making a further and more comprehensive contribution in respect of the budget as part of the Second Stage debate on the Social Welfare Bill. I commend the resolution to the House and I will now concede the floor to my Independent colleague, Deputy Finian McGrath, who has some even more important announcements to make.

**Deputy Finian McGrath:** I welcome the opportunity to contribute to this important debate. One of the aims of the budget is to protect the vulnerable. This is also my political objective. Before discussing the details of the budget, I wish first to welcome the €2.5 million allocated in respect of cystic fibrosis services at Beaumont Hospital. I warmly welcome the additional support provided to patients and their families at the hospital, which is located in my constituency. This is a major step and I hope it marks the beginning of a process of developing cystic fibrosis services at other hospitals such as St. Vincent's. I will continue to fight in respect of the provision of such services.

My vision for the health service — I was subjected to a great deal of criticism in respect of it recently — revolves around reform and investment. The latter are the key factors and I urge all Deputies to support the concept I am promoting.

In the discussions relating to my agreement with the Taoiseach, I raised the issue of disability and cancer services. I am glad that an additional €50 million is being provided in respect of the disability sector and that an extra €29 million is being allocated for cancer services. I also welcome the additional €25 million being provided in respect of care of the elderly. I raised these issues with the Government on previous occasions and I look forward to seeing more of the services to which I refer being rolled out during the next 12 to 18 months.

Since we are dealing with the budget and related health issues, I wish to challenge the misinformation emanating from some Deputies in respect of frontline services and the so-called HSE embargo. In my constituency, Dublin North Central, since 5 September 2007 a total of 117 new employees have been appointed by the HSE. The breakdown in respect of the posts taken up by these individuals is as follows: medical, 15; dental, one; nursing, 59; allied health professionals, 21; support service staff, four; administrative hospital-based staff, five; additional nursing, seven; additional health professionals, four; and extra allied health professional, one. When new staff are appointed or new services put in place, Deputies should tell the truth and stop misleading the public.

**Deputy Bernard J. Durkan:** Perhaps the other Members to whom Deputy Finian McGrath refers have not had the same experience as him.

**Deputy Finian McGrath:** Since 5 September, 110 staff members have been appointed to front-line services — including care of the elderly and disability services — at Beaumont Hospital. These are the facts and they are provided by the HSE. When protecting the vulnerable, it is very important that we look at the details of the budget. It is important that Deputy Durkan pays attention to the issues in this budget. Despite the economic downturn, I see that the carer's allowance is up €14 per week and the carer's grant is increased to €1,700. An extra €1.1 billion is being spent on health, €50 million is being spent on the disability sector and €276 million extra is being spent when we add cancer services to elderly and disability services. Child benefit is up €6 per week. For example, families with two children under six will now get €6,148. That is a major step in the right direction and I commend the Minister on this. The big one is the €2.5 million for cystic fibrosis which will be rolled out in January. This goes some of the way towards building a more caring society. I look forward to other services being rolled out in the interests of patients.

In recent days, I have been in talks with individuals who were involved in building an independent hospital beside Beaumont Hospital. This project is worth €254 million.

**Deputy Bernard J. Durkan:** That is co-location. The sell-out of the State.

**Deputy Finian McGrath:** The Deputy should listen. It is an independent hospital.

**Deputy Bernard J. Durkan:** He is a recent convert to privatisation.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Deputy McGrath, without interruption.

**Deputy Bernard J. Durkan:** I am sorry, but I just get upset about that.

**Deputy Finian McGrath:** This plan will include 170 inpatient beds in a high-tech facility, which will employ 510 people—

**Deputy Bernard J. Durkan:** Which will result in the scaling down of the public health service. The Deputy should be ashamed of himself.

**Deputy Finian McGrath:** —and will complement the main hospital with extra support services on site and millions of euro for Beaumont Hospital. That is the reality. It is hoped to begin construction in May 2008 and that it will be open in 2010. This also means that 170 new beds will be freed up in Beaumont Hospital, but more importantly it will mean millions of euro going into the accident and emergency department to

take the pressure off. That is the way we should go.

**Deputy Bernard J. Durkan:** Will it take the pressure off the newly built hospital?

**Deputy Finian McGrath:** Section 9 of my agreement contains a measure on social and affordable housing. I welcome the €124 million for social housing and the €50 million for the affordable housing scheme. Some of these schemes will be rolled out and, as I speak, Deputy Durkan, work has begun in Coolock and Cromcastle.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Deputy McGrath should refer his remarks through the Chair rather than any individual Deputy and we might have fewer interruptions. Deputy Durkan should listen before he is called to speak.

**Deputy Bernard J. Durkan:** If that animated action is going on in the Deputy's constituency, I would check it out tomorrow before it stops. I apologise to the Leas-Cheann Comhairle.

**Deputy Finian McGrath:** It is also refreshing to see the voluntary and community housing groups receiving €26 million. I support that as a major step in the right direction.

I accept that we have a long way to go in ensuring the maximum protection of the vulnerable, but this budget is a major start and I will do my best to push for developments in the interests of the people of Dublin North Central. It is an important budget because the objective is to protect the vulnerable. We now have the opportunity to deliver the services, but we also have a responsibility to ensure that when €50 million is allocated to people with disabilities, those services are rolled out and given to the families that need them. When €29 million is given to cancer services, we have a responsibility to ensure that these services are put in to support people with cancer. We must have accountability and this is linked into the debate about investment and reform in our health services. We must have reform and that has begun.

**Deputy Bernard J. Durkan:** There is reform of a kind.

**Deputy Finian McGrath:** I welcome the appointment of Professor Tom Keane, who will get involved in the delivery of these services in the next two years. I urge Deputies to be sensible and to support such progressive developments. I am also delighted that Beaumont Hospital has been selected as one of the centres of excellence as this is a major statement for the north side of Dublin. I take on board some of the criticisms from people in other parts of the country who feel that they are being neglected. We should look at those cases again and I urge Professor Keane to support people in areas that might not

necessarily have got what they wanted. We cannot have a situation where some areas of the country are ignored by these centres.

The carer's benefit of €14 per week and the carer's grant of €1,700 are very important, but the key issue is that even though there is a downturn in the economy, the Minister had the courage to go for €1.1 billion extra in the health services. This is an opportunity to support the development of our health services. I raised these issues and I have been banging on doors and tables for the past few years. The process has now begun and I welcome that. It is a major start and a step in the right direction. I urge all Deputies to support the sensible aspects of this budget.

**Deputy Joanna Tuffy:** Yesterday we had the carbon budget which was promised in the programme for Government. It consisted of a page and a half in total and it did not tell us anything we did not know already, or anything that could not have been highlighted in a primary school project on climate change. In his budget speech, the Minister for Finance stated that climate change targets required everybody to play a part and that the Government also had a part to play, as if the Government was a bit player in addressing climate change. That does not auger very well for his claim that by setting up the Cabinet committee on climate change and energy security, the Government has put climate change at the heart of decision making.

Today's report from the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government was just a speech. It was a filler, the afterthought to the so-called carbon budget, and just a sop to the Green Party Deputies to make them feel included. It was part of the spin of an allegedly green budget, but not a very successful spin. The Minister stated that he particularly welcomed the strong defining theme in the Budget Statement highlighting the Government's environmental agenda. Deputy Gormley's speech largely highlighted how badly the Government is doing in reducing our emissions and tackling climate change. It was more an admission of failure of the green agenda than a new, greener dawn.

The Minister highlighted that we must buy carbon credits to meet the difference between Ireland's net carbon emissions and our Kyoto target. More than half the reduction in emissions will not be an actual reduction, but merely a piece of paper we will buy from somewhere else. The rest is largely accounted for by what are termed carbon sinks, namely, sinks eligible for accounting under Kyoto Protocol rules. Therefore, a minuscule amount of reductions will allegedly come through measures to reduce emissions. The Minister's speech confirms what was predicted in a European Commission report two weeks ago, which stated that our carbon reductions would be largely bought as opposed to achieved. How green is that in meeting our Kyoto targets?

[Deputy Joanna Tuffy.]

A genuine commitment to tackling climate change would have involved the purchase of carbon credits as a last resort, as opposed to a mainstay in achieving our Kyoto targets. The Green Party is admitting defeat in the Minister's speech today on what surely should have driven a real carbon budget, which would deliver a real reduction in our carbon emissions. The Green Party has hitched itself to an incompetent Fianna Fáil and Progressive Democrats administration that has failed to invest in measures that would genuinely have achieved carbon emission reductions, such as investment in public transport and sustainable development. It is the fault of the Government that too much taxpayers' money will be spent on the purchase of carbon credits, with no improvement to the environment.

The Minister's speech largely highlighted the failures, including the fact that "last year greenhouse gas emissions from transport increased by over 5%, indicating the scale of the challenge in that sector". What an understatement. However, from the Minister's speech today and yesterday's budget it looks like business as usual. Instead of a commitment from the Minister for Finance to fast-track key public transport projects, we get regurgitated spin about projects announced many times over, for example, the Kildare line upgrade, originally supposed to have been completed in 2005. There was no commitment in the budget to the 500 extra buses needed in the short term to move more people in Dublin onto public transport as soon as possible.

There was no reference to the building of the interconnector from Heuston Station to Dublin city centre, a vital public transport project that would benefit suburban and intercity rail commuters. The Kildare route project, extra buses for Dublin Bus and the interconnector are all measures that should have been done years ago and still the Government is set to dither and delay significantly investing in our public transport. Rather than prioritising public transport, we get the very non-green approach of allocating almost two thirds of our budget for road building — €1.7 billion for roads out of €2.7 billion in total. So much for the Green Party's election promises to provide major investment in public transport.

Besides the admission by the Minister, Deputy Gormley, that our transport carbon emissions are going up, there is nothing in his speech about public transport. There is one green transport related measure in this budget, namely, the changes to the VRT regime to base VRT on the carbon dioxide emissions of cars. The motor tax changes in this budget represent regressive taxation and, as the Minister admitted yesterday, are merely a revenue raising measure. Its purpose is to make up somewhat for the shortfall in Government funding to local authorities under the budget. The Minister promises to make motor tax

carbon dioxide rated at a later stage. Again, the assumption behind the motor tax and the VRT changes is that most people have no option but to use their cars, increasing carbon emissions, and we might as well tap them for some money for their trouble, namely, being stuck in traffic all day, while we are at it. The apparently green measures in this budget assume our continued dependence as a society on cars and acknowledge an abject failure to reduce our transport caused carbon emissions by giving people more public transport options.

The good news in the Minister's speech consists of rehashing previous announcements, including the draft building regulations on more energy efficient buildings and the continuation of the greener home scheme. These apparently environmentally friendly measures also signify the failure of the Green Party to achieve anything substantial in Government in its first budget. One of the first decisions by the Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources was to slash the amounts available under the greener homes scheme for individuals installing more environmentally friendly heating systems in their homes. Before the Green Party was in Government, a home owner could apply for €4,200 for a biomass boiler. Instead of increasing that, the Green Party in Government reduced the amount to €3,000. That is a failure by the Green Party in Government. The people who would apply for this grant want to change to a more environmentally friendly heating system. How could a Green Party Minister stand over a reduction in the grants to those who want to play their part in reducing the emissions?

The draft building regulations will not be worth the paper they are written on if we continue with the *laissez-faire* approach of the Government to compliance with building regulations. Deputy Sargent said to the Taoiseach in the Dáil this February:

I refer to two articles, one from *The Sunday Tribune* and the other from a construction magazine, *Construct Ireland*, stating that less than 2% of all houses comply with Part L of the Building Regulations 1997. This follows a survey conducted by Sustainable Energy Ireland, which has not been published even though it was carried out in 2005.

That is some context for the Minister, Deputy Gormley's self praise about his introduction of the draft building regulations. The problem is these regulations operate under a system of self-certified compliance by architects employed by the builders who only get to inspect in a very superficial way whether the building regulations are being complied with. Like the existing building regulations, the proposed new building regulations will be no guarantee that our buildings will have the theoretical level of energy efficiency in practice. Will there be any significant compliance with the regulations unless they are backed up by

significant levels of inspection by local authorities and the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government?

A very basic level of alternative heating system is required under the proposed regulations, for example, a wood pellet stove. With the high cost and difficulty in getting wood pellets, what hope is there that hard pressed home buyers will use these heating systems and will not instead opt to use the gas heating systems that will almost certainly also be installed in most of the homes built under these new regulations? This brings me back to the minuscule carbon emission reductions that are predicted in the Minister's emissions table. Is it at all probable that in practice the draft building regulations and the VRT changes will lead to the reductions in emissions predicted by the Minister? Is it more likely that this prediction will have to be adjusted downwards and the amount to be spent on carbon credit purchase revised upwards?

There was no reference in the Minister, Deputy Gormley's speech to the role of waste management in reducing emissions. Was that because the budget provided no increase in money available under the environment subheading for recycling services? How can we, as the Minister suggests, "achieve the annual reduction on average between now and 2012" and "need to purchase only a million carbon credits on average each year" with the approach taken in this first so called "carbon budget"? It is obvious from the Minister's speech that this is only aspirational and he has no intention of making such targets legally binding. He said that "this year's budget is a significant first step". Obviously it is not. Where are the specifics about how we are going to actually reduce our emissions and by how much? Where is the programme for reducing emissions Department by Department? Where are the requirements of local authorities to reduce emissions at local and regional level? Where is the legislation needed to make these targets more than just aspirational? The extra funding for the EPA is welcome but what about the need to properly fund and resource local authorities in their role in environmental protection and mitigating and adapting to climate change?

One does not need a Cabinet committee on climate change and energy security to tell one that public transport projects should be fast-tracked to reduce our transport emissions. It is obvious that we cannot continue with urban sprawl and unsustainable rezonings if we want to reduce our carbon footprint, yet the Government is blindly ignoring this fact, conveniently for Fianna Fáil's developer friends. So called carbon reports and carbon budgets are merely cosmetic unless we make real changes in Ireland, such as vastly improving our public transport sector and more responsible planning of residential communities that will be more energy efficient.

On paper, the Green Party seems to have got very little in the programme for Government, and

so far in practice with the so called "carbon budget" it seems even less. It has adopted the Fianna Fáil pose of being seen to do things by opening conferences and launching reviews, reports and awareness campaigns, although I should say advertising campaigns. Meanwhile, Ireland continues unabated as one of the worst offenders in terms of non-compliance with EU environmental legislation. With today's speech from the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government, it seems the Green Party has given up on reducing our carbon emissions, instead having to buy our way to our Kyoto targets.

In February Senator Dan Boyle, as a then Deputy, said the Carbon Fund Bill:

... was an illustration of the hollowness of the Government's policies towards the environment. It underlines the empty rhetoric in which the Government engages, in terms of indulging in "green speak" and not undertaking one inch of green action.

The shoe is on the other foot now. The Government still indulges in "green speak" but has the Greens to do so for it.

**Deputy Thomas Byrne:** I propose to share time with Deputies Michael McGrath and Cyprian Brady, with the permission of the House.

Tá an-áthas orm labhairt anseo ar son na cáinfhaisnéise a chur an Tánaiste le chéile inné. Tá cruth maith ar an ngeilleagar a bhfuil againn inniu in Éirinn. Níl an geilleagear ag fás chomh tapaídh is a bhí sé cheana ach tá sé fós ag fás, agus go tapaídh má dhéantar compairáid le tíortha eile cóngarach linn. Tá cuspóirí an Tánaiste le feiceáil ins an gcáinfhaisnéis. Tá orainn infheistíocht a dhéanamh don todhchaí, an bhochtaineacht a laghdú, fiontar a chothú, obair a chúiteamh agus, go háirithe, an chomhshaol a chaomhnú agus a shabháil.

Chun an bhochtaineacht a laghdú agus daoine inleonta a chabhrú, fecimid, mar shampla, méadú de 17% ar chreidmheas cánach do churamóirí. Feicimid méaduithe suntasacha ar an réimse leathan do leasa sóisialta, freisin, agus tá go leor samplaí eile ann. Chun obair a chur chun cinn, feicimid go ndearna an Tánaiste cinnte de go gcoinneofar daoine ar phá íseal ó cháin ioncaim ar chor ar bith. Bainfear 39,000 díobh siúd as an eanga cánach, coinneofar daoine ar mheánphá as an ráta ard cánach agus tá na rudaí sin an-tábhachtach don méid mór daoine. Tá an obair seo ag dul chun cinn os rud é gur leathnaigh an Tánaiste na bandaí cánacha tríd na réimsí go léir. Aontaím le seo.

Thacaigh an Tánaiste le húineirí agus ceannaitheoirí tithe agus leis an tionscal tithíochta inné, agus tá an tionscal sin an-tábhachtach don tír seo. Bhí lucht an Fhreasúra ag cáineadh ár bpolasaí maidir le dleacht stampa i rith na mbliana seo agus is deacair a thuiscint cén fáth atá siad á gcáineadh anois, go háirithe nuair a bhfuil an

[Deputy Thomas Byrne.]

Tánaiste ag gníomh ag an am ceart agus nuair atá an margadh ag lorg cabhair. Is féidir comparáid a dhéanamh leis an mbliain seo caite nuair a bhí an baol ann go gcuideodh athrú mar seo le boillsciú phraghais tithe. Feicfead i mo thuairimse, gur Tánaiste ciallmhar agus críonna a bhfuil ann.

Measaim gurb é an rud is tábhachtaí maidir leis an athstruchtúr seo maidir le dleacht stampa ná go bhfuil an córas i bhfad níos simplí. Feicimid an t-am ar fad nuair a bhíonn córas cáin níos simplí go mbíonn fonn ar níos mó daoine é a íoc. Beidh sé éasca an dleacht stampa a thuiscint anois agus cabhróidh sé seo le daoine atá ag iarraidh tithe a cheannach agus leis an margadh go ginearálta.

Nuair atá rátaí úis níos airde ná mar a bhí siad le cúpla bliain anuas, agus leis an gcumhacht sin chun rátaí úis a árdú nó a ísliú anois imithe go dtí an Eoraip, lenár gceadúnas caithfead a rá, tá sé an-tábhachtach go gcabhródh an Tánaiste le daoine ar nós mé féin, caithfidh mé a admháil, a bhfuil ag íoc ar ais morgáistí móra. Tá mórán daoine óga ins an dtreo sin. Feicimid méadú mór ar an uasteorainn faoiseamh úis ar mhortgáiste do chéad-cheannaitheoirí. Tá a Ián céad-ceannaitheoirí i mo dháilcheantair fhéin agus beidh an-áthas orthu go léir. Beidh an-mheas acu ar an dTánaiste mar gheall air.

Molaim go háirithe freisin méadu sa phinsin Stáit. Is é seo an chéad méadú a bhfaighidh pinsineoirí idir seo agus an chéad olltoghcháin eile agus tá siad go léir ag súil leis an €300 sa tseachtain a mbeidh siad ag baint úsáid as.

Maidir le caiteachas, molaim go mór an méadú d'oidreachas ach aithním go mbeidh brú mór ar an Aire Oideachais agus Eolaíochta maidir le scoileanna nua sna ceantair ar nós mo cheantair fhéin atá ag méadú go tapaidh. Beidh scuaine mór ó mo cheantar fhéin ag súil le deá-sceal on Aire maidir le foirgnimh nua go luath.

Maidir leis an dtimpeallacht agus an gcomhshaol, aithním gurb é seo an chéad bhuiséad carbóineach agus is lá tábhachtach mar gheall ar seo. Molaim obair an Taoisigh i leith na timpeallachta le fada an lá.

I shall speak in English as regards VAT and property because this is too complicated to try to translate into Irish.

**Deputy Bernard J. Durkan:** Do not encourage me.

**Deputy Thomas Byrne:** I shall just speak briefly on this. I have worked as solicitor — not in Walkinstown, I should say. In the relatively small number of commercial transactions I have been involved in, an inordinate amount of time was spent on VAT on property. It raises costs and wastes too much time. Although not specifically mentioned in the Budget Statement, the proposed new regime that will be in the Finance Act is part of the budget documentation and, as such, it is appropriate to comment. I cannot say I fully understood the old system or that I have studied

the new system in depth. Anything that will simplify the system of VAT on commercial property and on residential property in some cases, however, will have an enormous impact and reduce professional service costs for solicitors and accountants. In my experience, solicitors ring accountants who ring back and *vice versa*. Nobody knows where he or she is going much of the time with VAT on property. We often end up ringing the Revenue Commissioners asking for an opinion and that is wasteful of their time too.

I commend the Tánaiste on the review that has taken place. There has been much consultation on VAT on property between the Revenue Commissioners and the Department of Finance and the various professions involved. This is very important because it has driven up costs unnecessarily.

**Deputy Michael McGrath:** I very much welcome the opportunity to speak on the 2008 budget. At the outset it is important to understand the context of the budget, in particular given the incessant negative commentary we have had in recent weeks about the performance of the economy. It is important to take an objective look at the facts and examine the performance of the economy and the state of the national finances as we come to the end of the 2007 calendar year.

In 2007 growth in gross domestic product will be in the region of 4.75%. Over the past decade we have had rapid growth in GDP. Not alone have we maintained the level of that output, we again have increased it by almost 5% in 2007. Year on year we are breaking new barriers and continue to make further progress in economic performance. We generated an additional 72,000 jobs in 2007, quite a remarkable performance for an economy of this size. I also commend the Minister on that. I am especially pleased he is prioritising investment on the capital side in the context of the implementation of the national development plan, with a 12% increase over 2007 figures in the allocation to the capital side of the budget. It is important we continue to invest in the development of infrastructure and projects that will deliver benefits throughout the country over the years ahead and put us in a strong position to maintain sustainable and prudent economic growth.

On the current side, spending will increase by 8%. Despite all the talk of cutbacks and deficits, we are increasing expenditure on the current side by that percentage, and by any measure across the OECD, that is a significant increase. Based on those points the Minister can genuinely argue that the fundamentals of the economy are strong and this is irrefutable. Most developed countries in the world would grab the performance we have achieved in recent years and would be delighted to be in position Ireland is in currently as regards national finances. Growth will moderate further in 2008, but GDP will increase by 3% in real

terms. We will create a further 24,000 jobs and inflation will moderate to around 2.4%.

I noted with interest some of the earlier comments about the national debt and our borrowing a further €5 billion in 2008. It is very important we consider what this means. Many Opposition Deputies have expressed concern about borrowing, but the level of a country's debt cannot be measured in absolute terms. The value of the figure in absolute terms is not a real measure of debt. It must be measured as a percentage of the country's output, better known as its GDP. The debt-GDP ratio in Ireland in 2008 will be in the region of 26%. When I looked at the comparators across Europe I found that Ireland was in a very strong position. In 1997 the debt-GDP ratio was 64% while in 2008 it will be less than 26%, which is a dramatic improvement. Having reviewed the NTMA report and examined Eurostat figures, Ireland is in an extremely strong position *vis-à-vis* our European partners, with a debt to GDP ratio which is less than half the EU average. This is significant. Next week, I hope to speak on the Social Welfare Bill and to welcome many of the initiatives the Minister will introduce.

As Deputy Mansergh did earlier, I welcome the allocation of €914 million towards overseas development aid in 2008. This places a major obligation on us to ensure the money is properly invested. A country of our size spending approximately €1 billion on overseas aid is a tremendous achievement and we are well on the way to achieving our overall targets.

In the coming weeks, the Minister will give consideration to the detailed measures of the Finance Bill 2008. I ask the Minister to give serious consideration to the inclusion of tax incentives for the Cork docklands project. Cork City Council and the Cork Chamber of Commerce have submitted a proposal which is in line with EU approval for these incentives. It is a project of regional significance and is in line with our overall gateway strategy. It will help to continue to regenerate Cork city in a positive way.

I welcome the changes in stamp duty introduced by the Tánaiste and Minister for Finance in yesterday's budget. It is an appropriate time to introduce stamp duty reform as can be seen if one examines the impact it will have on couples in particular who wish to trade up and families who need extra bedrooms. Taking the example of a couple buying a house for €500,000, which is not a large amount of money in many parts of the country in terms of property, under the old regime they would have paid €37,000 on stamp duty. The changes implemented yesterday will reduce this liability to €26,250, a reduction of €11,250. This will generate further activity and buoyancy in the market at a time when nobody will deny it is needed. The Minister's intervention is timely, measured and appropriate. I also welcome the significant improvements in mortgage interest relief. The relief has been increased to

€20,000 per annum for a couple. This will make a difference of more than €300 every month.

The increased spend allocated to the Department of Education and Science is to be welcomed, particularly in the context of the primary school building and modernisation programme. I note from the Minister's comments yesterday that the emphasis in 2008 will be on the provision of places in rapidly developing areas throughout the country. My constituency has a number of such areas, particularly Carrigaline and Passage West which are undergoing dramatic development and population expansion and where new school places will be required. The 28% increase in the capital envelope on the primary school side for 2008 gives great hope to communities such as Carrigaline and Passage West that projects in these areas will advance through the building and modernisation programme in 2008.

It would be remiss of us not to acknowledge the tremendous progress achieved in the area of income tax since we came into Government in 1997. I am pleased to see the Minister will continue with this progress in 2008. When one examines the tables in the budget publication one sees the improvements are stark. In 1997, the effective tax rate for a person earning €40,000 in today's terms was approximately 41%. It is now less than half of this at 18.6%. This is a dramatic improvement. While the progress made in the budget might have been less dramatic than in previous budgets it keeps pace with inflation and gives real improvements to people.

Taking the example of a married couple with one income and two children, if the household income in 1997 was €60,000 in today's terms, the effective tax rate would be 36%. In 2008, these changes and progress over the past ten years mean this rate is reduced to just under 20%. These are dramatic improvements in take home pay and allow families to choose how to spend their income and rewards work. This is to be welcomed.

I welcome the many pro-business initiatives in the budget, particularly in the areas of science, technology and innovation. The research allocation of approximately €300 million in 2008 will provide tremendous opportunities for this country to position itself as a leading nation throughout the OECD in terms of investment in science, technology and innovation. This investment will yield a high dividend for the country in the years ahead. I commend the Minister on his ongoing commitment to invest in science, technology and innovation in the State.

The improvements to the research and development tax credit are also to be welcomed. Yesterday, the Minister agreed the base year used to calculate expenditure on research and development is being fixed at 2003 for a further four years to 2013. This will give greater capacity for research and development investment throughout the country. Many companies and organisations will benefit in the long term from this.

[Deputy Michael McGrath.]

The linking of VRT to emission levels is to be welcomed. The Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government, Deputy Gormley, made further announcements today with regard to the carbon budget. This is an important initiative. Much public comment has been made in recent months on the importance of the climate change issue and the significance of it for mankind. The fact cannot be disputed that it must become the most significant political issue in the years ahead. Every citizen of the State, all political parties and all groups and organisations throughout the country have a role to play. While Ireland is a small piece in the jigsaw which can only do what it can, we must play our part in tackling climate change and ensuring the future of the planet is secure for the generations to come. I commend the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government, Deputy Gormley, on the significant initiatives he has taken.

Many improvements have been made with regard to compliance of small and medium businesses with the Revenue Commissioners and the taxation regime to reduce the administrative burden and bureaucracy and provide them with greater flexibility. This is important, as is the Minister's announcement that the small company tax liability threshold for the payment of preliminary tax on the simpler prior year basis will be increased to €200,000 from €150,000 and the threshold for new start-up companies at or below which they do not have to pay preliminary tax in their first accounting year will be increased from €150,000 to €200,000. As my colleague, Deputy Byrne, stated, the small business VAT registration threshold will be increased further from €35,000 per annum for services and €70,000 for goods to €37,500 and €75,000 respectively from 1 May 2008.

As someone with eight years' experience serving in local government, I welcome the fact that local government will benefit significantly from yesterday's budget. While every motorist in the country will experience pain from the increases in motor tax, it is essential that we invest greater resources in local government. The interaction the vast majority of the public has with Government is through the local government system. The roads on which they drive, the footpaths they walk, the facilities their children have in terms of playgrounds, amenities, water services and waste water services are essential facilities provided by local government.

Debate adjourned.

#### Message From Select Committee.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Brian O'Shea):** The Select Committee on Foreign Affairs has concluded its consideration of the Passports Bill 2007 and has made amendments thereto.

## Adjournment Debate.

### Schools Building Projects.

**Deputy James Bannon:** I thank the Ceann Comhairle for affording me time to speak on this important matter, namely, the need for the Minister for Education and Science to give an update on the application by St. Joseph's national school, Rathwire, Killucan, County Westmeath, for a new school building in light of increased enrolment and the rapid growth of the local population. I have already received a reply to a parliamentary question on this issue and, while I appreciate the Minister's agreement that additional accommodation will be required at the school to cater for the increase in enrolments due to the current and planned housing developments in the area, her overall response has not been satisfactory.

Outlining the investments due under the new national development plan is rather like telling children about Christmas and the presents Santa Claus is going to bring but then saying it does not apply to them. Promises about school building programmes in the past ten years have brought little in the way of results for many of our schools. I want to see a firm commitment to St. Joseph's school, which is bursting at the seams of its sub-standard buildings.

This fine school is a victim of its own success and the rapid expansion of the area. The population of the county has increased by 20% in the past ten years. The official enrolment at the end of September was 164 pupils and this is expected to increase to 175 by Christmas, with 19 more already enrolled for next September. By 2010 an enrolment of 400 or more is expected. Staff numbers at the school have increased from four to six teachers, in addition to the principal. The school is a valuable community asset but its future rests on the improvement of the built environment, which cannot be ignored by the Government. The school has been given a four acre site by the Bishop of Meath and all that is needed now is Government funding for the new building. Westmeath County Council will give all the assistance necessary to facilitate the advancement of the project.

The school's current classrooms are too small, with 32 pupils accommodated in 40 square meters. Three pre-fabs are being utilised to ease the pressure on space. Many pupils throughout the country have spent their school days in pre-fab accommodation but I do not want to see that happen to the children of Rathwire. Since 2000, the Government has spent €111 million on temporary accommodation instead of permanent classrooms despite warnings from the State financial watchdog that it would be cheaper to build new buildings.

We should not make the same mistake in this instance. St. Joseph's is surrounded by new housing developments and is anxious to accept all children who wish to enrol. I compliment the teachers, pupils, parents, the principal and the board of management for all the hard work they have put into making their dreams for the school a reality. I ask the Minister to give a firm commitment to helping this school in the interest of educational progression and health and safety. It is unfair to force children and teachers into accommodation when capacity is already maximised. The only blockage to progress at present is the Minister.

**Minister of State at the Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs (Deputy Pat Carey):** I am replying to this motion on behalf of the Minister for Education and Science. I thank the Deputy for raising this matter as it provides me with the opportunity to outline to the House the Government's strategy for capital investment in education projects and to outline the current position on St. Joseph's national school, Rathwire, Killucan, County Westmeath.

Modernising facilities in our 3,200 primary and 750 post-primary schools is not an easy task given the legacy of decades of under investment in this area, as well as the need to respond to emerging demands in areas of rapid population growth. Nonetheless, the Government has shown a consistent determination to improve the condition of school buildings and ensure the appropriate facilities are in place to enable the implementation of a broad and balanced curriculum.

The Government has dramatically increased investment in the school building programme from just over €90 million to €540 million this year. Under the lifetime of the national development plan, almost €4.5 billion will be invested in schools. This unprecedented level of capital investment reflects the commitment of the Government to continuing its programme of sustained investment in primary and post primary schools. This year over €300 million will be invested in large scale building projects concentrated mainly in the provision of school accommodation in rapidly developing areas.

The funding will facilitate construction work on over 150 large scale projects which will deliver over 15,000 additional permanent places in new schools and the extension and modernisation of facilities in existing schools for over 45,000 pupils. It will also enable the purchase of sites to facilitate the smooth delivery of the school building programme with a focus on site requirements in rapidly developing areas. The balance will be used to fund the other elements of the school building programme such as the summer works scheme, the small schools scheme and the permanent accommodation scheme. In total over 1,500 school building projects will be delivered in 2007.

St. Joseph's national school has a current staffing of one principal, five mainstream teachers and one learning support and resource teacher. The school has a current enrolment of 147 pupils and has experienced a 15% increase in enrolments over the past five years.

The school management authority made an application to the Department in February 2006 for capital investment in additional classroom accommodation. The application was assessed in accordance with the Department's published prioritisation criteria. As the Deputy will be aware, all applications for large scale capital funding are assessed against published prioritisation criteria. Progress on individual projects, such as the one in question, will be considered in the context of the multi-annual school building and modernisation programme.

In common with all applications for major capital investment, the Department carries out a detailed examination of the demographic profile of an area, together with planned housing developments and other matters to ensure that any planned capital investment will meet the needs of the area as a whole for the foreseeable future. A recent submission on developments in the area has been received from the school authorities and is being examined by the Department. All schools are required as an interim measure to maximize the use of existing accommodation until the Department is in a position to make extra accommodation available.

**Deputy Jimmy Deenihan:** I thank the Ceann Comhairle for affording me the opportunity to raise the issue of Dromclough national school, County Kerry. I attended the school in the late 1950s and early 1960s. It has always had a high level of academic achievement. Enrolment is approximately 203 and the school has 11 teachers, three special needs assistants and a secretary. An application was made in April 2002 for new accommodation and a further application was submitted in January 2003. The school authorities received a letter from the Department of Education and Science in January 2006 confirming that approval had been granted for an eight classroom school. The school authorities, board of management, principal and teachers have been waiting for a site visit from the Department's technical team for almost two years. They believe that other schools, which received approval for building projects after January 2006, have made considerable progress and they are asking why their school has been ignored.

The school was placed on band 2.2 in the Department's banding system. The board of management believes the school should have been placed in a higher priority band on the basis that cognisance was not taken of the structural condition of the school building. Three classrooms built in 1964 are basically glass boxes measuring



[Deputy Jimmy Deenihan.]

49 sq. m., whereas the current regulation classroom size is 70 sq. m. The classrooms in question are a safety hazard in every sense and limited space is also bad for health. They are not linked by a corridor which means pupils must walk through working classrooms to reach the other part of the school building. Such conditions are unacceptable in this day and age.

A further section of the building was completed in 1981. Unfortunately, due to cutbacks at that time, proper materials were not used in construction. As a result, there are major structural defects with the entire section, in which I have seen subsidence. Floors have dropped, creating ledges and the roof leaks. When the heating system broke down in 2004 the school was informed by a plumber that the pipes in the section had been broken and had been leaking hot water into the ground for as many as 20 years. Water drainage pipes under the building were also broken and there were sewerage problems. Cracks have had to be filled in various parts of the section over the years.

The doors of the in-class toilet areas have to be planed regularly. A prefabricated building provided by the Department in 1991 is falling into serious disrepair. Accommodation was never provided for the resource teachers despite many applications being submitted. A sense of complete frustration led the school to buy a portakabin measuring 52 ft. by 12 ft. This is divided by a single partition into three spaces for the three resource teachers. Moneys for this purpose were primarily secured through fundraising.

The school does not have a staff room, principal's office or storage facilities in corridors or classrooms, nor does it have facilities for disabled people. The building's flat roof has outlived its lifespan. A site of 4.5 acres is available for a new building adjacent to the school grounds.

I am disappointed the Minister is not present for this debate. I ask the Minister of State, Deputy Pat Carey, a fellow Kerry person and former teacher, to convey to the Minister the need to assemble a technical group to visit Dromclough national school. Other schools in County Kerry could be visited at the same time. Is the county so peripheral that the Department cannot get officials to visit us?

**Deputy Pat Carey:** I am taking this Adjournment matter on behalf of the Minister for Education and Science, Deputy Mary Hanafin. The Minister thanks the Deputy for raising the matter as it affords her an opportunity to outline to the House the Government's strategy for capital investment in education projects and the position regarding the application for an extension to Dromclough national school, Listowel, County Kerry.

Modernising facilities in our schools presents major challenges given the legacy of under-investment and the need to respond to emerging issues in areas of rapid population growth. The Government has demonstrated a commitment to improving the condition of our school buildings and ensuring accommodation facilities are made available to support a broad and balanced curriculum. This year alone, more than €540 million is being spent on school building and modernisation projects. Since 1997, a total of €3 billion has been invested in school buildings and this has delivered in excess of 7,800 projects.

While continuing to build on past achievements, investment this year has focused in particular on the provision of school accommodation in areas where the population is growing at a rapid rate. As further evidence of the Government's commitment, funding under the national development plan of approximately €4.5 billion will be invested in schools in the coming years.

In addition to the record levels of investment I have outlined, the programme for Government contains a wide range of commitments which will maintain momentum in the school building programme. I am sure Deputies will agree that, taken together with the committed funding in the coming years, there is clear evidence of the priority accorded to school building by the Government.

Furthermore, to reduce red tape and allow projects to progress at a faster pace, responsibility for smaller projects has been devolved to school level. Standard designs have also been developed for eight and 16 classroom schools to facilitate speedier delivery of projects and save on design fees. The design and build method is also used to expedite delivery where the use of standard designs is not possible. Taken together with the unprecedented level of funding available, these initiatives ensure building projects are delivered in the fastest timeframe possible.

Turning to the school in question, Dromclough national school is a co-educational primary school with a current enrolment of 194 pupils. Enrolments at this school have increased in recent years from 164 pupils in 2001. The school has a current staffing of a principal, seven mainstream assistants and three learning support-resource teachers.

The school has submitted an application to the Department for an extension and the long-term staffing figure on which accommodation needs will be based has been determined and notified to the school authority. It has been agreed that appropriate accommodation should be provided to cater for a long-term projected staffing of a principal, eight mainstream assistants and appropriate ancillary accommodation. The next step is to carry out a technical investigation of the existing building and site to determine its suitability. When this inspection has been completed the project will be progressed in the context of the

school building and modernisation programme. I will convey to the Minister the Deputy's concern that the project be progressed as quickly as possible.

I thank the Deputy for raising this matter and allowing me to outline the progress being made under the school building and modernisation programme and the position regarding the application for an extension to Dromclough national school, Listowel, County Kerry.

**Deputy Jimmy Deenihan:** The school has made no progress.

### Planning Legislation.

**Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin:** I seek the repeal of the Planning and Development (Strategic Infrastructure) Act 2006. I opposed the Bill's passage through this House in the final days of the session prior to the commencement of the summer recess in July 2006. Sinn Féin remains absolutely opposed to the anti-democratic intent of this legislation that facilitates the rushing through, railroading and imposition of major infrastructural projects, irrespective of their effects in environmental or health terms on citizens or on whole communities.

In our contributions in the course of the passage of this legislation Sinn Féin Deputies spelled out clearly its intent and purpose and our opposition. This legislation allows major infrastructural projects to bypass the planning process, denies citizens and communities their right to give effect to their objections in that process and fast-tracks approval through the strategic infrastructure division of An Bord Pleanála. Incinerators, thermal power stations, landfill sites, oil and gas pipelines and installations, motorway routes, electricity power line link-ups and much more besides are facilitated by the legislation. It is the latter, the electricity power line link-ups, that has prompted our return to the legislation in question. EirGrid has now publicly indicated its intent to put in place a North-South interconnector from counties Tyrone and Armagh and through County Monaghan and into County Cavan. It has a second power line proposal between counties Meath and Cavan.

It would appear that despite the clearly expressed opposition of countless thousands of families who live in close proximity to the proposed routes of these power lines and their support pylons, EirGrid remains fixed on its overhead approach to these projects. The same can be said of NIE, Northern Ireland Electricity, which is jointly on board with EirGrid in the first of the two projects signalled. Communities the length of these proposed power lines are vehemently opposed to the introduction of these unsightly pylons and fearful for the health of all exposed to these high voltage power conduits, fearful for

themselves collectively, for their families, and for the children of these communities.

It is an absolute essential, I believe, that we recognise the harrowing reality of the outworking of the passage of the Planning and Development (Strategic Infrastructure) Act 2006. The extent of concern, real fear, and absolute opposition voiced throughout the length and the breadth of counties Armagh, through Monaghan and Cavan and into County Meath knows no bounds. It knows no political boundaries and people of all opinions and none are joining as concerned communities endeavouring to ensure that EirGrid and NIE in their particular area of responsibility deal with these proposed projects, important infrastructural developments that they be, from an underpinning approach. There can be no question that there is significant information on record, eminent professional and well-researched opinion, stating clearly that there is every reason for genuine health concerns and there can be no question as to the visual impact on the environment of this unsightly string of pylon structures, stretching some 130 plus km along the length of the two routes suggested.

It is imperative, therefore, in light of the continued obstinacy of EirGrid and NIE, that we in this jurisdiction respond to the concerns of communities, families and citizens, who are dependent on their elected voices to deliver. In this instance, it is our bounden duty to revisit this legislation, mindful of its role in facilitating these major developers in carrying out their specific plans. We need to restore access to the proper planning process. We need to ensure there is compliance by all who wish to see major projects undertaken. We need to ensure that communities and citizens have the right to engage as objectors in the normal course.

I appeal to the Minister and to the Government to take on board this Deputy's concerns, concerns reflected by colleagues of his own and of all opinion represented in this House. It is now time for action and to properly and responsibly revisit this legislation.

**Deputy Pat Carey:** I thank Deputy Ó Caoláin for raising the issues of democracy, accountability and participation in the planning process. One of the main goals set for the coming years by the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government, Deputy Gormley, on whose behalf I am taking this adjournment matter, is to maximise public participation in the planning process, from the forward planning stage to development management. It is a matter of major importance to others besides Deputy Ó Caoláin.

Repealing the provisions of the strategic infrastructure Act would not do anything to enhance public participation or community involvement in the planning process. In fact, it would do the very opposite. The strategic infrastructure Act has

[Deputy Pat Carey.]

introduced a number of key measures designed to ensure that projects which go through the new strategic consent process are subject to even greater public scrutiny than projects which go through the normal planning process, both at pre-application and application stage.

Specifically, the Act is designed to provide a better quality service for all stakeholders, infrastructure providers, State bodies and the general public alike, through a single stage consent process of approval for projects, a rigorous assessment of all projects including their environmental impact, full public consultation, and greater certainty of timeframes. Our existing planning system is an inclusive one which rightly provides for extensive public participation at various stages and ensures that all concerns can be fully taken into account when crucial decisions are taken. The strategic consent process in no way compromises or “short circuits” democratic involvement. However, what the new consent system does achieve is a streamlining that allows for full democratic participation, ensures transparency and accountability, and strikes the right balance between the national interest and the views and concerns of local groups and individuals.

The Act protects the rights of everyone to participate in the process and affords opportunities for members of the public, residents or environmental groups to make known their views on proposed infrastructure projects. Pre-application consultations also form an integral part of the new process. The purpose of these consultations is to ensure that the subsequent application for permission-approval is of a high standard, that correct procedures are followed, that adequate information is submitted and that issues relating to proper planning and sustainable development and the effects on the environment are adequately addressed from the outset in the application. Crucially, from the point of view of maximising community involvement, the board has powers to include in the process any person who in its opinion is in possession of information relevant to the proposed development. For the purposes of transparency, on conclusion of the pre-application process, records of any meetings held with prospective applicants will be made available by the board for inspection by the public.

At application stage proper, the very same extensive rights of public participation that exist in relation to “normal” planning applications apply equally under the new process. This means that, before making a decision, the board is legally obliged to consider submissions made in relation to an application. As well as having their views taken into consideration during the decision-making process, third parties also have the right to be notified of any new significant

information provided by an applicant; request an oral hearing; and be notified of the decision of the board. It is worth noting that the chairperson of An Bord Pleanála has signalled that its general policy will be to hold oral hearings in all cases other than the most straightforward.

The Act also recognises the potential role for locally elected representatives in the consent process for major infrastructure development in their areas, by giving them the opportunity to have their views, both collective and individual, included in a report from the local authority or authorities potentially affected by such a development. These views, with those of the managers of the relevant local authorities, and those submitted by members of the public and other third parties, must then be taken into consideration by the board in making its determination on a particular application.

The provisions contained in the strategic infrastructure Act not only uphold but also significantly enhance the democratic participation, transparency and accountability associated with the planning process.

#### **Fisheries Protection.**

**Deputy Joe McHugh:** I welcome the Minister of State. As of last Tuesday no drift net fishermen or draft net fishermen operating out of Lough Foyle have been paid under the hardship compensation scheme. Perhaps the Minister of State has a further update, but that was the position up to Tuesday. We are talking about a number of fishermen who have been fishing all their lives and generations of their families have been involved in salmon fishing. These fishermen bought into this scheme in good faith and surrendered their licences and their nets. It is nearly Christmas yet none of these fishermen has been paid. It is a serious issue because the hardship scheme and the ban on drift net fishing damaged the fabric of a way of life not just in Donegal and the Lough Swilly area but around the inlets of the island of Ireland. This will always be remembered.

It is an extremely sore point given that the fishermen bought into this scheme in good faith but must now await EU approval. The Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, stated that this must be sanctioned by the European Commission. While the Minister of State, Deputy Carey, probably does not have this information to hand, the question that needs to be asked is when the State aid package was sent to Europe for consideration and sanction. There is no point in members of the Government telling fishermen in Donegal that Brussels is responsible. The onus is on the Government to expedite the processing of this approval. The only way this can happen is by making direct contact with Commissioner Joe Borg in Brussels. I ask the Minister

8 o'clock

of State to use his good offices with the Minister, Deputy Ryan, to come to some resolution.

More generally, the community in County Donegal, which includes my constituency, is very much a coastal one. There have been dramatic changes in its way of life in recent years, with fishermen not being allowed to fish for salmon and having to sell their licences. In addition, another decommissioning of the white fish fleet is coming down the track for 2008. Many fishermen had difficulty with this fund being named the hardship fund. Effectively it is more a redundancy package. These men had a way of life in an industry that contributed to the local economy. The only difference from a redundancy package is that the payments from the fund will be taxed, which is another cause for concern and a bone of contention.

We are fighting a battle to retain jobs in this sector. While some fishermen are diversifying into shrimp fishing or returning to lobster fishing, there are job losses as a result of the scheme. It is difficult to map out a future for any type of coastal activity. There was a gaping hole in yesterday's budget regarding funding for the coastal community following the cessation of drift net fishing.

In Brussels, Joe Borg stated that compensation packages would be available for the Government to access. Where are they? The Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, needs to answer this question. Where are the measures for the different types of investment schemes which were discussed seven months ago? They are not in place and are not included in this year's budget, unless they are hidden between the lines.

Coastal communities have many difficulties. I raised the issue of the coastal stations at Malin Head and Valentia with the Taoiseach yesterday. We are getting rid of a way of life in rural Ireland. This is an issue we need to take seriously and we have enough coastal public representatives to make sure it does not happen. Why are we seeking to remove services from Malin Head and Valentia, two of the most peripheral parts of the country, given there are 17 jobs at each station? We must stay focused on this issue. I look forward to a favourable reply.

**Deputy Pat Carey:** I thank Deputy McHugh for raising the matter, which I am taking on behalf of the Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources, Deputy Eamon Ryan.

By way of background, the Minister would like to advise the House that in May 2007 approval was given by the North-South Ministerial Council for the introduction of a suite of five regulations to be administered by the Loughs Agency of the Foyle, Carlingford and Irish Lights Commission. The regulations provided the Loughs Agency with the necessary powers to manage the North Atlantic salmon fisheries in the Foyle and Carlingford areas in compliance with the EU habitats directive and the recommendations of

the North Atlantic Salmon Conservation Organisation, NASCO. Recognising the impact that cessation of the mixed stock fishery at sea would have on a traditional salmon fishermen, approval was also given for an associated hardship scheme to be offered to former drift and draft net licence holders with demonstrable fishing experience during the period 2002 to 2006.

Historically, commercial salmon fishing has been undertaken using drift and draft nets. Drift net fisheries have operated in the Foyle area, with draft net activity being concentrated in recent years in the tidal River Foyle between Derry and Strabane. There is no commercial fishery for salmon in the Carlingford area. As the stocks exploited seawards of Lough Foyle are mixed and include stock from rivers not achieving their conservation limits, the agency must end the fishing of salmon in this area. While the stocks exploited in both Lough Foyle and the tidal area of the Foyle by the commercial fishery are currently achieving their conservation limits, evidence indicates that rationalisation of fishing effort is necessary for stock levels to continue to achieve conservation limits and for the continuation of a viable commercial fishery. It is therefore recognised that the cessation and rationalisation of commercial salmon fishing will have a significant financial impact on those who historically operated in these seasonal fisheries.

The salmon hardship scheme being administered by the Loughs Agency is intended to provide a measure of relief to individuals in line with the degree of hardship likely to be experienced on foot of the cessation of fishing for salmon arising from the closure of the interceptory fishery seaward of Lough Foyle and the reduction of the number of commercial licences operating within the lough. The scheme is based on the fishing history of those who are impacted by the need to cease fishing and of those who may accept it on a voluntary basis to facilitate the rationalisation of commercial fishing effort.

The agency has estimated the maximum total cost of the scheme at €4,270,000 if all the licensees were to take up the package. The agency will collect and destroy the decommissioned fishing gear and those wishing to receive the hardship package will be required to give a commitment to leave the salmon fishing sector permanently. In fact, the number of drift nets that operated in the Foyle area in 2007 reduced from 112 to 18 and the number of draft nets which operated within Lough Foyle and the River Foyle decreased from 50 to 12.

The scheme is joint-funded by the Government and the Northern Ireland Executive. Both sponsoring Departments have simultaneously lodged a State aid notification with the Commission. The necessary State aid approval by the European Commission of the Hardship Scheme is still awaited and it has not been possible for payments to be made by the Loughs Agency to date. The Minister, Deputy Ryan, recently discussed the

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issue with the Minister for Agriculture and Rural Development in Northern Ireland, while participating in a sectoral meeting of the North-South Ministerial Council, and they resolved that they would pursue the European Commission for an urgent decision. I am advised that as soon as

approval is received, applicants will be invited to complete their applications and payments will commence.

The Dáil adjourned at 8.10 p.m. until 2.30 p.m. on Tuesday, 11 December 2007.

## 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 11, inclusive, answered orally.*

### Transport Regulation.

12. **Deputy John O'Mahony** asked the Minister for Transport if he will create the role of a National Transport Regulator; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32940/07]

13. **Deputy Joe Carey** asked the Minister for Transport if he will open up the bus market to increased competition; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32878/07]

38. **Deputy Eamon Gilmore** asked the Minister for Transport if he has plans to introduce new national or regional transport authorities to complement the proposed Dublin Transport Authority and implement Transport 21; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32797/07]

76. **Deputy Kieran O'Donnell** asked the Minister for Transport if he has plans relating to a review or restructuring of regulatory bodies in the transport sector; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32935/07]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Noel Dempsey):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 12, 13, 38 and 76 together.

The Programme for Government includes a commitment to examine a National Transport Regulator in the context of the proposed review of the economic regulatory environment.

The first step is, as stated in the Programme for Government, to expedite the establishment of a Dublin Transport Authority which will have overall responsibility for surface transport in the Greater Dublin Area. I am currently examining legislative proposals for the proposed Authority with the intention of bringing them to Govern-

ment for approval and to publish a Dublin Transport Authority Bill in due course.

The Programme for Government also includes a commitment to improve bus services under Transport 21 by reforming bus licensing to facilitate the optimum provision of services by providing a level playing field for all market participants. The precise arrangements for the procurement of buses from the private sector will be dealt with in this context. The new licensing regime will be designed in a manner consistent with the recently adopted EU Regulation on Public Service Obligations in the transport sector.

While it is not possible at this time to indicate a precise time as to when the legislative proposals on regulatory reform of the bus market will be published, applications for bus licences and notifications from bus operators will continue to be processed under the provisions of the Road Transport Act 1932, as amended, or the notification system with reference to the Transport Act 1958, as appropriate.

The proposed review of the entire economic regulatory framework, to which I referred to at the outset, is being coordinated by the Department of the Taoiseach. The Government is reflecting on how best to proceed with this review, which will of necessity involve a number of Government Departments.

### Air Services.

14. **Deputy Olivia Mitchell** asked the Minister for Transport if he will promote direct flights between Moscow and Dublin; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25601/07]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Noel Dempsey):** My policy objective is to ensure that Ireland is served by as wide a range as possible of safe and reliable air services for the benefit of business and tourism. A bilateral air service agreement between Ireland and the Russian Fed-

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eration has been in place since March 1993, which facilitates direct services between Moscow and Dublin. I understand that a Russian airline is planning to operate a scheduled service between the two cities starting in 2008.

#### Road Safety.

15. **Deputy Willie Penrose** asked the Minister for Transport when he will publish the report on his Department's investigation into the presence of vehicles that have been classified as total write-offs and unfit for road use on Irish roads; if he will reform the National Vehicle Driver File in view of these allegations; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32778/07]

25. **Deputy Alan Shatter** asked the Minister for Transport the action he will take to address the situation of potentially thousands of dangerous crashed cars being put back onto Irish roads; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32946/07]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Noel Dempsey):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 15 and 25 together.

As I indicated in reply to a similar questions put down by Deputy Broughan on 18 October and Deputy English on 23 October last the arrangements covering the treatment and notification of write-offs are being examined by the RSA, the Garda Síochána, the Revenue Commissioners who are responsible for the registration of vehicles and my Department in its role in relation to the NVDF. This examination which is still ongoing includes an intensive exercise involving the matching of data held by insurers, where this is made available, against the NVDF records to discover if there are gaps in the information on the NVDF. The verification process is made more difficult given that it is not obligatory on insurance companies to provide the data.

If the examination reveals that there are deficiencies in the current arrangements, appropriate action will be taken. This would include adjustments to the procedures for notifying and recording on the NVDF, appropriate verification of identity and roadworthiness where vehicles are returned to use and legislative changes, if warranted.

#### Road Network.

16. **Deputy Joan Burton** asked the Minister for Transport if he has reviewed the National Consumer Agency's submission objecting to the proposed increase in tolls to come into effect when barrier-free tolling is introduced on the M50 in August 2008; the exact amount it will cost the State to buy NTR out of the West Link toll contract; the way the VAT portion of this cost was

financed by his Department; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32781/07]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Noel Dempsey):** As Minister for Transport I have responsibility for overall policy and funding in relation to the national roads programme element of Transport 21. The implementation of individual national road projects, including the M50, is a matter for the National Roads Authority (NRA) under the Roads Act, 1993 in conjunction with the local authorities concerned.

In addition, issues relating to tolls on national roads are in the first instance a matter for the NRA. The statutory power to levy tolls on national roads, to make toll by-laws and to enter into toll agreements with private investors in respect of national roads, is vested in the NRA under Part V of the Roads Act 1993 (as amended by the Planning and Development Act 2000 and the Roads Act 2007).

Section 57 of the Roads Act 1993 (as amended by Section 271 of the Planning and Development Act 2000) provides that the NRA may make a Draft Toll Scheme in respect of a national road and Section 58 (as amended by Section 272 of the Planning & Development Act 2000) states that objections to the draft toll scheme may be made in writing to the road authority, which in the case of a national road is the NRA.

I understand that a number of objections have been lodged to the Draft Toll Scheme for the M50, on foot of which there is to be an Oral Hearing in accordance with the requirements of Section 58 of the Roads Act 1993, commencing on Wednesday, 12th December 2007, and that the NRA have appointed Mr. Maurice O'Connell to hold this Oral Hearing.

In relation to the buy-out of the West-Link toll concession, the cost of compensating NTR was a matter for determination between the NRA and NTR in line with the 1987 West-Link Agreement. On that basis, NTR will receive annual payments of €50 million, plus CPI, for each of the years 2008-2020, in other words a sum of the order of €600 million.

The VAT payment arising from the buy-out was almost €121.9 million, the cost of which was met by my Department in July 2007. In order to meet this cost, a Supplementary Estimate of €60 million will be sought on the 11th of December 2007. The remainder of the payment is being offset by savings in the Transport Vote in 2007.

#### Public Transport.

17. **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** asked the Minister for Transport the percentage of Bus Átha Cliath and Bus Éireann buses that can accommodate passengers with impaired mobility. [32851/07]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Noel Dempsey):** Since 2000 all buses purchased by

Dublin Bus are low-floor wheelchair accessible. I understand from Dublin Bus that currently 67% of the fleet (almost 800 buses) is accessible and that the company plans to have all of the fleet accessible by 2012.

Bus Éireann has informed me that approximately 26% (174 buses) of its fleet of buses used for scheduled services is fully accessible to customers with impaired mobility. (This excludes coaches). The company has achieved practically a complete fleet conversion to low floor accessible buses on all city services operating in Cork, Limerick, Galway and Waterford. In the future all buses purchased by Dublin Bus and Bus Éireann will be fully accessible.

### Integrated Ticketing System.

18. **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** asked the Minister for Transport when integrated ticketing will be introduced; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32852/07]

41. **Deputy Pat Rabbitte** asked the Minister for Transport when integrated ticketing will be introduced in the greater Dublin and mid-east regions; the estimated cost of implementing an integrated ticketing scheme; the amount that has been spent to date on the integrated ticketing programme; if all relevant Bus Éireann services will be included in the integrated ticketing scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32795/07]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Noel Dempsey):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 18 and 41 together.

The Second Report of the Integrated Ticketing Project Board sets out the time lines, scope and budget for the Integrated Ticketing Project.

This involves the integrated ticketing system being launched initially on the scheduled services of Dublin Bus, LUAS and Morton's Coaches, a private bus operator by September 2009.

Irish Rail DART and commuter rail services will be included within a further 12 months, and Bus Éireann will implement a pilot scheme on one of its commuter routes in the Greater Dublin Area. It is also envisaged the other private bus operators will also join the integrated ticketing system over this timeframe.

The Integrated Ticketing Project Board has agreed a programme for the delivery of an integrated ticketing system in the Dublin area within a capital budget of € 49.6 million. This includes long distance commuting into/out of the Dublin area. To date, €12.1 million exchequer funding has been spent.

The Chairman of the Integrated Ticketing Project Board has informed me, in a recent report, that he is pleased to be able to report good progress with the project progressing in accordance with the agreed programme.

### Environmental Policy.

19. **Deputy Shane McEntee** asked the Minister for Transport if he will commission a study of environmental costs caused by the transport sector with a view to introducing possible measures to reduce carbon emissions; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32924/07]

49. **Deputy Joe Costello** asked the Minister for Transport if, in view of Sustainable Energy Ireland's report Energy Efficiency in Ireland, he has plans to introduce new standards for carbon emissions of imported vehicles, measures to encourage the purchase of hybrid or low emissions vehicles or targets to reduce the huge transport carbon footprint; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32807/07]

59. **Deputy Liz McManus** asked the Minister for Transport the percentage of carbon emissions generated by transport; the target being set for 2008 to reduce carbon emissions from transport; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [29144/07]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Noel Dempsey):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 19, 49 and 50 together.

A number of measures to reduce greenhouse gas emissions relating to transport have been included in the National Climate Change Strategy, published by the Department of Environment Heritage and Local Government in April 2007. These include rebalancing of motor taxes, Mineral Oil Tax Relief for biofuels, modal shift through Transport 21 and the achievement of a 5.75% biofuels blend in fuels by 2010. In all, the transport sector will provide up to 13% in total national emission savings under that Strategy.

I have also announced the preparation of a Sustainable Transport Action Plan, which will support the revised National Climate Change Strategy. This Action Plan will set out a broad suite of policies and measures to help the transport sector progress along a more sustainable trajectory and make a further contribution to reducing emissions to year 2020.

Tackling transport emissions requires a cross-Departmental approach and I am determined to ensure that my Department will continue to play its part in ensuring that the transport sector makes its contribution to the task of controlling national greenhouse gas emissions so that Ireland fulfils its international obligations relating to climate change.

### Air Services.

20. **Deputy Olivia Mitchell** asked the Minister for Transport if he is aware of any plans by Aer Lingus to either dispose of or lease Heathrow slots to US airlines, or alternatively, if the airline has itself plans to open a base in a US city to



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capitalise on its Heathrow slots under Open Skies; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25642/07]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Noel Dempsey):** I understand that one slot pair at London Heathrow is currently being leased by Aer Lingus to the US carrier Continental Airlines for a three-year period. Decisions relating to the lease of slots and to setting up new bases outside of Ireland are commercial decisions for the board of Aer Lingus and its management team and I am not aware of their plans in that regard.

However, the situation is quite different regarding the disposal of slots at London Heathrow. At the time of the IPO last year arrangements were put in place to safeguard against the disposal of Heathrow slots by the airline. These arrangements are built into the Company's Memorandum and Articles of Association. The effect of these arrangements, at present, is to provide for the possibility that any disposal of Heathrow slots can be prevented by 30.4% of the votes cast at an Extraordinary General Meeting. 25.4% of the shares in the Company are held by the Minister for Finance on behalf of the State.

#### Road Traffic Accidents.

21. **Deputy Rory O'Hanlon** asked the Minister for Transport the number of fatalities involving drivers, pedestrians and cyclists, including motor cyclists, in which the level of blood alcohol was between 50 to 80 mg per 100 ml; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [27645/07]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Noel Dempsey):** Under the Road Safety Authority Act 2006 (Conferral of Functions) Order 2006 (S.I. No 477 of 2006) this is a matter for the Road Safety Authority.

#### Port Development.

22. **Deputy Ciarán Lynch** asked the Minister for Transport if he will report on the proposed disposal of lands in the port of Cork's Tivoli estate; his Department's estimation of the values of these lands; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32790/07]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Noel Dempsey):** This is an operational matter for Port of Cork Company. I have no function in this regard.

#### Ministerial Responsibilities.

23. **Deputy Jack Wall** asked the Minister for Transport if he has received and reviewed a book (details supplied); his view on the finding of the report that the failure of the Government to re-establish a dedicated Department of the Marine is in opposition to stated EU maritime policy and

that the failure to reconvene a dedicated Marine Department will adversely effect marine development; if the transport and marine Department as presently constituted is unwieldy and difficult to manage; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32793/07]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Noel Dempsey):** I have not received the book nor had an opportunity to study it. However, I believe the current allocation of Ministerial responsibilities provides fully for the development of marine and maritime matters. The nature of Government is such that any combination of functions will still require cross Departmental co-operation and co-ordination to deliver the full agenda. This is the case in a maritime context but will not, I believe, adversely affect overall development. The Irish position is not unique and the issue is discussed from time to time at a European level. As the Deputy will be aware, my Department is the Department of Transport and while it covers a broad and very intensive range of issues, I have not found it to be unwieldy or difficult to manage. Indeed I consider that the maritime function is a welcome inclusion and enables the full spectrum of transport issues — land, sea and air — to be considered in context.

#### Departmental Offices.

24. **Deputy Kieran O'Donnell** asked the Minister for Transport the issues covered by his press office on 13 and 14 June 2007; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32936/07]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Noel Dempsey):** The Press Office of my Department is responsible for the dissemination of information to the media and coordinating the release of press material on behalf of the Department.

The range of issues that the Press Office must deal with on any given day is wide and very varied, reflecting the many areas of responsibility of the Department. While no daily log of press queries is kept by the press office the media queries dealt with on the days in question would have been numerous. They would have ranged from Coast Guard & related matters, to Road Safety matters to Public Transport issues, appointment of new Minister etc.

*Question No. 25 answered with Question No. 15.*

#### Coast Guard Service.

26. **Deputy Martin Ferris** asked the Minister for Transport if there will be job losses as a result of the removal of Marine Resource Co-ordination Centres in Valentia and Malin Head. [32856/07]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Noel Dempsey):** I would like to assure the Deputy that there will be no job losses arising from the change

of Coast Guard functions for the Marine Rescue Co-ordination Centres at Valentia and Malin Head. As the Deputy is no doubt aware, I have recently announced an enhancement of the marine emergency response capability in Ireland involving an investment programme to create two state of the art Marine Co-ordination Centres, one in Drogheda and another on the west coast.

The Valentia and Malin Head premises will remain part of the Coast Guard infrastructure, they will be staffed and some operations will continue to be delivered from the locations. The precise nature of the long-term function has yet to be finalised.

The process of migrating from the present situation to the new developments will be planned and implemented in consultation with staff interests. That process will take account of the safety needs of local communities, ongoing improvement of the service to the public and the concerns of individual staff members.

#### Traffic Management.

27. **Deputy Michael Noonan** asked the Minister for Transport if he will ensure that operation freeflow in Dublin will continue all year round; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32934/07]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Noel Dempsey):** There are several good reasons why Operation Freeflow, the traffic management initiative for Dublin for the Christmas and New Year period, is not continued around the year.

During the period over 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 as part of Operation Freeflow would not be matched by take-up by the public at other times of the year.

A ban on non-essential road works, which plays an important role in Operation Freeflow, would also obviously not be possible year-round.

Finally, Freeflow involves putting a large number of extra probationary Gardaí on the streets — 160 in Operation Freeflow 2007. As you will appreciate, Garda resources are in demand across a variety of enforcement functions, and the retention of so many Gardaí on Freeflow-type duty after traffic volumes revert to normal levels and patterns would be questionable.

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.

#### Road Network.

28. **Deputy Joan Burton** asked the Minister for Transport if he will direct the National Roads

Authority under section 41 of the Roads Act 1993 to commence full upgrade works on the N11 from Wicklow to Rosslare, County Wexford; the reason the N11 in County Wexford has not already been upgraded especially with regard to the heavy volume of traffic to and from Rosslare Port; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32782/07]

58. **Deputy Joanna Tuffy** asked the Minister for Transport if he will direct and finance the NRA under section 41 of the Roads Act 1993 to undertake a full national works programme for the upgrading and maintenance of all national secondary and local roads; if he will direct the NRA and Longford County Council on safety grounds especially to carry out a long promised works and maintenance programme on the N4 approximately three kilometres east of Longford; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32784/07]

71. **Deputy Brendan Howlin** asked the Minister for Transport if he will direct the NRA under section 41 of the Roads Act 1993 to upgrade the N28 to Cork port; if his Department and the NRA are examining proposals for an alignment on the N28 to serve the proposed new container terminal entrance at the Port of Cork; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32786/07]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Noel Dempsey):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 28, 58 and 71 together.

As Minister for Transport I have responsibility for overall policy and funding in relation to the national roads programme element of Transport 21. The planning design and implementation of individual national road projects is a matter for the National Roads Authority under the Roads Act, 1993 in conjunction with the relevant local authorities concerned.

I do not propose to issue any directions to the National Roads Authority under section 41 of the Roads Act 1993.

#### Departmental Records.

29. **Deputy Jim O’Keeffe** asked the Minister for Transport the process by which news items are brought to his attention by his Department or by his advisers or personal staff; the issues that were brought to his attention in the month of June 2007; the number of advisers, press officers, personal assistants and so on in his office for the complete month of June 2007; if any briefings were given by such individuals to him or his staff when the Ministers changed in June 2007; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32939/07]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Noel Dempsey):** News items may be brought to my attention in a number of ways, e.g. verbal brief-

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ings, press clippings, if they are deemed to be important. The Press office, relevant Assistant Secretary or the Secretary General might also bring such items to my attention.

#### Local Authority Funding.

30. **Deputy Jimmy Deenihan** asked the Minister for Transport if funding will be provided under the 2008 specific improvement grant scheme to provide a replacement bridge at Ballingar, Lixnaw, County Kerry; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25133/07]

66. **Deputy Jimmy Deenihan** asked the Minister for Transport if he will allocate the necessary funding to Kerry County Council to provide a new bridge at Ballinaghar, Lixnaw, County Kerry; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32234/07]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Noel Dempsey):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 30 and 66 together.

The provision or improvement of non-national roads, including bridges, in its area is a matter for Kerry County Council to be funded from its own resources supplemented by State grants.

In August this year, applications were invited from road authorities for funding under the non-national roads Specific Improvements Grant scheme in 2008. The proposals submitted by Kerry County Council included an application for grant aid for a bridge at Ballinagare.

All applications received for funding under the scheme will be considered by my Department, having regard to compliance with eligibility criteria, the need to prioritise projects, competing demands from other local authorities and the funds available for the scheme in 2008. The 2008 non-national road grant allocations to local authorities will be announced early next year.

#### Public Transport.

31. **Deputy John O'Mahony** asked the Minister for Transport if he will promote the provision of real time passenger information; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32941/07]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Noel Dempsey):** Both Irish Rail and Luas already deploy real time information systems. Bus Éireann and Bus Átha Cliath are both proceeding with the introduction of automatic vehicle location technology on board buses. This technology will create the platform for the deployment of real time passenger information.

#### Road Traffic Accidents.

32. **Deputy Kathleen Lynch** asked the Minister for Transport his views on introducing a unitary system of investigation into all serious road colli-

sions involving the Road Safety Authority and the Health and Safety Authority; if he has had contact with the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government, the RSA, the HSA or the local authorities over the investigation by the HSA into road deaths at the site of road works; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32775/07]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Noel Dempsey):** I have no plans at present to make any changes to existing statutory powers in relation to the investigation of road collisions. My officials have had contacts with the agencies mentioned, on the general issue of the involvement of the HSA in the area of roadworks.

#### Public Transport.

33. **Deputy Thomas P. Broughan** asked the Minister for Transport his views on the Meath master plan policy proposals on enhancing public transport and the protection of archaeological heritage in County Meath; the progress his Department has made on evaluating its proposals for public transport, sustainable tourism, housing and energy for County Meath; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32805/07]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Noel Dempsey):** I am aware of the privately produced document to which the Deputy refers and which makes particular reference to key road and rail projects in County Meath.

The M3 motorway from Clonee to Kells, which completed the planning process and was approved in 2003, is currently under construction and the National Roads Authority and the Government are anxious to see it completed as soon as possible.

The Navan rail project provides for the reopening of the rail line from Dublin to Navan in two phases. Phase 1 involves reopening 7.5 kilometres of track from Clonsilla to Pace on the M3 motorway. Iarnród Éireann has submitted a Railway Order application to An Bord Pleanála in respect of this phase. Iarnród Éireann is examining route alignment options in respect of the second phase which will extend the line from Pace on to Navan.

Responsibility for sustainable tourism, housing and energy rests with other Ministers.

*Question No. 34 answered with Question No. 11.*

#### Driving Tests.

35. **Deputy Ciarán Lynch** asked the Minister for Transport his views on a moratorium on the introduction of the introduction of the learner permit until all those holding a provisional driving licence, and who are currently on the waiting list for a test, have had an opportunity to avail of

a driving test; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26899/07]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Noel Dempsey):** The learner permit has been introduced and there are no plans for a moratorium in that respect.

#### Aviation Regulation.

36. **Deputy Billy Timmins** asked the Minister for Transport the recent discussions he has had with the International Civil Aviator Organisation with respect to the regulation of aviation; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [29336/07]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Noel Dempsey):** Ireland is a contracting party to the Convention on International Civil Aviation (the Chicago Convention). Representatives from Ireland attend meetings and participate in various working groups within the International Civil Aviation Organisation (ICAO), which was established by the Convention, on an ongoing basis. Officials from my Department recently attended the triennial assembly of ICAO at which many aspects of the regulation of civil aviation were discussed.

#### Aer Lingus.

37. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Transport the extent to which the States shareholding in Aer Lingus has been or can be used for the benefit of the company and its international operations; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32828/07]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Noel Dempsey):** The Government's aviation strategy is to develop as wide a range as possible of competitive, safe and reliable air services for the benefit of business and tourism. In this context the State's shareholding of 25.4% is important for two key reasons. Firstly, it acts as a block against a hostile takeover of Aer Lingus and ensures that the aviation market in Ireland will continue to be served by at least two strong competing airlines. This is good for consumer choice and for lower air fares. Secondly, the shareholding also ensures that the Memorandum and Articles of Association of the Company cannot be changed without the approval of the State. In turn, this means that the safeguard measures relating to a disposal of Heathrow slots cannot be changed by other shareholders. Also, the measures whereby the State can appoint three directors cannot be changed by other shareholders.

*Question No. 38 answered with Question No. 12.*

#### Rail Network.

39. **Deputy Alan Shatter** asked the Minister for Transport if he has received representations regarding the reopening of the Phoenix Park rail tunnel; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32932/07]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Noel Dempsey):** I have not received any representations regarding the reopening of the Phoenix Park Tunnel. The Tunnel is an existing railway line connecting Heuston Station with Connolly Station and North Wall Freight Yard and is used for freight services and transfer of rolling stock. The line is also occasionally used for passenger trains for major sporting events at Croke Park, such as football and hurling All-Ireland finals when trains from places like Cork and Kerry go direct to Connolly Station. I am informed by Iarnród Éireann that the railway line is not used for commuter services 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. Iarnród Éireann regards the Interconnector tunnel as the best option for providing additional cross city capacity. The planning, design and construction of the Interconnector is a matter for Iarnród Éireann. Transport 21 provides for the completion of the Interconnector by 2015.

#### Road Safety.

40. **Deputy Michael D. Higgins** asked the Minister for Transport when he will make a decision on whether to lower the blood alcohol limit for motorists; the national and international experts and agencies advising him on this matter; and if he will make a decision on the matter. [32774/07]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Noel Dempsey):** The Road Safety Strategy 2007 to 2012 identifies the need to legislate for and introduce a reduction in the legal Blood Alcohol Level for drivers, but does not specify what that level should be. I am awaiting the advice of the Road Safety Authority (RSA) on the matter, and am aware that the RSA has sought the advice of its Policy Advisory Panel and expects that recommendations will be made to the RSA Board in early 2008. The RSA Advisory Panel, details of which are published in the 2007 to 2012 Road Safety Strategy, will take into account known driver behaviour, past offending rates, analysis of data held by the Medical Bureau of Road Safety, enforcement practicalities and best international practice, and advice on the most appropriate BAC level to deliver the optimum road safety dividend.

*Question No. 41 answered with Question No. 18.*

### **Port Development.**

42. **Deputy Mary Upton** asked the Minister for Transport his views on studies and proposals to relocate Dublin Port and the potential of sites such as Greenore, County Louth and Loughshinny, County Dublin; if he has reviewed the impact of the HGV policy in Dublin on the competitiveness of Dublin Port; if he will outline recently announced plans to fast-track the expansion of Dublin Port; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32792/07]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Noel Dempsey):** Dublin City Council recently conducted an eight-week public consultation on its Dublin Bay Study. The study looks at a wide range of economic, amenity, recreational and environmental issues linked to Dublin Bay, including the port area. In a submission to the consultants carrying out the study, my Department pointed out that Dublin Port handles the vast majority of trade for the Greater Dublin Area and beyond and is of vital strategic importance to the economy. Some 79% of the State's RoRo trade and some 62% of its LoLo trade was handled at Dublin Port in 2006. The National Spatial Strategy identifies strategic merit in relieving pressure on Dublin through targeted interventions in building up port capacity elsewhere. The National Development Plan proposes a comprehensive study of the role of Dublin Port, taking account of locational considerations, in the context of overall ports policy on the island of Ireland, wider transport policy, urban development policy, the National Spatial Strategy and national economic policy. The Council will submit the findings of its consultations to my Department for consideration as part of the NDP study. Preparations for this study will be initiated in the near future. With regard to Dublin Port Company's expansion plans, the company has for a number of years been developing a proposal to expand the port on the north side by reclaiming land on a phased basis. The company has had consultations with the Strategic Infrastructure Division of An Bord Pleanála, which has recently decided the proposal qualifies as strategic infrastructure. This is part of the pre-application stage in advance of any formal planning application. The HGV Management Strategy, which was introduced on 19 February 2007, is a matter for Dublin City Council.

### **Airport Development Projects.**

43. **Deputy Jan O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Transport the financial measures he is proposing for route support, marketing and the enhancing of connectivity at Shannon Airport; when he will respond to the €53 million support

package for Shannon and the mid west; if he has met Shannon Airport Authority and other mid west stakeholders on this matter; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32800/07]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Noel Dempsey):** Since the announcement by Aer Lingus of its decision to withdraw from the Shannon Heathrow route, Shannon Airport Authority has been actively engaging with airlines with a view to securing new services that would redress the reduction in connectivity that will follow from withdrawal of the Aer Lingus service. With a view to promoting the development of new services, the airport has published a European Hub Airport Incentive Scheme for services to come into operation in 2008. The Airport Authority has specifically identified airline services to the key European Hub airports of London — Heathrow, Paris Charles de Gaulle, Amsterdam and Frankfurt- Main as being of key strategic importance to its ongoing development. The Scheme also provides for significant discounts in airport charges and for the possibility of marketing support to be provided by Shannon Airport for new services. In the context of the decision of Aer Lingus to withdraw its Shannon Heathrow service my Department has had several meetings with stakeholders in the mid west region and I have met the Atlantic Connectivity Alliance on two occasions. My Department has prepared an Economic and Tourism Development Plan for the Shannon Airport catchment area. The Plan has been prepared in consultation with the Departments of Finance; Arts, Sport and Tourism; Enterprise, Trade and Employment; and Communications, Energy and Natural Resources and will be finalised shortly. The purpose of the plan is to ensure that the region is well placed to respond to the challenges and opportunities emerging in the context of full liberalisation of the transatlantic aviation market and the phasing out of the Shannon stop as envisaged under the EU-US Open Skies Agreement.

### **Departmental Records.**

44. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Transport the details of news items covered on his Department's intranet on the 13 and 14 June 2007; the person who selected the news items and the order in which they were placed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32937/07]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Noel Dempsey):** The number of news items which were included on the Department's intranet page on 13 and 14 June 2007 was 54 and 49 respectively. I am arranging to have details of the news items forwarded to the Deputy. All of these news items were placed on the intranet page in accordance with established practice, which is based on the allocation of each news item to the relevant sec-

tor concerned. These sectors appear on the intranet system in alphabetical order. Officials of the Department normally assigned to this task in the Human Resources Customer and Management Services Division, carried out the work involved in the selection and placement of the news items in question.

#### Road Traffic Accidents.

45. **Deputy Rory O'Hanlon** asked the Minister for Transport the number of fatalities involving drivers, pedestrians and cyclists including motor cyclists, in which the level of blood alcohol was over 80 mg per 100 ml; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [27646/07]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Noel Dempsey):** Under the Road Safety Authority Act 2006 (Conferral of Functions) Order 2006 (S.I. No 477 of 2006) this is a matter for the Road Safety Authority.

#### Road Safety.

46. **Deputy Kathleen Lynch** asked the Minister for Transport the level of funding and resources his Department are requesting in order to expand the drug testing programme of the Medical Bureau of Road Safety; when he will publish a range of comprehensive measures on the drug-testing of drivers; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32776/07]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Noel Dempsey):** The issue of funding and resources for the Medical Bureau of Road Safety (MBRS) is under consideration in the context of the overall funding and resources for my Department and its non-commercial state agencies for 2008. With regard to drug testing of drivers, the Road Traffic Acts already provide 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 to submit to a blood test or to provide a urine sample. There is no feasible basis yet in Ireland or in Europe for the introduction of a preliminary roadside test for drugs as testing devices are still in the prototype stages. However my Department, with the MBRS, is keeping abreast of developments in this area.

#### Western Rail Corridor.

47. **Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin** asked the Minister for Transport the progress regarding the western rail corridor. [32854/07]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Noel Dempsey):** I refer the Deputy to my answer to

Question No. 49 of Thursday, 18 October 2007. The position remains the same.

*Question No. 48 answered with Question No. 7.*

*Question No. 49 answered with Question No. 19.*

#### Public Transport.

50. **Deputy Pat Rabbitte** asked the Minister for Transport his plans to reform bus licensing legislation; when he will to publish proposed legislative changes; the areas of Dublin that still have inaccessible buses; the position regarding the new bus re-equipment programme at Dublin Bus; the number of buses currently in the Dublin Bus fleet; when he will increase the total size of the bus fleet; when he will ensure that all Dublin bus routes are fully accessible for citizens with disabilities; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32794/07]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Noel Dempsey):** The Programme for Government includes a commitment to improve bus services under Transport 21 by reforming bus licensing to facilitate the optimum provision of services by providing a level playing field for all market participants. The new licensing regime will be designed in a manner consistent with the recently adopted EU Regulation on Public Service Obligations in the transport sector.

While it is not possible at this time to indicate a precise time as to when the legislative proposals on regulatory reform of the bus market will be published, applications for bus licenses and notifications from bus operators will continue to be processed under the provisions of the Road Transport Act 1932, as amended, or the notification system with reference to the Transport Act 1958, as appropriate.

In relation to the Dublin Bus fleet, almost 800 of the total 1182 buses are low floor, wheelchair accessible. All buses purchased since 2000 are accessible and the company plans to have all of the fleet accessible by 2012. In the meantime, Dublin Bus try to ensure that there are accessible buses operating on all of the main corridors. Dublin Bus are currently bringing into service the remainder of the 100 additional buses for which Exchequer funding of €30 million was approved last year. This brings the total Dublin Bus fleet to 1,182 buses — up from just over 900 in 1997.

The capacity of the Dublin Bus fleet, taking into account the 100 additional buses referred to above, is now over 106,000 passengers — an increase of more than 34% on the 2000 capacity. Over the same period, Dublin Bus passenger numbers have grown from 137 million to 146 million passengers per annum, an increase of 7%. The need for additional buses, over and above the 100 currently being brought into service, is

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being considered in the context of the legislation being prepared for the replacement of the Road Transport Act 1932.

### Regional Airports.

51. **Deputy Billy Timmins** asked the Minister for Transport the discussions he has had with his EU colleagues with respect to attracting new airlines and business to the Shannon region; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25022/07]

56. **Deputy Michael D. Higgins** asked the Minister for Transport if his Department has examined the possibility of establishing a public service obligation for the Shannon-Heathrow route; if not, the grounds on which this option has been ruled out; if he has had discussions with his British counterpart in this regard; if he has decided to carry out any restructuring of his Department in view of the failure of his Department to inform him of Aer Lingus' decision to transfer Heathrow slots from Shannon to Belfast; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32769/07]

57. **Deputy Dan Neville** asked the Minister for Transport if there have been further discussions or meetings with the Shannon Airport Authority regarding the decision of Aer Lingus to cease the Shannon-Heathrow service; the details of such discussions; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32931/07]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Noel Dempsey):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 51, 56 and 57 together.

Responsibility for securing new services to an airport rest with the relevant Airport Authority. I have had no discussions with my EU colleagues as regards attracting new airlines and business to the Shannon region. Neither have I had discussions to date with my UK counterpart concerning the establishment of a PSO on the Shannon Heathrow route because such discussions would be premature. As to meetings and discussions with the Shannon Airport Authority, my Department maintains contact on the airport' development and continues to encourage commercial efforts to secure a replacement service through its hub incentive scheme.

Ireland already has an air services Public Service Obligation (PSO) scheme in operation. The scheme provides for the subvention of air services from Dublin to Kerry, Galway, Knock, Sligo, Donegal and Derry. These PSO routes serve regional airports that, because of their remote locations or limited runway facilities, find it difficult to attract commercial scheduled air services.

The relevant EU Council Regulation, (EEC) No. 2408/92 of 23 July 1992, allows a Member

State to establish a PSO route in respect of scheduled air services to an airport serving a peripheral or development region in its territory, where such air services are considered vital for the economic development of the regions concerned and where air carriers are not prepared to provide them on a commercial basis. In addition, the Department is aware that there may be opportunities for State intervention under the Community Guidelines on Financing of Airports and Start up aid to Airlines departing from Regional Airports.

My Department has recently written to the EU Commission with a view to exploring what the options if any exist for facilitating the provision of air services to meet the connectivity requirements of the West of Ireland in a liberalised, competitive aviation market. My officials have requested an early meeting with the Commission on the matter. Following that meeting, my Department will be in a position to advise me on appropriate contacts with the British authorities. With regard to not being informed of the Aer Lingus decision to transfer Heathrow slots from Shannon to Belfast, this has been fully dealt with following the report of the Secretary General of my Department into the matter.

### Road Safety.

52. **Deputy Seán Sherlock** asked the Minister for Transport the resources he will allocate to the RSA to dramatically enhance their programme for inspecting the driver and vehicle standards of HGVs; if he will introduce primary or secondary legislation to set higher standards for the testing of HGVs in view of the very high percentage of Irish trucks found to be in breach of standards in the UK; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32804/07]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Noel Dempsey):** The funding provided to the Road Safety Authority is agreed in the context of the annual Estimates, and has been finalised for 2008. It is a matter for the Road Safety Authority to manage resources in line with the funding provided by Budget 2008.

In relation to the standards for testing of commercial vehicles, a fundamental review of the arrangements for the compulsory periodic roadworthiness testing of these vehicles has been conducted by consultants engaged by the Road Safety Authority. On foot of this review, the Road Safety Authority has made a number of recommendations to me, which I have accepted, to strengthen the roadworthiness testing regime and to address a number of related issues. Where necessary, new legislation will be introduced.

I have asked that the relevant stakeholders in this area, including the local authorities, be informed of my acceptance of the recommendations of the RSA report and that the necessary consultative and other implementation arrangements be commenced. These steps will be

taken in the coming weeks and the RSA report will then be placed in the public domain.

### Road Network.

53. **Deputy Dan Neville** asked the Minister for Transport if the bypass of Adare Village is included in the Government's National Development Plan 2007 to 2013 in January 2007. [28791/07]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Noel Dempsey):** The N21 Adare Bypass is included in Transport 21, the implementation of which is contained in the National Development Plan 2007-2013. As Minister for Transport I have responsibility for overall policy and funding in relation to the national roads programme element of Transport 21. As the Deputy is aware, the implementation of individual national road projects, including the N21 Adare Bypass, is a matter for the National Roads Authority (NRA) under the Roads Act, 1993 in conjunction with the local authorities concerned.

*Question No. 54 answered with Question No. 10.*

### Transport 21.

55. **Deputy Ruairí Quinn** asked the Minister for Transport if he will conduct an audit of the planning and implementation of Transport 21 in view of the ongoing delays in a significant number of Transport 21's major infrastructural projects; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32772/07]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Noel Dempsey):** Given the scale of investment in Transport 21, the monitoring arrangements supporting the framework must be sufficiently robust to ensure that the projects and programmes identified are proceeding as planned and are properly appraised and provide value for money. Structures are in place in my Department to provide these assurances.

A High Level Monitoring Group has been set up comprising representatives of the relevant Government Departments and assisted by the Chief Executives of the State agencies with responsibility for implementing the projects in Transport 21. The main role of this Group is to monitor the implementation of projects and programmes provided for in Transport 21 and to review compliance with the Department of Finance's Capital Appraisal Guidelines and Value for Money Indicators. To assist the Group, my Department has appointed independent auditors to carry out reviews of a representative selection of projects. These reviews look at capital appraisal and physical implementation of projects.

My Department has also retained specialist advisors to assist it in relation to specific issues

arising under the Transport 21 programme. A Programme Board comprising senior managers from the Department is responsible for the overall management of the Transport 21 capital envelope and for issues which are cross sectoral in nature, such as capital appraisal, communications and information.

The huge scale of the Transport 21 programme is such that adjustments to the timescale for individual projects is inevitable. The value of the ten-year financial framework is that it gives us the flexibility to deal with this in an effective way. The monitoring structures and supports which I have already outlined provide a robust framework for making adjustments to the investment programme as circumstances require.

*Questions Nos. 56 and 57 answered with Question No. 51.*

*Question No. 58 answered with Question No. 28.*

*Question No. 59 answered with Question No. 19.*

### Motor Taxation.

60. **Deputy Joanna Tuffy** asked the Minister for Transport if he has had discussions with the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government on plans to increase the motor tax burden on drivers with SUVs or cars with engines over 1.6 litres; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32803/07]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Noel Dempsey):** My Department has had discussions with the Department of Environment, Heritage and Local Government in relation to motor tax in the context of our overall responsibility for transport policy. I support any measures that help in delivering more sustainable transport and in the near future, I intend embarking on a public consultation process to help inform the preparation of a Sustainable Travel and Transport Action Plan which I am committed to publishing in 2008.

### Transport Policy.

61. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Transport the input he or his Department have retained in respect of policy making in the transport sector; if his Department envisages changes in this area; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32829/07]

129. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Transport the extent to which he has direct or indirect influence on transport policy; the extent to which this influence has manifested itself to date; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [33177/07]



**Minister for Transport (Deputy Noel Dempsey):** I propose to take Questions Nos 61 and 129 together.

As Minister for Transport, I have responsibility for the development and promotion of all national transport policies. My Department's Statement of Strategy 2005-2007 provides details of these, together with the intended actions in respect of each of those areas. The Department's Annual Report provides information on key achievements, including reporting on strategy outcomes. A new Statement of Strategy for the period 2008-2010 is currently being finalised by my Department and will be published early in 2008. The current strategy (2005-2007) is available on the Department's website at [www.transport.ie](http://www.transport.ie).

#### Port Development.

62. **Deputy Brian O'Shea** asked the Minister for Transport if he will report on the recent decision to select a company (details supplied) to build the new Bremore deep water port; when he plans to amend the Harbours Act 1996 to facilitate the development of Bremore; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32791/07]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Noel Dempsey):** Drogheda Port Company has for some years been developing a proposal for a new port facility at Bremore in Fingal County. The company conducted an open competition to select a preferred joint venture partner. The competition elicited considerable interest in the market and Castle Market Holdings, a subsidiary of Real Estate Opportunities Limited, were selected after a detailed evaluation and shortlisting process. An amendment of the Harbours Act 1996 will be necessary to enable formal legal consent to be given to the joint venture. More generally, the existing legislation is more than ten years old and requires updating.

My Department has made substantial progress in preparing the Heads of a new Harbours Bill to further support implementation of ports policy and to update existing legislation. I propose to seek early Government approval for the drafting of the Bill and I intend to pursue its enactment as quickly as possible.

#### Cycle Facilities.

63. **Deputy Ruairí Quinn** asked the Minister for Transport his views on the recent report released by the Central Statistics Office on the 2006 Census Travel to Work, School and College; if he has plans to address the ever increasing use of cars to travel to work, school and college; if he will address the complete absence of comprehensive and safe urban cycle-way networks as highlighted by the CSO figures which show that the numbers of people cycling to work remains very low; and

if he will make a statement on the matter. [32771/07]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Noel Dempsey):** I am aware of the trends from the 2006 Census. It shows a continuation of the growth in the use of the private car and a decline in the numbers commuting by bicycle. My Department has provided funding to support the development of cycle routes and facilities. It has also assisted specific initiatives such as the Safe Routes to Schools Programme supported by the Dublin Transportation Office.

My Department has also provided support for the One Small Step campaign which encourages drivers in the Greater Dublin Area to examine their car usage patterns and to think about using other ways of getting around, such as walking, cycling or public transport, whenever they can. The campaign promotes cycling as one of the best ways of getting fresh air, regular exercise, saving money, saving journey time and benefiting the local and general environment.

Nevertheless more needs to be done to reverse the trend. I am committed to increasing the use of cycling as a mode of transport and I have commissioned research on international best practice, which will inform the development of a National Cycle Policy. This, in turn, will complement the proposed Sustainable Travel and Transport Action Plan, which I intend publishing in 2008 after a full public consultation process. The process will inform the precise measures to be adopted in relation to cycling and other issues.

#### Driving Tests.

64. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Transport if the Road Safety Authority has briefed him on the performance of SGS in the provision of driving tests; if he has requested the RSA to undertake an audit on the consistency of driver testing provided by SGS; his views on the different pass rates achieved by SGS and RSA driving testers; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32773/07]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Noel Dempsey):** 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 delivery of the driving test and the issuing of certificates of competency. The RSA has briefed me from time to time on progress in driver testing arrangements, including arrangements with SGS Ltd. I have not asked the RSA to undertake an audit of SGS.

#### Rail Services.

65. **Deputy Michael Noonan** asked the Minister for Transport if he will introduce incentives to encourage the transport of freight by rail includ-

ing the introduction of competition; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32933/07]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Noel Dempsey):** In line with developments across the EU, rail freight is fully liberalised in Ireland since 1st January, 2007. No proposals have been made to my Department for entry to the market to date. I would welcome any expressions of interest. In the absence of real opportunities or proposals for viable long term rail freight business, the development and use of fiscal incentives has not been considered.

*Question No. 66 answered with Question No. 30.*

### Road Safety.

67. **Deputy Brendan Howlin** asked the Minister for Transport if he has reviewed recent research undertaken by the UK Department of Transport on the use of speed cameras to reduce road death and serious injury; if he has reviewed the type of speed cameras used on Irish roads after the high number of unusable photographs from fixed speed cameras was highlighted by the Comptroller and Auditor General; if he will report on the recent tendering process for up to 100 new privately operated speed cameras; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32780/07]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Noel Dempsey):** Issues relating to the use of speed cameras in the enforcement of speed limits are matters for the Garda Authorities and the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform.

*Question No. 68 answered with Question No. 10.*

69. **Deputy Liz McManus** asked the Minister for Transport if he has plans to reform the penalty points system in view of recent statistics that up to two thirds of drivers who accumulate twelve penalty points are not voluntarily giving up their driving licenses as they are legally obliged to do; the legislative and other measures he is planning to introduce to ensure that all vehicles on Irish roads, both Irish and foreign registered, are subject to the same laws, regulations and penalties and that any fines or penalties accrued by a driver of a foreign registered vehicle are realised; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32779/07]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Noel Dempsey):** The Road Traffic Act 2002 provides for the notification to a person of the endorsement of penalty points, and where appropriate, of the imposition of a six-month disqualification. Where a disqualification is applied, the 2002 Act provides that the licence holder must return their licence to the licensing authority that granted the

licence within 14 days of the appropriate date and that failure to comply with this requirement constitutes an offence. All drivers are subject to road traffic law and enforcement, including in relation to this matter, is a matter for An Garda Síochána. I do not have plans to reform the penalty points system in that regard.

I am conscious that enforcing penalties for road traffic offences on foreign registered drivers raises many legal, organisational and procedural issues, which make it very difficult for any one State to enforce such penalties.

For that reason, my Department is pursuing this question at the European, British/Irish and North/South levels where mutual recognition and cross border enforcement possibilities are under consideration. As foreign licence holders do not have an Irish driving licence record, penalty points incurred in this State are recorded against that person on a separate record in the National Driver File. 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. The realisation of fines and penalties imposed by the Courts is a matter for the Courts Service.

### Taxi Regulations.

70. **Deputy Jack Wall** asked the Minister for Transport when he will make a decision on the proposal by the Office of the Taxi Commissioner for the introduction of a subsidy scheme to assist with the purchase of wheelchair accessible taxis and hackneys; his views on the recent request by the National Taxi Drivers Union for a 50 cent extra surcharge on taxi fares to compensate drivers for spiralling fuel prices; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32799/07]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Noel Dempsey):** The Commission for Taxi Regulation published new National Vehicle Standards — Requirements for Small Public Service Vehicles on 26 November 2007, which include new accessible vehicle standards for licensing as wheelchair accessible taxis and wheelchair accessible hackneys.

My Department is in discussion with the Commission for Taxi Regulation in relation to a proposed subsidy arrangement to assist taxi and hackney operators with the purchase of wheelchair accessible vehicles that will meet the new accessible vehicle specification developed by the Commission. The recent announcement of the new accessible vehicle standards by the Commission facilitates further detailed examination of the proposal, which continues to be the subject of discussion with the Commission. A final decision will be made on the subsidy scheme proposal as

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soon as possible having regard to the overall budgetary context.

Insofar as taxi fares are concerned, section 42 of the Taxi Regulation Act 2003 provides that decisions in relation to the maximum fares that may be charged in any taximeter area are matters for the Commission for Taxi Regulation. I have no function in relation to the setting of these fares.

*Question No. 71 answered with Question No. 28.*

### **Marine Safety.**

72. **Deputy Brian O'Shea** asked the Minister for Transport if he will report on the number of marine inspectors employed by his Department; the number of spot-check inspections carried out in 2003, 2004, 2005, 2006 and 2007; his plans to strengthen the inspection and invigilation of ships operating in Irish ports and waters; the Government's objectives at EU wide level to address the problems associated with vessels operating under flags of convenience and on strengthening EU wide regulations on safety, pay and working conditions for maritime workers; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32789/07]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Noel Dempsey):** The number of marine surveyors employed by my Department currently stands at 24. The number of "spot check" inspections carried out on foreign flag merchant ships visiting Irish ports (Port State Control) under the Paris Memorandum of Understanding on Port State Control and EU Directive 95/21, as amended, is as follows: In 2003, a total of 430 inspections were completed. In 2004, a total of 411 inspections were carried out. In 2005, a total of 422 inspections were completed. In 2006, the total of 24 inspections were completed. For the current year, 344 inspections had been completed by October 31st and it is expected that in excess of 400 inspections will have been completed before the end of the year.

Ireland is a member of the Paris Memorandum of Understanding on Port State Control, Paris MoU, and currently holds the Chairmanship of the Paris MoU. Developments in Port State Control in the coming years will see the introduction of a new inspection regime, which should ensure comprehensive inspection of foreign ships entering all Paris MoU ports and a higher frequency of inspections for problem ships. There will be enhanced powers in this new inspection regime which will provide for wider powers to ban sub-standard ships. On the other hand the new inspection regime will reward quality shipping with less inspections.

In addition to the Port State Control Inspections referred to above, Ireland is a host state in accordance with EU Directive 99/35/EC and car-

ries out mandatory safety inspections on regular ro-ro passenger ferries and high-speed passenger craft operating on international routes to/from Ireland. The figures for these inspections is as follows:

In 2003, a total of 26 inspections were completed. In 2004, a total of 23 inspections were carried out. In 2005, a total of 24 inspections were completed, and in 2006 the total number of inspections completed was also 24. So far in 2007, a total of 28 such inspections have been completed.

I can advise the Deputy that the terms and conditions of employment on board vessels are linked to the State in which the ship is registered. A comprehensive body of Irish employment rights legislation governs the conditions of employment, including minimum wages, of workers on board vessels under the Irish flag. This would include legislation dealing with minimum wages.

If the vessel is not registered in Ireland, then the port state control inspections referred above will cover the International Maritime Organisation's various Safety and Environment Protection Conventions as well as the International Labour Organisation Conventions. The inspection of the latter would cover the welfare of the crew (food, accommodation, hours of work etc) but would exclude rates of pay.

Ireland has consistently supported the International Labour Organisation in its efforts to promote global labour standards for seafarers. A new consolidated Maritime Labour Convention was adopted in February 2006 at the 94th International Labour Conference in Geneva. Ireland was represented at the 94th Conference by a tripartite delegation consisting of Government officials, nominees of the employers (IBEC) and of the workers (ICTU). The new Convention sets out clear principles and rights for seafarers. Ireland fully supports the new Convention and voted in favour of the proposal.

The European Commission has indicated that it will continue to study all possible solutions aimed at safeguarding employment in the maritime sector and that it would also continue to pursue the implementation of International Labour Organisation (ILO) standards into Community law and to encourage discussion on this issue within the framework of the European Social Dialogue.

During 2007, following requests from Member States and the European Parliament, the Commission launched a study titled "Study on the labour market and employment conditions in intra-Community regular maritime transport services carried out by ships under Member States' or third countries flags". The study is due to be completed by mid 2008 and Ireland has played its part in providing detailed information to the study.

### Rail Network.

73. **Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin** asked the Minister for Transport if there will be a feasibility study undertaken regarding rail links from Derry to Sligo. [32853/07]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Noel Dempsey):** The upgrading and extension of the mainline railway system is a matter for consideration by Iarnród Éireann in the first instance. I understand from Iarnród Éireann that it has no plans to undertake a feasibility study into a Derry/Sligo rail link. Such a proposal does not form part of Transport 21.

### Road Traffic Offences.

74. **Deputy Willie Penrose** asked the Minister for Transport the position regarding discussions between his Department, the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform and the Courts Service on reforming the present mechanism for the collection of fines for motoring offences; the time-frame for the introduction of such legislation; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32777/07]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Noel Dempsey):** The collection of court fines levied in respect of motoring offences and any reform of that collection system are matters for the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform and the Courts Service.

### Harbours and Piers.

75. **Deputy John Perry** asked the Minister for Transport his views on the recommendations contained in the KPMG Report on regional harbours and ports; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32943/07]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Noel Dempsey):** In 1998, KPMG Consulting were contracted to undertake a review of the State's regional harbours operating under the Harbours Act 1946. The intention of the review was to chart the way forward for these facilities by setting out a long term, coherent and sustainable development plan for their future.

The review stated that the continued operation of the regional harbours under the outdated provisions of the Harbours Act 1946 is unsustainable on the grounds of good governance. The review recommended that the ports should either be corporatised as commercial State port companies, merged with an existing port company or transferred to the relevant local authorities.

The Ports Policy Statement, which was published in 2005, reiterated the view that most of these regional harbours would best achieve their potential through their transfer to local authority ownership. Where it was not possible to reach agreement on transfer to local authorities, the

option of sale of the harbours would be considered. In harbours where significant commercial traffic exists, consideration would be given to bringing such harbours under the control of a port company.

My Department is working with the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government, to advance the implementation of the Ports Policy Statement with regard to the transfer of the designated regional harbours to their respective local ownership. My Department has provided funding to protect the fabric of these regional harbours for the last number of years.

In 2006, Sligo Harbour and Annagassan Harbour transferred to Local Authority Control. Dingle Harbour was designated a Fishery Harbour Centre in 2007.

*Question No. 76 answered with Question No. 12.*

### Road Network.

77. **Deputy Thomas P. Broughan** asked the Minister for Transport if the National Roads Authority has submitted plans for a new round of public private partnerships for the national road building and maintenance programme; his plans for the financing of future road building and maintenance programmes; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32768/07]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Noel Dempsey):** As Minister for Transport I have responsibility for overall policy and funding in relation to the national roads programme element of Transport 21. The implementation of individual national road projects is a matter for the National Roads Authority (NRA) under the Roads Act, 1993 in conjunction with the local authorities concerned. In particular, the allocation of funding in relation to the construction or maintenance of national roads is a matter for the NRA under Section 19 of the Roads Act, 1993.

Also, 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, is vested in the NRA under Part V of the Roads Act 1993 (as amended by the Planning and Development Act 2000 and the Roads Act 2007).

The Government's Transport 21 Programme and the National Development Plan provide for an estimated €2 billion in private financing for the existing toll road programme bringing total investment in national roads under Transport 21 to just over €18 billion.

A total of 10 national road improvement schemes were identified by the NRA for development as toll-based PPP projects. The delivery of these 10 schemes represents the completion of the National Roads Authority's toll road prog-

[Deputy Noel Dempsey.]

ramme and the fulfilment of the private finance road targets set out in Transport 21. I am satisfied that the correct balance has been struck in Transport 21 between toll-based PPP projects and projects supported directly by the Exchequer. From time to time the NRA have indicated that the potential exists for further PPP-type road schemes, but I have no plan to expand the PPP network at the moment.

#### **Garda Stations.**

78. **Deputy Brendan Howlin** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Finance if the site has been acquired for the new Garda divisional headquarters for Wexford; the cost of acquiring the site; when he expects construction on this project to begin; when he expects the new station to be available for occupation; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32969/07]

**Minister of State at the Department of Finance (Deputy Noel Ahern):** The Commissioners of Public Works have signed a contract for sale for a site at Roxborough for a new Garda Station in Wexford. Progress has been made with regard to the conclusion of the legal arrangements to finalise this transaction with the Vendor's Solicitor and the Chief State Solicitor. Full and satisfactory conclusion is essential to enable progress to be made on all other matters in relation to the development of this project.

#### **Departmental Meetings.**

79. **Deputy Ruairí Quinn** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Finance if his Department has a management advisory committee or an equivalent management committee; if it meets regularly; and if so, the frequency of same; if he and the Ministers of State attached to his Department attend the meetings; if a special advisor or advisors attached to the Ministerial Office or offices attend such meetings; if the minutes are circulated subsequent to each meeting with an indication as to the action to be taken by whom and when; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32981/07]

80. **Deputy Ruairí Quinn** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Finance if he convenes specific policy meetings with officials in his Department; the way a policy meeting with officials is different to that of a management meeting, such as a management advisory committee meeting; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32995/07]

**Tánaiste and Minister for Finance (Deputy Brian Cowen):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 79 and 80 together.

My Department has a committee consisting of senior management known as the management advisory committee or MAC which meets weekly

to discuss progress on the Department's principal activities. The MAC may also meet more frequently if required. The minutes are circulated, with reference where appropriate to follow-up action required and the person or persons responsible.

The MAC also meets annually with each Assistant Secretary/Director and his/her staff down to and including Assistant Principal to discuss their divisional business plans, emerging short, medium or longer term issues, and principal strategic objectives. In addition, the MAC meets regularly with me (usually at 6-weekly intervals) to discuss key issues across the spectrum of the Department's activities, including the legislative programme, budgetary, spending, taxation and economic issues, and industrial relations issues. Attendance on these occasions includes my special advisors, my private secretary, and the Department's press officer. I also meet on a day-to-day basis with one or more senior officials from the various Divisions of my Department to discuss specific policy matters.

#### **Ministerial Staff.**

81. **Deputy Ruairí Quinn** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Finance the number of programme managers, special advisors, policy assistants, personnel on secondment and other personnel who are not part of the existing Civil Service who make up his Department, including permanent civil servants attached to the office of the Minister and Minister of States; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [33009/07]

**Tánaiste and Minister for Finance (Deputy Brian Cowen):** The part time Teachers (16) assigned to CMOD (Centre for Management, and Organisation Development), are not classified as part of the Civil Service. In addition, 2 of the staff in my Constituency Office are contract staff. Apart from these, all staff employed by my Department are Civil Servants. In relation to the Office of the Minister of State, 4 of the staff are contract staff.

#### **Business Expansion Scheme.**

82. **Deputy Paul Kehoe** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Finance his plans to change the criteria to the business expansion scheme in the Finance Bill or at another time; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [33015/07]

**Tánaiste and Minister for Finance (Deputy Brian Cowen):** I announced in my Budget 2008 statement that the requirement that recycling companies must have received grant assistance before availing of the Business Expansion Scheme (BES) is to be replaced by a requirement that their business proposals must be certified by an industrial development agency or County Enterprise Board before they avail of the scheme.

This change to the requirements will be included in Finance Bill 2008. As the BES is an approved State aid, it will be necessary to advise the European Commission of this proposed change.

### Departmental Bodies.

83. **Deputy Lucinda Creighton** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Finance the statutory bodies for which he has ministerial responsibility, but for which he is not accountable to Dáil Éireann for daily operational activities. [33079/07]

**Tánaiste and Minister for Finance (Deputy Brian Cowen):** The extent of my responsibility for the bodies and agencies on the following list under the remit of my Department varies in accordance with the nature of the legal arrangements. While I have responsibility for policy and legislation in respect of such bodies and agencies, legal responsibility for the performance of their statutory functions and operational responsibilities rests with the relevant body themselves. I do, however, give information, as appropriate, on such matters, as provided to me by the bodies.

- National Treasury Management Agency
- National Pensions Reserve Fund Commission
- State Claims Agency
- National Development Finance Agency
- Central Bank and Financial Services Authority of Ireland
- Irish Financial Services Appeals Tribunal
- Financial Services Ombudsman Council
- Credit Union Advisory Committee
- Ordnance Survey Ireland
- Special EU Programmes Body
- Valuation Tribunal
- Office of the Revenue Commissioners
- Office of the Comptroller and Auditor General
- Office of Public Works
- Office of the Ombudsman
- Office of the Information Commissioner
- Standards in Public Office Commission
- State Laboratory
- Valuation Office
- Public Appointments Service
- Office of the Commission for Public Service Appointments

### EU Directives.

84. **Deputy Joanna Tuffy** asked the Tánaiste

and Minister for Finance if the Government has plans to postpone the adoption of the Energy Tax Directive 2003 in view of the financial difficulties that will face many coach operators who are contracted to carry out school runs, scheduled services and tour operations, when their fuel rebate is withdrawn as a consequence of this directive; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [33107/07]

**Tánaiste and Minister for Finance (Deputy Brian Cowen):** The 2003 EU Energy Tax Directive incorporated special derogations which allowed specific excise duty reliefs to be applied in a number of Member States. In the Irish context, these derogations allowed for reduced rates to apply to fuel used for public transport services which includes school transport services.

While these derogations expired on 31 December 2006, Ireland, along with other Member States, sought retention of its derogations beyond that date. However the European Commission, who are the deciding authority, have to date refused all such requests. The Commission maintain that, in keeping with the EU Energy Tax Directive, Member States must apply at least the EU minimum rates of excise on fuels in such circumstances and that any further favourable excise treatment is not allowable. In this regard the Commission's decision was published on its website in March 2007. At the Commission's behest my officials have indicated that Ireland will avail of the forthcoming Finance Bill to make the necessary legislative changes to conform with the Directive.

In the circumstances, the relevant line Departments who have primary responsibility in this regard are, in conjunction with my Department, exploring alternative non-tax support mechanisms that could be put in place where appropriate to maintain the assistance currently being provided, subject of course to compatibility with EU State Aid requirements. In the interim the reduced rates applicable to fuel used will be maintained.

### Tax Yield.

85. **Deputy Leo Varadkar** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Finance the amount of revenue that has been accrued from inheritance tax for each year since 2000 with a breakdown by group A, B and C of the beneficiaries; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [33126/07]

86. **Deputy Leo Varadkar** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Finance the amount of revenue that has been accrued from probate tax for each year since 2000 with a breakdown by group A, B and C of the beneficiaries; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [33127/07]

**Tánaiste and Minister for Finance (Deputy Brian Cowen):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 85 and 86 together.

I am informed by the Revenue Commissioners that the information available in respect of net receipts from inheritance and probate tax is as follows:

Year	Inheritance Tax	Probate Tax
	€m	€m
2000	154.72	37.51
2001	121.50	21.41
2002	128.06	5.38
2003	130.65	2.55
2004	171.29	2.76
2005	196.65	1.73
2006	299.37	1.76

Details from inheritance taxes returns are not maintained in such a way as to provide a basis for compiling the detailed information sought by the Deputy. It is, therefore, not possible to separately identify the details relating to the distribution of cases by class of relationship to the donor without a protracted investigation of Revenue records.

A probate tax of 2 per cent applied to estates valued in excess of an exemption threshold (£40,000 in 2000) and was abolished in respect of deaths occurring on or after 6 December 2000. The group thresholds A, B and C did not apply to probate tax.

#### Gaming Legislation.

87. **Deputy Leo Varadkar** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Finance if agreement was reached between any agency or State body attached to his Department to support or assist in any way in the development of the proposed Sonas development on the former Phoenix Park Racecourse at Castleknock, Dublin 15; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [33141/07]

**Tánaiste and Minister for Finance (Deputy Brian Cowen):** In August 1994, the National Lottery Company informed the Department of Finance that it had entered into a reciprocal confidentiality agreement with a third party, the Vector Ogden Group, which had a proposal to build a complex in the old Phoenix Park Racecourse comprising an International Conference Centre and a casino. I understand that such an agreement was considered a necessary preliminary to the National Lottery Company's investigating with these promoters the prospects of the Company's involvement in the casino side of this operation. I am informed that this agreement was signed in July 1994 by An Post, the National Lottery Company, and Ogden Entertainment Services (Ireland) Ltd and that the agreement was effective from the date of its sign-

ing and had a termination date of 31 December 1994.

In February 1998, the Chairman of the National Lottery Company wrote to the Department of Finance about the Company's intention to go into a 12-month non-disclosure agreement with Sonas Centre Ltd, stating that Sonas had "expressed an interest in considering the NLC [the National Lottery Company] in some role in relation to casino gaming and for this to be evaluated by the parties, a non-disclosure agreement is necessary". Having considered the matter, and with the agreement of the then Minister, the Department replied in March 1998 informing the National Lottery Company that it would have no objection to the National Lottery Company's entering the agreement.

88. **Deputy Leo Varadkar** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Finance if consideration was given to amend legislation to permit casino gaming during the 1989 to 1994 period; the level of his involvement and that of the National Lottery Company in this process; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [33143/07]

**Tánaiste and Minister for Finance (Deputy Brian Cowen):** The establishment and operation of a casino would be subject to the provisions of the Gaming and Lotteries Acts, which are a matter, in the first instance, for my colleague the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform.

In respect of the period referred to by the Deputy, the records in my Department do not indicate that the National Lottery Company made any proposal to the Minister for Finance or the Department that would have necessitated an amendment to legislation to permit casino gaming and do not suggest that the Minister or the Department were involved in formulating such amendments to legislation.

#### Tax Code.

89. **Deputy Leo Varadkar** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Finance if there is anything in European law or intergovernmental agreements that would prevent or impede Ireland from reducing corporation profit tax; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [33148/07]

**Tánaiste and Minister for Finance (Deputy Brian Cowen):** There are no legal or other impediments of which I am aware which would prevent Ireland from changing its standard rate of corporation tax on a general basis.

The Government made clear its commitment to the standard 12.5% rate of corporation tax in its agreed Programme for Government.

#### Health Insurance.

90. **Deputy Thomas P. Broughan** asked the Minister for Health and Children if her Depart-

ment has given any further consideration to the pricing and cost of health insurance here especially in view of reported increases in premiums in early 2008; and if her Department has consulted on the creation of a health services regulator whose functions would include the pricing of health insurance. [33182/07]

**Minister for Health and Children (Deputy Mary Harney):** With regard to the pricing of health insurance, it is a matter for the insurer to determine the appropriate premium. Community rated health insurance in Ireland is significantly cheaper than comparable cover elsewhere particularly for vulnerable groups such as older people.

The Voluntary Health Insurance (Amendment) Bill 2007, currently before the Oireachtas, provides for the removal of the current limited role of Minister of Health and Children from involvement in the commercial affairs of the a VHI, including price setting.

Prudential regulation is a matter for the Financial Regulator and it is necessary that insurers have freedom in relation to the pricing of their products for the purposes of achieving and retaining authorisation. Against this background, it would not be appropriate to establish a health services regulator whose functions would include the pricing of health insurance.

The Health Insurance Acts (and regulations) have been enacted in the interests of the common good, providing for community rating, open enrolment and lifetime cover. Companies offering health insurance contracts are obliged to comply with the regulatory framework provided for in the Health Insurance Acts and related regulations. The health insurance industry is monitored by the Health Insurance Authority to ensure compliance with the common good regulatory framework.

#### Departmental Reports.

91. **Deputy James Reilly** asked the Minister for Health and Children the person who carried out the review of recruitment procedures for locum consultants; the date the review was completed; the recommendations made by the review; if the recommendations have been implemented; if she will make a copy of the review available; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [32965/07]

**Minister for Health and Children (Deputy Mary Harney):** In 2001 at the request of the then Minister for Health and Children, Deputy Micheál Martin, Ms Maureen Lynott carried out a review of the circumstances surrounding the employment of a person to a particular locum psychiatrist position in the Irish Public Health Service.

This review was completed in February 2002. Ms Lynott's report made a number of recom-

mendations regarding inter-agency cooperation, recruitment procedures by employing authorities of medical practitioners and legal matters.

The report was the subject of follow-up action with relevant health agencies. The report has also informed the preparation of the Medical Practitioners Act, 2007. A full copy of the report is available on the Department's website [www.dohc.ie/publications](http://www.dohc.ie/publications).

The Health Service Executive (HSE) has advised that the actual recruitment and selection of locum consultants is a matter for each individual hospital. The principles governing recruitment of locum consultants are set out in Comhairle na nOspideal Circular 1/1998 and HSE HR Circular 012/2007.

#### Health Service Staff.

92. **Deputy M. J. Nolan** asked the Minister for Health and Children when the embargo on recruitment of staff in the Health Service Executive will be lifted; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [32966/07]

**Minister for Health and Children (Deputy Mary Harney):** The current recruitment pause is a temporary measure initiated as part of the HSE financial break-even plan for 2007. In any instance where a critical or essential vacancy arises it may be filled through redeployment of existing staff by the line manager or re-assignment of responsibilities based on assessment of priority need.

Notwithstanding this, the HSE recognises that there are some circumstances where appointment of staff may be necessary in frontline services. Accordingly, a process has been put in place to evaluate, monitor and approve requests for derogation from the general recruitment pause. A group has been established which meets weekly to consider such applications. Of the applications received, a total of 520 derogations in whole-time equivalent terms have been approved up to 28 November where posts have been identified as critical to service delivery.

I have been advised by the Health Service Executive that the recruitment pause will continue for December 2007 and the current arrangement will be reviewed prior to the end of the year. It is intended that a robust employment control framework will continue to be applied to services in 2008.

#### Departmental Meetings.

93. **Deputy Ruairí Quinn** asked the Minister for Health and Children if her Department has a management advisory committee or an equivalent management committee; if it meets regularly; and if so, the frequency of same; if she and the Ministers of State attached to her Department attend the meetings; if a special adviser or advisers attached to the ministerial office or



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offices attend such meetings; if the minutes are circulated subsequent to each meeting with an indication as to the action to be taken by whom and when; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [32983/07]

94. **Deputy Ruairí Quinn** asked the Minister for Health and Children if she convenes specific policy meetings with officials in her Department; the way a policy meeting with officials is different to that of a management meeting, such as a management advisory committee meeting; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [32997/07]

**Minister for Health and Children (Deputy Mary Harney):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 93 and 94 together.

My Department's Management Advisory Committee (MAC) generally meets every Monday morning. Its work programme is structured and provides for regular consideration of matters of particular importance. Such matters are then brought to my attention, in the first instance, by the Secretary General, and also by individual MAC members.

In addition to dealing with internal management issues, such as finance and personnel, policy/service issues are tabled and discussed at MAC meetings to develop a corporate approach.

Minutes of MAC meetings are placed on my Department's intranet and copies of specified reports considered by MAC are circulated to me, the Ministers of State and the special advisors.

My interaction with the management of the Department is in line with a recommendation of the Travers report, as follows:

'Ministers and their Special Advisors should avoid becoming involved, to too great an extent, in the day — to — day operations and administration of the Department. In that context, Ministers should consider whether their involvement with the MAC should be on the basis of, perhaps, quarterly meetings which are well formulated and structured to focus on the key policy and operational issues of the Department. The Minister's key conduit of contact with the overall organisational arrangements for the Department should be through the Secretary General.' (p80)

Accordingly, it has not been my practice as Minister in this Department, nor in the Department of Enterprise, Trade, and Employment, to attend MAC meetings. I believe Departmental management should be able to meet collectively to discharge its functions as a civil service management unit.

In addition, neither the Ministers of State attached to my Department nor any special advisors attend the monthly MAC meetings.

However, I have ongoing contact with my Department's Secretary General, individual MAC members and other senior management on particular proposals, policies and issues. This can mean weekly, and sometimes, daily interaction with individual MAC members.

In addition to this day — to — day contact, I meet with the Secretary General on the morning of each Government meeting; I meet with the Ministers of State as a group each week; and I meet together with the Ministers of State and my special advisors with the MAC on a quarterly basis, as indicated in the quoted recommendation from the Travers report.

I have also agreed arrangements for interaction with individual MAC members approximately bimonthly, should the need arise to deal with aspects of their work which have not come up in more frequent issue-based meetings.

#### Ministerial Staff.

95. **Deputy Ruairí Quinn** asked the Minister for Health and Children the number of programme managers, special advisers, policy assistants, personnel on secondment and other personnel who are not part of the existing Civil Service who make up her Department, including permanent civil servants attached to the office of the Minister and Minister of States; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [33011/07]

**Minister for Health and Children (Deputy Mary Harney):** The following tables detail the number of programme managers, special advisers, policy assistants, personnel on secondment and other personnel who are not part of the existing Civil Service who make up my Department. Details are also provided in respect of the number of permanent civil servants attached to my office and the offices of the Ministers of State.

Minister's Office

Grade	Civil Servant/Other	Number W.T.E.
Special Advisor	Other	2
Special Advisor/Programme Manager	Other	1
Special Advisor/Press Advisor	Other	1
Personal Assistant	Other	2
Clerical Officer on Secondment	Civil Servant	2
Department of Health and Children	Civil Servant	8

## Minister of State, Mr Brendan Smith T.D.

Grade	Civil Servant/Other	Number W.T.E.
Special Advisor	Other	1
Personal Assistant	Other	1
Personal Secretary	Other	1
Clerical Officer on Secondment	Civil Servant	2
Department of Health and Children	Civil Servant	6.7

## Minister of State, Dr Jimmy Devins T.D.

Grade	Civil Servant/Other	Number W.T.E.
Special Advisor	Other	1
Personal Assistant	Other	1
Personal Secretary	Other	0.46
Personal Secretary	Other	0.54
Civilian Driver	Other	2
Department of Health and Children *	Civil Servant	5

\*An Executive Officer from the Department of Education and Science is also assigned to Minister Devins Office.

## Minister of State, Mr Pat the Cope Gallagher T.D.

Grade	Civil Servant/Other	Number W.T.E.
Personal Assistant	Other	1
Personal Secretary	Other	1
Clerical Officer on Secondment	Civil Servant	2
Civilian Driver	Other	2
Department of Health and Children	Civil Servant	5

## Minister of State, Ms Máire Hochtóir T.D.

Grade	Civil Servant/Other	Number W.T.E.
Personal Assistant	Other	1
Personal Secretary	Other	1
Civilian Driver	Other	2
Department of Health and Children	Civil Servant	6.5

In addition, there are 12.1 W.T.E. non-civil servants seconded on a temporary basis to my Department from a number of organisations and 1 officer on contract to my Department.

### Health Services.

96. **Deputy Paul Kehoe** asked the Minister for Health and Children the reason a child (details supplied) in County Wexford has to wait two years for an appointment to see an ear, nurse and throat consultant; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [33016/07]

**Minister for Health and Children (Deputy Mary Harney):** Operational responsibility for the

management and delivery of health and personal social services is a matter for the Health Service Executive 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.

### Home Help Service.

97. **Deputy Jack Wall** asked the Minister for Health and Children the premiums paid to home help personnel in the Kildare-west Wicklow areas

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for weekend periods; if this payment is in line with the guidelines as laid down by the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment in relation to working hours and the appropriate rates; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [33021/07]

**Minister for Health and Children (Deputy Mary 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, including the payment of premiums to eligible personnel, has been provided as part of its overall vote. The Executive is the appropriate body to consider the particular issues raised by the Deputy. My Department has requested the Parliamentary Affairs Division of the Executive to arrange to have these matters investigated and to have a reply issued directly to the Deputy.

#### Hospital Services.

98. **Deputy Bernard Allen** asked the Minister for Health and Children if she will investigate the reason the day procedures ward at Cork University Hospital was closed for the schools' mid-term break; and the further reason a busy hospital ward closed to coincide with school holidays. [33032/07]

**Minister for Health and Children (Deputy Mary Harney):** Operational responsibility for the management and delivery of health and personal social services is a matter for the Health Service Executive 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.

99. **Deputy Bernard Allen** asked the Minister for Health and Children if she will investigate the reason the day procedures ward at Cork University Hospital is closing for a three week period over the Christmas 2007 period. [33033/07]

**Minister for Health and Children (Deputy Mary Harney):** Operational responsibility for the management and delivery of health and personal social services is a matter for the Health Service Executive 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.

#### Health Service Staff.

100. **Deputy Jack Wall** asked the Minister for Health and Children if she will investigate the discrepancy between the statement issued in Dáil Éireann on 29 November 2007 and the letter received from the Health Service Executive on 21 November 2007 (details supplied); if she will clarify the position of the provision of occupational therapists in the Kildare/west Wicklow areas of the HSE; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [33037/07]

**Minister for Health and Children (Deputy Mary Harney):** According to information provided by the Health Service Executive on 29 November 2007 in the context of an Adjournment Debate on occupational therapy services in the Kildare/West Wicklow area, there were 8.5 vacant posts in the occupational therapy service in this area, including two maternity leave vacancies. According to clarification provided by the HSE to my Department yesterday (5 December), there remains 8.5 vacancies — one of which is a maternity leave vacancy and one of which is a clinical placement post.

The current recruitment pause is a temporary measure initiated as part of the HSE financial break-even plan for 2007. The HSE recognises that there are some circumstances where appointment of staff may be necessary in frontline services. Accordingly, a process has been put in place to evaluate, monitor and approve requests for derogation from the general recruitment pause. A group has been established which meets regularly to consider such applications. The HSE has confirmed that approval by way of derogation has been given to fill 3 maternity leave posts, one current and two in January 2008 in the occupational therapy service in Kildare/West Wicklow.

#### Departmental Funding.

101. **Deputy Jack Wall** asked the Minister for Health and Children her views on correspondence (details supplied); the funding allocated by her Department or the Health Service Executive to the group over each of the past five years; the plans she or the HSE has to increase the funding and to provide a staffing grant to the society; the mechanisms available to the society to obtain such grants; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [33071/07]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health and Children (Deputy Máire Hctor):** 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.

#### Health Services.

102. **Deputy Catherine Byrne** asked the Minister for Health and Children the number of stabilisation service beds, community based residential detoxification beds, medical detoxification unit beds and step-down or half-way house beds available here for rehabilitating drug addicts; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [33073/07]

**Minister for Health and Children (Deputy Mary 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.

#### Departmental Funding.

103. **Deputy Michael McGrath** asked the Minister for Health and Children if her attention has been drawn to the work being carried out by the Irish Osteoporosis Society; if her Department or the Health Service Executive provide core funding to the society; and if so, if this funding will continue into 2008. [33099/07]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health and Children (Deputy Máire Hctor):** 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.

#### Health Service Reform.

104. **Deputy Thomas P. Broughan** asked the Minister for Health and Children if she will expand the regulatory and inspection functions of the Health Information and Quality Authority; and if she will specifically invigilate and regulate the pricing structures and services offered by companies (details supplied) especially in view of reports of proposed increased health insurance premiums in 2008. [33186/07]

**Minister for Health and Children (Deputy Mary Harney):** The Health Information and Quality Authority (HIQA) was established in May 2007. This represents a crucial element of the Health Reform Programme and is a new departure for the Irish Health Services.

A core function of the Authority is to set standards on safety and quality of health services and to monitor enforcement of these standards in an open and transparent way. The Act gives HIQA strong powers in this area in relation to services provided by the Health Service Executive and bodies funded by the Executive to provide health services on its behalf. The introduction of such regulatory regimes in the public sector in the first instance is a feature of such developments in other jurisdictions. The extension of these provisions to the private sector would involve further legislation of a complex nature.

In January 2007, I established the Commission on Patient Safety and Quality Assurance chaired by Dr Deirdre Madden. The Commission is developing proposals to develop proposals for a health service wide system of governance based on corporate accountability for the quality and safety of all health services. One of its terms of reference is to specifically examine and make recommendations in relation to a statutory system of licensing for both public and private health care providers and services. The Commission is expected to issue its report in mid 2008.

Companies offering health insurance contracts are obliged to comply with the regulatory framework provided for in the Health Insurance Acts and related regulations. The Health Insurance Acts (and regulations) have been enacted in the interests of the common good, providing for community rating, open enrolment and lifetime cover. Insurers are obliged to accept all persons who wish to avail of a health insurance contract offered, to do so for a standard premium (with limited exceptions that primarily relate to reduced rates for students and children), and to renew the contracts of persons. They are not permitted to discriminate on the basis of health status. Insurers offering cover are also required to provide a minimum level of cover across a range of services, including private maintenance charges in public hospitals, consultants fees, private hospitals charges, out-patient and maternity benefits, convalescence, psychiatric treatment and substance abuse.

Currently, the VHI is obliged to notify the Minister of proposed premium increases. However, the VHI Bill presently before the Oireachtas correctly provides for the removal of the Minister's involvement in premia increases. Prudential regulation is a matter for the Financial Regulator. Therefore, it is a matter for the insurer to determine the appropriate premium.

### Coast Guard Service.

105. **Deputy Joe McHugh** asked the Minister for Transport if the jobs that were proposed for Malin Head and Valentia in the Deloitte and Touche report will be realised; if not, the reason for same; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [33087/07]

113. **Deputy Joe McHugh** asked the Minister for Transport when the decision was taken to reject the proposals set out in the Deloitte and Touche report to expand the Malin Head and Valentia Coast Guard Stations; the person who had the responsibility for making this decision; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [33089/07]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Noel Dempsey):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 105 and 113 together.

The Deloitte and Touche Irish Coast Guard Study made over one hundred recommendations for the future development of the Coast Guard service having regard to international best practice and value for money. Many of these recommendations have already been implemented by the IRCG.

A number of the recommendations are strategic in nature. One of these is the recommendation to reduce the number of rescue co-ordination centres from the current three to two. It was recommended that each location should be capable of supporting the entire IRCG national network and the building of two new centres was put forward as an option. The decision on location was left to the Department. Further recommendations detail the requirements for the centres, covering matters such as equipment, layout and environment. The decisions I took recently were made against the background of the Deloitte and Touche study and the Decentralisation Programme.

I consider that the communications system is the backbone infrastructure on which Coast Guard operations depend. It is essential that it is of high quality, efficient, effective and that it provides value for money. I am concerned at the state of the present equipment and have confirmed that a €2 million investment in essential equipment should proceed without any further delay. I also confirmed that this equipment should be sufficient to operate two fully manned Co-Ordination centres. Each centre will have the capability to run the entire Coast Guard network which will allow for a seamless transfer of co-ordination should one centre become suddenly unworkable for any reason. I also confirmed that locating one on the east coast and one on the west coast is the preferred option and that the east coast centre should be co-located with the HQ for operational reasons.

### Dublin Transport Authority.

106. **Deputy Thomas P. Broughan** asked the Minister for Transport when he will introduce legislation necessary to establish the Dublin Transport Authority; the reason there has been an ongoing delay with bringing forward this legislation; the timeframe for a fully operational DTA; if the functions of the DTA as proposed by the Dublin Transport Authority Establishment Team's report to him in March 2006 will still be the key responsibilities of the DTA; the functions of the Railway Procurement Agency, the Dublin Transportation Office or any other national, regional or local transport authority that will be transferred to the new DTA; if there will be an early announcement on the interconnector; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [33024/07]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Noel Dempsey):** The Agreed Programme for Government includes a commitment to expediting the establishment of a statutory Dublin Transport Authority. The new Authority will have overall responsibility for surface transport in the Greater Dublin Area (GDA) subject to direction by Government in respect of significant policy issues. Accordingly establishment of the new Authority will involve some alteration to existing institutional arrangements for the planning and delivery of surface transport in the GDA. The details will be set out in the planned legislation.

The principal functions of the proposed Authority are set out in the Programme for Government and will include: strategic transport planning; procurement of public transport infrastructure; procurement of public transport services; allocation of current and capital Exchequer funds for the provision of public transport infrastructure and services; regulation of public transport fares, routes, and service levels; delivery of integrated ticketing, integrated passenger information and integrated fares; better integration of transport and land use planning; ensuring effective traffic management. This is in line with the recommendations made in the report of the Dublin Transport Authority Establishment Team.

Preparation of the necessary legislation is well advanced and I will bring a Memorandum to Government in due course. My overriding priority is to establish as quickly as possible a statutory Authority that will be effective. The current position regarding the Interconnector is that Iarnród Éireann are proceeding with the detailed planning and design of the project with a view to submission of an application for a Railway Order to An Bord Pleanála in 2009.

### Integrated Ticketing System.

107. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Mini-

ster for Transport his views on the ongoing integrated ticketing project; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [33201/07]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Noel Dempsey):** The Integrated Ticketing Project Board was established last year with responsibility to deliver the smartcard technology required to deliver an integrated smart card ticketing system within an agreed specification, timeline and budget. The Project Board submitted a comprehensive proposal for the delivery of the project, setting out the timelines, scope and budget for the Integrated Ticketing Project. The proposal put the expected capital cost of the integrated ticketing system at €49.6 million. On the 1st June, my Department wrote to the Chairman of the Project Board authorising him to proceed with the implementation of the project along the lines proposed by the Board.

Integrated ticketing will be launched initially on the scheduled services of Dublin Bus, LUAS and Morton's Coaches, a private bus operator, by September 2009. Irish Rail DART and commuter rail services will be included within a further 12 months, and Bus Eireann will implement a pilot scheme on one of its commuter routes in the Greater Dublin Area. It is also envisaged the other private bus operators will also join the integrated ticketing system over this timeframe. The Board has recently agreed a Memorandum of Understanding setting out the role, responsibilities, actions and commitments to the integrated ticketing project of each of the parties for the effective and successful delivery of the integrated ticketing system. The procurement system for the Back Office clearing system to govern transactions between operators is currently underway. The Chairman of the Integrated Ticketing Project Board has informed me, in his recent report, that good progress is being made on the Project in accordance with the agreed programme.

#### Departmental Meetings.

108. **Deputy Ruairí Quinn** asked the Minister for Transport if his Department has a management advisory committee or an equivalent management committee; if it meets regularly; and if so, the frequency of same; if he and the Ministers of State attached to his Department attend the meetings; if a special advisor or advisors attached to the Ministerial Office or offices attend such meetings; if the minutes are circulated subsequent to each meeting with an indication as to the action to be taken by whom and when; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32986/07]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Noel Dempsey):** The Department has a Management Board comprised of the Secretary General and the 6 Assistant Secretaries in the Department.

The Board normally meets on a weekly basis and the minutes of the meeting are made available on the Department's intranet for the information of all staff. Items for follow up action are specifically identified. The Minister normally attends the Management Board meeting on a monthly basis and on such occasions his special advisor usually attends also.

109. **Deputy Ruairí Quinn** asked the Minister for Transport if he convenes specific policy meetings with officials in his Department; the way a policy meeting with officials is different to that of a management meeting, such as a management advisory committee meeting; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [33000/07]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Noel Dempsey):** I hold policy meetings with officials in my Department on an ongoing basis. The majority of these address specific sectoral policy issues within my remit. I also meet the Department's Management Board on a regular basis. This Board is comprised of the Secretary General and the 6 Assistant Secretaries. These meetings enable matters of a high level or strategic nature to be addressed.

#### Ministerial Staff.

110. **Deputy Ruairí Quinn** asked the Minister for Transport the number of programme managers, special advisors, policy assistants, personnel on secondment and other personnel who are not part of the existing Civil Service who make up his Department, including permanent civil servants attached to the office of the Minister and Minister of States; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [33014/07]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Noel Dempsey):** There are a total of 5 such personnel not part of the civil service working in my private and constituency offices and in the press office in the Department. In addition, there are 10 permanent civil servants working in my office.

#### Departmental Bodies.

111. **Deputy Lucinda Creighton** asked the Minister for Transport the statutory bodies for which he has Ministerial responsibility, but for which he is not accountable to Dáil Éireann for daily operational activities. [33081/07]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Noel Dempsey):** I have responsibility for the statutory bodies listed in the following table. In all cases I am not accountable to Dáil Éireann for daily operational activities.

## [Deputy Noel Dempsey.]

Table of statutory bodies under the aegis of the Department of Transport

Statutory Body
Dublin Airport Authority
Shannon Airport Authority
Cork Airport Authority
Irish Aviation Authority
Commission for Aviation Regulation
CIÉ
Iarnród Éireann
Bus Átha Cliath
Bus Éireann
Railway Procurement Agency
Railway Safety Commission
Railway Safety Advisory Council
National Roads Authority
Dublin Transportation Office
Medical Bureau of Road Safety
Commission for Taxi Regulation
Advisory Council to the Commission for Taxi Regulation
Road Safety Authority
Marine Casualty Investigation Board
Port of Cork Company
Drogheda Port Company
Dublin Port Company
Dundalk Port Company
Dun Laoghaire Harbour Company
Galway Harbour Company
New Ross Port Company
Shannon/Foynes Port Company
Port of Waterford Company
Wicklow Port Company
Arklow Harbour Commissioners
Baltimore Harbour Commissioners
Bantry Bay Harbour Commissioners
Kinsale Harbour Commissioners
Kilrush Harbour Commissioners
Tralee and Fenit Pier and Harbour Commissioners
River Moy (Ballina) Harbour Commissioners
Westport Port and Harbour Commissioners
Wexford Harbour Commissioners
Youghal Harbour Authority

**Decentralisation Programme.**

112. **Deputy Joe McHugh** asked the Minister for Transport if he will clarify his Department's position on decentralisation; and his views on whether the centralising of jobs from peripheral areas such as Malin and Valentia to Drogheda complies with the Government policy of decentralisation. [33088/07]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Noel Dempsey):** A total of 80 posts have relocated or are awaiting relocation under the decentralisation programme. This number includes 35 civil servants from my Department who have relocated to new Departments. At present, there are 17 posts in each of the centres at Malin Head and Valentia. Discussions with staff in these centres are expected to commence shortly. Relocation of staff will be on a voluntary basis in accordance with Government policy.

*Question No. 113 answered with Question No. 105.*

**Aer Lingus.**

114. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Transport the policy influence retained by his Department in Aer Lingus through the 25% shareholding in the company; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [33157/07]

130. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Transport the extent to which he anticipates Aer Lingus to operate in accordance with the Government's policy; if Government policy has yet to be determined in this regard; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [33178/07]

131. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Transport if he anticipates further executive decisions affecting policies to be pursued by Aer Lingus which might not be in accordance with the Government policy; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [33179/07]

132. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Transport if he will exercise an organisational or management function in Aer Lingus in the future; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [33180/07]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Noel Dempsey):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 114 and 130 to 132, inclusive, together.

The Government's aviation strategy is to develop as wide a range as possible of competitive, safe and reliable air services for the benefit of business and tourism. In this context the States shareholding of 25.4% is important for two key reasons. Firstly, it acts as a block against a hostile takeover of Aer Lingus and ensures that the aviation market in Ireland will continue to be served by at least two strong competing airlines. This is good for consumer choice and for lower air fares.

Secondly, the shareholding also ensures that the Memorandum and Articles of Association of the Company cannot be changed without the approval of the State. In turn, this means that the

safeguard measures relating to a disposal of Heathrow slots cannot be changed by other shareholders. Also, the measures whereby the State can appoint three directors cannot be changed by other shareholders.

Currently there is one State appointed director serving on the board and it is now proposed that two further appointments will be made in the near future. The State appointees will seek to ensure that all future decisions of the company that have implications for wider Government, aviation or regional development policies are considered and decided at board level. This will give the State appointees the opportunity to raise the public policy implications of each decision and to ensure that the full commercial implications for the company are taken into account. The State appointees to the board do not have a veto on board decisions. It is not possible for the State to avail of its shareholding to seek to impose non-commercial obligations on the Company. I do not have any role in relation to organizational or management functions in Aer Lingus.

#### Public Transport.

115. **Deputy Bernard J. 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. [33158/07]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Noel Dempsey):** The CIÉ bus companies are targeting significant growth in passenger numbers over the next 5 years — up to an additional 37.5 million per annum. Project passenger numbers for private operators are not available. However, applications for bus licences from private operators will continue to be processed under the provisions of the Road Transport Act 1932, as amended.

#### Railway Stations.

116. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Transport the car parking available for commuters at Sallins Rail Station, Sallins, County Kildare; his plans to increase this capacity in order to encourage the use of rail transport; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [33159/07]

117. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Transport the car parking available for commuters at Leixlip Rail Station, Leixlip, County Kildare; his plans to increase this capacity in order to encourage the use of rail transport; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [33160/07]

119. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Transport the extent to which free car parking is available for rail commuters in

County Kildare with a view to encouraging rail transport; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [33162/07]

120. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Transport if he has been in touch with Kildare County Council and Iarnród Éireann with a view to providing adequate car parking at all towns throughout the county with particular reference to meeting the parking requirements adjacent to commuter rail stations; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [33163/07]

121. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Transport the extent to which he will increase the number of car parking spaces at each rail station in County Kildare and the existing number of places in each case; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [33164/07]

124. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Transport the extent to which he proposes to ensure the provision of adequate car parking facilities in accordance with daily passenger throughput at Maynooth Rail Station, Maynooth, County Kildare; when he expects these facilities to be in place; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [33170/07]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Noel Dempsey):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 116, 117 and 119 to 121, inclusive, and 124 together.

The provision and operation of car parking at and adjacent to railway stations, including in Co. Kildare, is a matter for Iarnród Éireann and where appropriate, the relevant Local Authority.

#### Rail Services.

118. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Transport his proposals for the development of the rail transport system with particular reference to the need to provide an available, acceptable and attractive alternative for commuters; his plans to accelerate the programme to put in place a complimentary parking and bus feeder service with a view to increasing rail use by daily commuters in County Kildare; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [33161/07]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Noel Dempsey):** The major capital investment of over €1,787m in the railway network since 2000 has funded major improvements throughout the network. As a consequence, a total of 43m passengers travelled by rail in 2006 — an increase of 36% on 2000. The capacity and frequency of services will be further improved as major Transport 21 projects are completed including the Kildare route upgrade project, improved services along the Maynooth line and the bringing into



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service of new rolling stock. The provision of car parking at, and feeder bus services to, railway stations is a matter for Iarnród Éireann in conjunction with local authorities and bus operators.

*Question Nos. 119 to 121, inclusive, answered with Question No. 116.*

#### Road Network.

122. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Transport if future roadworks, tunnels or bridges will have the ability to accommodate supertrucks; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [33166/07]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Noel Dempsey):** The design of roads, including road bridges and tunnels, on the national road system is a matter for the National Roads Authority under the Roads Act 1993. The NRA Design Manual for Roads and Bridges is also applicable to non-national roads. Arrangements are being made to introduce a statutory maximum vehicle height limit of 4.65 metres.

As with the Dublin Port Tunnel, the planned Limerick Tunnel will have a height of 4.65 metres. No other road tunnels are currently planned. Any supertrucks of a height of 4.65 metres or lower can be accommodated under any of the two existing tunnels and in the Limerick Tunnel which is under construction.

#### Transport 21.

123. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Transport if he is satisfied that Transport 21 can and will be delivered on time and within cost; the areas least likely to meet these targets; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [33169/07]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Noel Dempsey):** I am satisfied with progress to date on Transport 21. To date, twenty one national roads schemes have been completed since the commencement of Transport 21 in January 2006. Many of the schemes were completed ahead of schedule and on or under budget. The opening of the Dundalk to Newry scheme, in August of this year, represents the completion of the M1 motorway, the first of the five inter-urban motorways identified for completion under Transport 21. The remaining four are on schedule for completion in 2010.

In the public transport area, the new Dublin Docklands station was opened in March of this year, 3 months ahead of schedule. With the introduction of 67 new rail carriages earlier this year, Iarnród Éireann is now operating hourly, clock-face services on the Dublin — Cork rail route, as provided for under Transport 21. Construction work has begun on a number of other projects

and planning, design and public consultation is continuing on many more.

There is no indication that the projects and programmes identified in Transport 21 will not be delivered within the ten-year timeframe and within the overall financial framework. Notwithstanding this excellent progress, it has been necessary to revise the indicative completion dates for some projects. The huge scale of the Transport 21 programme is such that adjustments to the timescale for individual projects is inevitable. The value of the ten-year financial framework is that it gives us the flexibility to deal with this in an effective way. My Department will continue to work with all of the implementing agencies to ensure that projects are delivered in the shortest possible timeframe.

*Question No. 124 answered with Question No. 116.*

#### Rail Services.

125. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Transport the extent to which commuter capacity has been increased in respect of all trains serving the railway stations at Kilcock, Maynooth, Leixlip, Confey, Hazelhatch and Sallins, County Kildare; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [33172/07]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Noel Dempsey):** I refer the Deputy to my replies to PQs no 28134 and 28135 on 13 November 2007 and to PQs no 24658 and 24659 of 18 October 2007 which set out the position regarding the provision of additional capacity on the Maynooth and Kildare lines.

#### Driving Tests.

126. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Transport the extent to which he gave instructions to the relevant authorities in regard to the reduction of waiting times for driving tests; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [33173/07]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Noel Dempsey):** Under the Road Safety Authority Act 2006 (Conferral of Functions) Order 2006 (S.I. No 477 of 2006) this is a matter for the Road Safety Authority.

#### Road Traffic Accidents.

127. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Transport if he has received recent reports setting out details of fatal and non-fatal traffic accidents in which provisional driver licence holders were involved and other licence holders; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [33174/07]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Noel Dempsey):** Under the Road Safety Authority Act 2006 (Conferral of Functions) Order 2006 (S.I. No 477 of 2006) this is a matter for the Road Safety Authority.

#### Road Safety.

128. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Transport if he will direct policies towards improved road safety; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [33175/07]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Noel Dempsey):** Road safety is already a matter to which I attach a high priority. Two recent important initiatives in this area have been the establishment by me of the Road Safety Authority on 1 September 2006, and the launch by An Taoiseach in October of the Road Safety Strategy 2007-2012. With the establishment of the RSA, a single statutory body now exists to focus on road safety matters and to co-ordinate a range of road safety initiatives. The RSA also has a key role in advising me on road safety policy. The Road Safety Strategy sets out the direction in road safety for the next six years, with the overall objective of reducing road deaths to no more than 60 per million of population by the end of 2012.

*Question No. 129 answered with Question No. 61.*

*Questions Nos. 130 to 132, inclusive, answered with Question No. 114.*

#### Rail Network.

133. **Deputy Thomas P. Broughan** asked the Minister for Transport the reason the Limerick to Foynes rail line was disconnected from the Irish Rail national network on 5 November 2007 in view of the cost of reconnecting the line in the future and the necessity to preserve rail freight and other infrastructure in the mid-west; his views on whether from a transport strategic point of view, the Foynes line should remain connected especially as part of the Limerick re-signalling programme in 2009; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [33189/07]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Noel Dempsey):** This is a day to day operational matter for Iarnród Éireann and not one in which I have any role.

#### Marine Safety.

134. **Deputy Thomas P. Broughan** asked the Minister for Transport his plans to introduce an emergency towing vessel service on the Irish coast; if he has held or intends to hold discussions with his UK Ministerial counterpart regarding shared ETV facilities on the Irish Sea and Celtic Sea; and if his Department has carried out a cost

benefit analysis for this project and business models to carry out the ETV function. [33190/07]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Noel Dempsey):** Emergency Towing Vessels (ETV's) are deployed to empower a State to proactively protect its coast and all maritime activities within its Exclusive Economic and Marine Pollution Responsibility Zones. The tasking of ETVs include intervention in casualty response to prevent pollution from oils or hazardous and noxious substances and damage to the environment, life or property; pollution enforcement; oil recovery; reduction of pollution costs; fire fighting; and enhancement of search and rescue services.

My Department is reviewing the options to ensure that Ireland has access to ETV capacity to protect the coast from the consequences of major oil pollution or vessel stranding. In reviewing options I also intend to include discussion with our counterparts in the UK.

#### Departmental Meetings.

135. **Deputy Ruairí Quinn** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if his Department has a management advisory committee or an equivalent management committee; if it meets regularly; and if so, the frequency of same; if he and the Ministers of State attached to his Department attend the meetings; if a special advisor or advisors attached to the Ministerial Office or offices attend such meetings; if the minutes are circulated subsequent to each meeting with an indication as to the action to be taken by whom and when; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32982/07]

**Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Dermot Ahern):** My Department has a Management Advisory Committee (MAC), comprising the Secretary General of the Department and the Heads of all Divisions in the Department. The MAC meets regularly, approximately once a month. To date, this year, there have been eight MAC meetings, and further meetings are planned before the end of the year.

I attend a number of the MAC meetings, together with the two Ministers of State attached to my Department, Mr. Dick Roche T.D. and Mr. Micheál Kitt T.D. My Special Advisor and my Press Advisor would normally attend MAC meetings that I am attending. Normally, minutes are circulated after each meeting of the Management Advisory Committee. The content of those minutes varies considerably, depending on the issues discussed. The meetings which I and my Ministerial colleagues have with the Management Advisory Committee offer a valuable opportunity to discuss the various strategic issues facing the Department, with a particular focus on ensuring timely delivery on the commitments made in the

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Programme for Government. These meetings are, of course, in addition to the ongoing contacts which I and my Ministerial colleagues have with Departmental officials, including members of the MAC, on various policy issues.

136. **Deputy Ruairí Quinn** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if he convenes specific policy meetings with officials in his Department; the way a policy meeting with officials is different to that of a management meeting, such as a management advisory committee meeting; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32996/07]

**Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Dermot Ahern):** I convene specific policy meetings on a regular basis with officials of my Department. Their frequency and content varies having regard to the challenges and priorities that arise at a given time.

The main difference between these meetings and the meetings of the Management Advisory Committee (MAC) which I attend are that the former are usually one subject agendas, dealing, for example with the Irish Aid programme or Northern Ireland, whereas the latter generally take a broader view of the work of the Department.

#### Ministerial Staff.

137. **Deputy Ruairí Quinn** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the number of programme managers, special advisors, policy assistants, personnel on secondment and other personnel who are not part of the existing Civil Service who make up his Department, including permanent civil servants attached to the office of the Minister and Minister of States; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [33010/07]

**Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Dermot Ahern):** The core staff number authorised for my Department is currently 1,576. This figure includes approximately 300 staff who are recruited locally to work in our Missions abroad but excludes clerical staff employed on fixed term contracts to work in the Passport Offices during the peak season. It excludes a limited number of interns engaged on fixed term contracts to work in the Department's Political and Legal Divisions and in Irish Aid, as well a public servant who is on secondment from the IDA.

There have been no programme managers in the Department of Foreign Affairs since 1997. I have one Special Adviser (non-established), one Press Adviser (non-established) and one Personal Secretary (non-established) based in the Department of Foreign Affairs. I also have one Personal Assistant (non-established) based in the office in my constituency.

My colleague Mr. Dick Roche T.D., Minister of State with special responsibility for European Affairs at my Department and at the Department of An Taoiseach, has appointed one Special Adviser (non-established), one Personal Assistant (non-established) and two Temporary Civilian Drivers (non-established) to his office. He also appointed one Personal Secretary (non-established) to his constituency office. My colleague Mr. Michael Kitt T.D., Minister of State with special responsibility for Overseas Development at the Department of Foreign Affairs, has appointed one Personal Assistant (non-established) and two Temporary Civilian Drivers (non-established), together with one Personal Secretary (non-established) to his constituency office.

The non-established officers and civilian drivers referred to are employed on the basis of a contract which is coterminous with the appointment of the relevant office holder.

#### Official Engagements.

138. **Deputy Michael Ring** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the funding that was spent in the USA by his Department in the past twelve month period; the events that took place in America that were attended by him or his Department officials; the costs of travel, and so on for attendance at each event by his Department; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [33047/07]

139. **Deputy Michael Ring** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the amount of funding spent by his Department and the Government in attending the St. Patrick's Day Parade event in America, including details of all costs such as travel, drinks, receptions, accommodation and so on; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [33048/07]

141. **Deputy Michael Ring** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the funding spent by his Department in America in 2006 and to date in 2007, to include all travels costs, reception costs, details of events, sponsorship and funding allocated to US based organisations and so on; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [33050/07]

**Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Dermot Ahern):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 138, 139 and 141 together.

With reference to the Deputy's query regarding St. Patrick's Day, I, along with an official party of four, travelled to Washington from 14 March to 16 March 2007 to join the Taoiseach in a programme of events and ceremonies designed to both celebrate St. Patrick's Day and to promote Irish interests in the United States. The

total costs of the visit, including flights and accommodation, came to €30,492.

I am not in a position to comment on any travel or other costs incurred by any Government Department other than my own in relation to this or other visits to the United States as these are matters for each individual Minister and Department. In 2006 I visited Dallas and Washington to participate in the official St. Patrick's Day celebrations for that year. In addition, I made a

number of visits to the United States in 2006 and 2007 for the purpose of discussions with senior figures in the Administration and in Congress on a range of issues including developments in Northern Ireland, immigration reform and other bilateral issues. These visits also provided an opportunity for meetings with groups active on immigration reform and other issues of concern to the Irish community. Estimated costs of these visits are provided below.

US Visits 2006 and 2007

	Dallas & Washington 11-17 March 2006	Washington 23-24 May 2006	New York 25-27 Sept 2006	New York 10-12 Nov 2006	Washington 14-16 March 2007	New York/ Washington 30 Sept-04 Oct 2007
TOTAL (€)	50,968	4,721	31,248	7,015	30,492	30,173

In addition, there have been a number of visits to the United States by officials from my Department for a range of purposes including bilateral consultations, participation in conferences and training programmes. It would not be feasible to provide a detailed breakdown of costs in individual cases.

With reference to the Deputy's query regarding funding allocated by my Department to US based organisations, I can confirm that funding to support the Irish Immigration Centres, the Irish Lobby for Immigration Reform and support groups in the United States amounted to €1.128m in 2006 and the outturn in 2007 will exceed €1.554m. A €2m contribution to an endowment fund for The Ireland Funds, in support of the work undertaken by that organisation, has been provided for in my Department's 2007 budgetary allocation. Departmental funding in support of Irish cultural activities in the United States amounted to €35,221 in 2006 and the outturn in 2007 will be in the order of €44,000, although not all such funding was channelled through US based organisations.

In addition to travel and attendance at events in the United States by me, as Minister, and by officials from Dublin, the Ambassador in Washington and the diplomatic staff and officials of the Embassy and the four Consulates General engage in a targeted programme of representational activities and participate in a range of events in the United States in support of Government economic and political objectives.

#### Departmental Funding.

140. **Deputy Michael Ring** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the funding spent by his Department on a project (details supplied) in the USA; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [33049/07]

**Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Dermot Ahern):** While it would not be possible in the

time allocated to check the files for earlier years, it is my understanding that the Department of Foreign Affairs has not provided any funding to the institution in question.

*Question No. 141 answered with Question No. 138.*

#### Overseas Development Aid.

142. **Deputy Michael McGrath** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the amount of overseas aid allocated to Sudan in 2007; and his views on withdrawing overseas aid to the country in protest at the decision to jail a British school teacher (details supplied). [33098/07]

**Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs (Deputy Michael P. Kitt):** To date in 2007, Irish Aid has provided in excess of €16 million in overseas aid to Sudan. A further €0.5 million has been approved in funding to support the Darfur peace talks and Ireland has made a contribution of €2 million in support of the African Union Mission in Sudan (AMIS). Our overseas aid funding is provided to a range of United Nations (UN) and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs). No funding has been channelled through the Government of Sudan. Our funding is focused on alleviating the suffering of the people affected by conflict and other humanitarian crises in Sudan.

#### Emigrant Support Services.

143. **Deputy Frank Feighan** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if he will review funding of Irish welfare centres in Britain in view of the reductions by the boroughs in Birmingham and London; and if he will make representations to British Government in connection with this policy of cutbacks their boroughs are implementing. [33155/07]

**Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Dermot Ahern):** Reaching out to and strengthening links with the Irish community in Britain and with those of Irish ancestry is a cornerstone of Government policy. The establishment and operation of the Irish Abroad Unit in the Department of Foreign Affairs has greatly enhanced our capacity to develop and implement more responsive policies in this regard. Government funding to assist our community in Britain will exceed €11.5 million this year. This represents an increase of more than €1 million over the funds made available in 2006. Approximately €50 million has been provided since the Government commenced funding Irish community organisations in 1984. A similar level of funding will be made available in 2008. Applications for funding through the Government's Emigrant Services programme will be invited early in 2008, and I would encourage those organisations who give valuable assistance to the Irish community in Britain and who need further support to apply for this funding. The primary emphasis of Government funding in Britain will continue to be directed at supporting frontline services. This support for frontline agencies in their social outreach programmes helps them to assist our most vulnerable fellow countrymen and women, including the elderly members of the community susceptible to health and social problems.

Last week's report by Committee D of the Last week's report by Committee D of the British-Irish Inter-Parliamentary Body on the Irish Community in Britain supports the view that the British Government has a duty of care to the Irish community, and reflects the almost unanimous agreement by the British members of the Committee that the Irish community in Britain should be given more support by the British Government and local authorities. I warmly welcome this report. Unfortunately, however, there has been a policy shift by local authorities across Britain away from funding social and community services for individual ethnic groups. This in places is presenting a challenge for organisations specifically serving the Irish community, who now find themselves in a tougher funding environment. I share the view that the Authorities in Britain should maintain their well established responsibilities to the Irish community in their areas, and I will have this view conveyed through the Ambassador in London.

#### **Human Rights Issues.**

144. **Deputy Thomas P. Broughan** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the initiatives the Government is taking or in which the Government is involved to ensure that the rights of the Kurdish people are vindicated, fully respected and to assess the present situation of the Kurdish people within the five States which encompass historic Kurdistan. [33185/07]

**Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Dermot Ahern):** There are significant Kurdish minority populations in Turkey, Iraq and Iran, and a smaller population in parts of Syria.

There are 15 million people of Kurdish ethnic origin living in Turkey, mostly in the south east of the country. The Government's concerns about the human rights situation in Turkey, including the situation of people of Kurdish origin, are raised on a regular basis in our contacts with the Turkish Government. Most recently, I raised our concerns about the human rights situation in Turkey at my meeting with Turkish Foreign Minister Babaçan on the margins of the UN General Assembly in October.

In recent years Turkey has made significant progress in the adoption of wide-ranging political and legal reforms. Important human rights reforms have been introduced and legislation enacted aimed at strengthening the enforcement of human rights, including the cultural rights of all citizens, including those of Kurdish origin. The security situation in the south east of the country, which had gradually improved since 1999, has worsened in the past two years. This follows the resumption of violence by the PKK, a Kurdish separatist organisation that appears on the EU list of terrorist organisations. Tensions have been particularly high in recent months, with an increase in casualties on both sides. The killing of 12 Turkish soldiers in a coordinated attack on a post on the Iraqi border, and the capture of a further 8 in the same incident, were the most high profile incidents. This has prompted the dangerous possibility of a large-scale Turkish incursion into northern Iraq to quell the threat. We continue to closely monitor developments in the region through our Embassy in Ankara, and in cooperation with our EU partners.

In Iraq, the de facto autonomy of the Kurdish region since the mid 1990s has been confirmed and strengthened following the end of the regime of Saddam Hussein. The two main Kurdish parties are key members of the broad coalition that makes up the Iraqi Government. The President of Iraq is the Kurdish leader Jalal Talibani. The Iraqi Constitution, adopted by popular vote in October 2005, recognises Kurds as one of the component peoples of Iraq, and provides for the exercise of a large degree of autonomy by the three Kurdish provinces, acting together as a Kurdish region. There is reason to hope that this settlement, if it can survive the serious violence threatening to destabilise Iraq, can provide a long-term solution to the issue of the rights and aspirations of Kurds within Iraq.

The Government are not aware of any serious discrimination against Kurdish people in Iran specifically on the basis of their ethnic origin. However, the conservative regime which has come to power in Iran in recent years shows much less tolerance than its reformist predecessor for expressions of identity by Iran's many ethnic

minorities, and this has led to violent incidents and arrests in a number of provincial cities, including in Kurdish areas. In addition, the overall human rights situation in Iran continues to be a matter of concern, and Ireland co-sponsored a resolution adopted by the UN General Assembly in November 2007, which expressed serious concern at the continuing violations of human rights in Iran. Among a number of recommendations, the resolution called upon the Government of Iran to eliminate all forms of discrimination based on religious grounds or against persons belonging to minorities.

Regrettably, there has been a continual worsening of the human rights situation in Iran in recent years. The EU's human rights dialogue with Iran, through which we sought constructively to encourage improvements, has fallen into abeyance due to Iran's refusal to agree to further meetings. We will continue to monitor the human rights situation in Iran, including the situation of the Kurdish minority, through our Embassy in Tehran and in cooperation with our EU partners.

#### Departmental Meetings.

145. **Deputy Ruairí Quinn** asked the Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment if his Department has a management advisory committee or an equivalent management committee; if it meets regularly; and if so, the frequency of same; if he and the Ministers of State attached to his Department attend the meetings; if a special advisor or advisors attached to the Ministerial Office or offices attend such meetings; if the minutes are circulated subsequent to each meeting with an indication as to the action to be taken by whom and when; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32979/07]

**Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Micheál Martin):** My Department has a Management Board comprising the Secretary General of the Department, who chairs the Board, the Department's Assistant Secretaries General, the CEO of Forfás, and two Principal Officers, one of whom is the Head of the Department's Planning Unit.

The Board meets on average twice monthly and the Ministers of State at the Department, Ministerial Advisors and I usually attend every second meeting. Minutes of each Board meeting are produced which identify the Actions to be followed up and the Business Units responsible for same. Both the agenda and minutes for each meeting are made available to all staff on the Department's Intranet site.

146. **Deputy Ruairí Quinn** asked the Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment if he convenes specific policy meetings with officials in his Department; the way a policy meeting with officials is different to that of a management meeting, such as a management advisory committee meeting; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32993/07]

**Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Micheál Martin):** As outlined in my reply to a separate Parliamentary Question to Deputy Quinn today, my Department has a Management Board which meets, on average, twice a month. My Departmental Ministers of State and I usually attend every second meeting of the Board. As the Deputy would expect, each Board meeting deals with a number of items of business as set out in an agenda for that meeting. In addition, specific policy meetings are convened by me and/or my Ministers of State as required, and such meetings would usually be devoted to a particular item of Departmental business.

#### Ministerial Staff.

147. **Deputy Ruairí Quinn** asked the Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the number of programme managers, special advisors, policy assistants, personnel on secondment and other personnel who are not part of the existing Civil Service who make up his Department, including permanent civil servants attached to the office of the Minister and Minister of States; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [33007/07]

**Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Micheál Martin):** The table below sets out details in respect of personnel in my Department as requested above:

	Numbers
Programme Managers	Nil
Special Advisors	4
Policy Assistants	Nil
Personnel on secondment	7 (5 civil servants and 2 public servants working in Line Divisions)
Other personnel who are not part of the existing Civil Service who make up my Department	14 (including 6 civilian drivers)
Permanent Civil Servants attached to the Minister and Minister of States Office	23
This Department offers 3 and 6-month placements to third-level students each year	Currently — 4 Students

### Departmental Properties.

148. **Deputy Leo Varadkar** asked the Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the lands in the ownership of the IDA, their acreage and the percentage of that remains undeveloped; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [33113/07]

**Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Micheál Martin):** Under the Industrial Development Act of 1986, as amended by the Acts of 1993 and 1995, IDA Ireland has the power to acquire, hold and dispose of land and any other property or any interest therein for the purpose of facilitating an industrial undertaking. Accordingly, the management of IDA Ireland's industrial property portfolio is a day-to-day operational matter for the Agency, as part of the statutory responsibility assigned to it by the Oireachtas and it is not a matter in which I have a function.

The Agency acquires the freehold or leasehold interest in, and disposes of, land in response to the changing sectoral needs of existing and prospective FDI clients. I have been informed by IDA Ireland that a total of 1,552 hectares are currently in the absolute ownership of the Agency. Of this amount approximately 1,100 hectares are available for use by clients of IDA. The property programme is managed carefully by the Agency and, for reasons of commercial sensitivity, aggregate or detailed information regarding lands that are undeveloped or to be developed is not divulged.

### Company Closures.

149. **Deputy Leo Varadkar** asked the Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the action an employee can take to have their wages paid where a company has ceased trading; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [33114/07]

**Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Billy Kelleher):** Where a company has ceased trading but is still solvent and has not paid an employee in full, the employee may refer a complaint against that company to a Rights Commissioner. In accordance with the Payment of Wages Act 1991 non-payment of wages properly payable by an employer to an employee on any occasion will be regarded as an unlawful deduction from wages unless the deficiency or non-payment is attributable to an error of computation.

A complaint to the Rights Commissioner may be made by giving them notice of it in writing on the appropriate form. The form is available from the Rights Commissioner Service or from Information Services in the National Employment Rights Authority (NERA). Such a complaint must be made within a period of 6 months begin-

ning on the date of the contravention to which the complaint relates. If the Rights Commissioner is satisfied that there are exceptional circumstances s/he may decide to extend the period for up to a further 6 months.

Where a Company has ceased trading and is insolvent then the Insolvency Payments Scheme, operated under the Protection of Employees (Employers' Insolvency) Act, 1984, and administered by my Department, provides for the payment of certain wage-related entitlements where an employee's employment is terminated as a result of the employer's insolvency. These entitlements include arrears of wages, sick pay, holiday pay, minimum notice, etc. However, claims under the Scheme can only be processed if a company is formally insolvent within the definition of the Act and a "relevant officer" — normally a receiver or liquidator — has been appointed and certifies the claims.

150. **Deputy Leo Varadkar** asked the Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the action an employee can take to get a P45 where a company has ceased trading; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [33115/07]

**Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Billy Kelleher):** I am advised by the Revenue Commissioners that a Form P45 is required, under PAYE regulations, to be given by an employer to an employee on cessation of employment. This form certifies the employee's pay, tax and PRSI contributions from the start of the tax year to the date of the cessation, and also certifies that the deductions have been made in accordance with the instructions given by Revenue.

Should reasonable requests for issue of a P45 be refused, the employee should notify their local Revenue office in writing, that they have failed, after several attempts, to get a P45 and the matter will be followed up by Revenue. An employer who fails to issue a P45 may be subject to civil penalties under Section 987 of the Taxes Consolidation Act for breach of the PAYE regulations, or may be charged with a Revenue offence under Section 1078 of the same Act, for failing, without reasonable excuse, to issue a required certificate or notification.

### Economic Competitiveness.

151. **Deputy Leo Varadkar** asked the Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment his views on the National Competitiveness Council's report for 2007; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [33117/07]

**Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Micheál Martin):** I welcome the National Competitiveness Council's recent

Annual Report that benchmarks Ireland against its international peers in the OECD, and the Council's associated publication, Ireland's Competitiveness Challenge.

The new thematic approach presented by the NCC in this year's report is a worthwhile and useful development. By identifying a small number of strategic themes, centring on cost competitiveness, enhancing productivity and building innovative enterprises, the NCC has presented enterprise policy guidance that will help inform the Government's approach to enterprise policy.

It is important to recognise that, as NCC's Chairman puts it in his forward, we are well placed to take on competitive challenges with the resources that are now available to us. This is because of our remarkable achievements over the past 15 years and the careful yet robust enhancement of enterprise policy. These resources will be carefully managed and invested to best effect for the economy. They will be channelled through strategic initiatives such as the National Development Plan, the National Skills Strategy and the Strategy for Science, Technology and Innovation. These are the policy frameworks in which the strategies will comprehensively address and set the operational agenda to strengthen the productive capacity of the economy and support what firms want to do for themselves.

I also welcome some very important findings concerning the competitiveness and efficiency of our enterprise sector. The NCC mentions that our annual average productivity growth in key sectors such as chemicals/pharmaceutical, financial and telecommunications services is above that of the most developed economies in the EU and that of the United States of America. This very significant outcome relates to sectors that tend to be dominated by foreign investment but it is also mirrored in important indigenous sectors such as food products, agriculture and construction.

The NCC says these two key competitive indicators show a strong or improving performance. This reinforces the many competitive advantages Ireland has and reinforces my belief that Ireland is a very productive and competitive location for business investment.

The NCC reports also show that Ireland is number 1 in the OECD economies in its attractiveness for Greenfield investment projects. This analysis is reinforced by more recent information published in IBM's Global Location Trends annual report for 2006. Ireland holds third position in the top ranking destinations for FDI employment when measured against country size. Ireland is in second position on this measure for ICT employment and investment.

There are undoubtedly challenges to be addressed, not least in terms of our cost base at present, and these are clearly signalled in the report. I am satisfied however that through our prudent management of the economy, through our social partnership structure, and through the

provision of competition and other structural reforms in the economy that we will be able to meet those challenges.

#### Work Permits.

152. **Deputy Leo Varadkar** asked the Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the number of green card work permits refused on the grounds that as a consequence of granting the permit the employer will have more than 50% non-EEA employees for the six months from February 2007; the numbers broken down by the employment sectors to which these refusals related; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [33118/07]

**Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Micheál Martin):** The table below shows the number of Green Cards refused wholly or partly because, if granted, the employer would have more than 50% of non-EEA employees and the employment sector to which these refusals relate in the six months from February 2007. I would point out that it is open to applicants to appeal decisions regarding employment permits application.

Month	Refusal Based on 50% non-EEA Employees	Sector
February	0	
March	0	
April	1	1. Nursing Home
May	2	1. Nursing Home 2. Motor Company
June	0	
July	0	

#### Skill Shortages.

153. **Deputy Leo Varadkar** asked the Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment if he will report on the achievements to date of the Expert Group on Future Skills; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [33119/07]

**Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Micheál Martin):** The Government established the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs (EGFSN) in 1997 to provide advice on Ireland's future skills requirements and make recommendations as to how those needs could be met.

The EGFSN is an independent advisory body appointed by the Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment in consultation with the Minister for Education and Science. It reports to both Ministers. The group is broadly representative of social partnership, with members from enterprise,



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academia, government departments, and employer and worker organisations. The EGFSN operates under the auspices of Forfás which provides research and secretariat support to it.

In 2001, a Skills and Labour Market Research Unit (SLMRU) was established in FÁS to provide additional research capability to the Group on an ongoing basis. The SLMRU operate a National Skills Database on behalf of the EGFSN. This database contains demand and supply side data including employment indicators, vacancy data, economic immigration statistics and education and training supply data. The current mandate of the Group runs from 2007 to 2009.

The work of the EGFSN is undertaken at two levels: economy wide and sector specific. The early work of the Group focused on sector level skills forecasting. Sectors examined to date include ICT, Biotechnology, Food Processing, and Engineering. More recently, the work of the Group has examined horizontal skills issues facing enterprise across all sectors. These include management development, research, in-company training and careers and labour market information and dissemination. A listing of work undertaken to date is in the appendix below.

In 2005, the EGFSN undertook research to underpin the development of the new economic migration regulations that were introduced in January 2007. This work was published in Skills Needs of the Irish Economy: the Role of Migration. The EGFSN continues to review the

skills requirements of the economy that can be met through migration on an ongoing basis and informs policy development in that area.

Last year, the EGFSN undertook extensive research to underpin the development of the national skills strategy. The resulting publication — Tomorrow's Skills: Towards a National Skills Strategy — was launched in March of this year and outlines strategic objectives from a skills perspective in the period to 2020.

Current studies being undertaken by the EGFSN include: Skills Needs of the Medical Devices Sector, Skills and Research Needs of the Financial Services Sector, High Level ICT Skills in the ICT Sector and Skills and Labour Requirements of the Construction Sector. All of these studies are being undertaken in close collaboration with the different interest groupings involved.

In 2008, the EGFSN will continue to support the work of both Government Departments in implementing the National Skills Strategy and it will also report on progress in this regard. The EGFSN has also established links with the Skills Expert Group in Northern Ireland and at my request is organising an All-Island Skills Conference for 2008. Research for an all-island statement on skills demand is currently underway.

The mandate governing the EGFSN was reviewed and revised earlier this year. A Group was appointed this year and current membership and the interests that they represent are indicated in the appendix below.

#### Appendix 1

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#### Current Membership of Expert Group on Future Skills Needs

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Chairperson: Ms Anne Heraty, Chief Executive, CPL Resources  
 Ms. Ruth Carmody, Assistant Secretary, Department of Education and Science  
 Ms. Liz Carroll, Training and Development Manager, ISME  
 Mr. Enda Connolly, Divisional Manager, IDA Ireland  
 Mr. Fergal Costello, Head of IoT Designation, Higher Education Authority  
 Mr. Ned Costello, Chief Executive, Irish Universities Association  
 Mr. Brendan Ellison, Principal Officer, Department of Finance  
 Mr. Roger Fox, Director of Planning and Research, FÁS  
 Mr. David Hedigan, Manager, Enterprise Ireland  
 Mr. Garry Keegan, Director, Acumen  
 Mr. John Martin, Director for Employment, Labour & Social Affairs, OECD  
 Mr. Dermot Mulligan Assistant Secretary, Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment  
 Mr. Pat Hayden Principal Officer, Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment  
 Mr. Brendan Murphy, Director, Cork Institute of Technology  
 Mr. Alan Nuzum, CEO, Skillnets  
 Ms. Aileen O'Donoghue, Director of Financial Services Ireland, IBEC  
 Ms. Mary O'Leary, School Teacher  
 Mr. Peter Rigney, Industrial Officer, ICTU  
 Ms. Jacinta Stewart, Chief Executive, City of Dublin VEC  
 Mr. Martin Shanahan, Head of Human Capital and Labour Market Policy, Forfás

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## Appendix 2

The Expert Group on Future Skills Needs has published the following reports since 1997.

Report	Date of Publication
National Skills Bulletin	October 2007
Monitoring Ireland's Skills Supply: Trends in Education/Training Outputs	June 2007
Tomorrow's Skills: Towards a National Skills Strategy	March 2007
National Skills Bulletin 2006	December 2006
Future Skills Requirements of the International Digital Media Industry: Implications for Ireland	July 2006
Careers and Labour Market Information in Ireland	July 2006
Skills at Regional Level in Ireland	May 2006
SME Management Development in Ireland	May 2006
Monitoring Ireland's Skills Supply: Trends in Educational/Training Outputs	January 2006
Data Analysis of In-Employment Education and Training in Ireland	January 2006
National Skills Bulletin 2005	October 2005
Skills Needs in the Irish Economy: The Role of Migration	October 2005
Languages and Enterprise	May 2005
Skills Requirements of the Digital Content Industry in Ireland Phase I	February 2005
Innovate Market Sell	November 2004
The Supply and Demand for Researchers and Research Personnel	September 2004
Literature Review on Aspects of Training of those at Work in Ireland	June 2004
Financial Skills Monitoring Report	November 2003
Responding to Ireland's Growing Skills Needs — The Fourth Report of the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs	October 2003
The Demand and Supply of Skills in the Biotechnology Sector	September 2003
Skills Monitoring Report — Construction Industry 2003/10	July 2003
Benchmarking Education and Training for Economic Development in Ireland	July 2003
The Demand and Supply of Engineers and Engineering Technicians	June 2003
The Demand and Supply of Skills in the Food Processing Sector	April 2003
National Survey of Vacancies in the Private Non-Agricultural Sector 2001/2002	March 2003
National Survey of Vacancies in the Public Sector 2001/2002	March 2003
The Irish Labour Market: Prospects for 2002 and Beyond	January 2002
Labour Participation Rates of the over 55s in Ireland	December 2001
The Third Report of the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs — Responding to Ireland's Growing Skills Needs	August 2001
Benchmarking Mechanisms and Strategies to Attract Researchers to Ireland	July 2001
Report on E-Business Skills	August 2000
Report on In-Company Training	August 2000
The Second Report of the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs — Responding to Ireland's Growing Skills Needs	March 2000
Business Education and Training Partnership 2nd Forum, Dublin	March 2000
Business Education and Training Partnership Report on the Inaugural Forum, Royal Hospital Kilmainham	March 1999
The First Report of the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs — Responding to Ireland's Growing Skills Needs	December 1998

### Business Regulations.

154. **Deputy Leo Varadkar** asked the Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the third recommendation of the Business Regulatory Forum; if he will implement this recommendation; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [33120/07]

**Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Micheál Martin):** In its report of

April this year, the Business Regulation Forum recommended that “an administrative burden reduction programme should be initiated in Ireland without delay.” In response to this, earlier this year I set up the High Level Group on Business Regulation under the chairmanship of my Department's Secretary General. The Group comprises representatives of Government Departments and agencies, the business sector and the ICTU. It has decided to focus initially on

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ways to reduce, simplify and eliminate unnecessary administrative burdens and associated costs in the five priority areas identified in the Business Regulation Forum's Report and to capture the savings arising from that work on a case-by-case basis. The five priority areas identified by the BRF are taxation, statistical reporting, environmental regulations, health and safety regulations and company and employment law. I expect the group to submit an initial report to me by July 2008.

I presume the Deputy's question refers to the call by the BRF that "a target for administration burden reduction should be set" and that "simplification and measurement should proceed iteratively, with further shortlists of regulations, identified by business, until the national target has been met".

In this regard, I would advise the Deputy that workshops have been held with business to identify issues of real concern to business. The High Level Group has been examining ways to simplify the areas identified and measuring the benefits of reductions made. Before setting a definitive target, I will be consulting with other Departments and Agencies on the extent of administrative burdens and on measures that have been undertaken or are planned to reduce that burden. It is important that any target set is appropriate to the Irish context.

155. **Deputy Leo Varadkar** asked the Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment if his Department has carried out an investigation into the usage of standards costs model to quantify the cost of the administrative burden on businesses of complying with Government regulations; the outcome of such an investigation; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [33139/07]

**Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Micheál Martin):** During 2006, PriceWaterhouse Coopers were contracted to carry out a pilot study using the Standard Cost Model (SCM). This pilot project sought to carry out a full measurement of the administrative burdens caused by two specified 'Information Obligations' ie the Annual Return to the Companies Registration Office (CRO); and the requirement on retailers to provide unit-priced labelling on products.

The pilot study showed that the administrative cost associated with the CRO's Annual Return Form was found to be in the region of €35 million, across 144,907 companies. The workshop and interviews conducted in order to establish this cost also yielded a number of suggestions for simplification. The CRO had either already considered or is working on these suggestions.

The study showed that the administrative cost to the 36,364 retail units to which the product pricing legislation applies was found to be in the

region of €387 million. In consultation with the retailers themselves, however, the study found that only a small proportion of this cost was regarded as a burden as most companies would feel obliged to display pricing information even in the absence of the regulation.

In conclusion, the Business Regulation Forum stated that given the resource implications associated with undertaking a full baseline measurement (i.e. using the Standard Cost Model as had been done in other countries), "a prioritised and selective approach is the most realistic way forward for Ireland". The BRF further stated that in this prioritised approach, "a SCM-type methodology can be used primarily to measure reductions achieved rather than for identifying the most burdensome areas".

In response to the BRF Report, earlier this year I set up the High Level Group on Business Regulation under the chairmanship of my Department's Secretary General. The Group comprises representatives of Government Departments and agencies, the business sector and the ICTU. It has decided to focus initially on ways to reduce, simplify and eliminate unnecessary administrative burdens and associated costs in five priority areas identified in the Business Regulation Forum's Report. In conducting its work the High Level Group has adopted the approach proposed by the BRF i.e. identifying priority areas in consultation with business, seeking to reduce or eliminate the administrative burdens involved and measuring the savings on a case-by-case basis.

#### **National Conference Centre.**

156. **Deputy Leo Varadkar** asked the Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment if, during the 1989 to 1994 period, a commitment was given to fund and assist in the development of a national conference centre as part of or associated with the proposed Sonas development on the former Phoenix Park Racecourse; the Minister, agency or State body that made that commitment; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [33145/07]

**Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Micheál Martin):** Under the Industrial Development Acts, the property function is vested in IDA Ireland. Enterprise Ireland has no role in property development. I have made enquiries from IDA and I have been informed that as far as the Agency is aware it did not have any involvement with this project.

#### **Departmental Funding.**

157. **Deputy Leo Varadkar** asked the Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment if the National Irish Safety Organisation receives any grants or funding from his Department; the

amount and timeframe of same; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [33151/07]

**Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Billy Kelleher):** NISO, the National Irish Safety Organisation, which is a voluntary and non-profit making body making a valuable contribution to occupational health and safety in Ireland was given €100,000 in 2006 and €75,000 in 2007 by my Department to assist its restructuring and redevelopment plan. It is proposed to make a grant of €100,000 available to NISO in the Estimates for 2008.

In 2006, NISO embarked on a new strategic direction following on from a review of the organisation by PriceWaterhouseCoopers. A recommendation of the review was that NISO should strengthen the organisation in order to offer a wider range of services, including training, and a more professional approach with a view to increasing revenue and membership and ultimately becoming self-financing during 2009.

#### Departmental Meetings.

158. **Deputy Ruairí Quinn** asked the Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism if his Department has a management advisory committee or an equivalent management committee; if it meets regularly; and if so, the frequency of same; if he and the Ministers of State attached to his Department attend the meetings; if a special advisor or advisors attached to the Ministerial Office or offices attend such meetings; if the minutes are circulated subsequent to each meeting with an indication as to the action to be taken by whom and when; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32974/07]

159. **Deputy Ruairí Quinn** asked the Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism if he convenes specific policy meetings with officials in his Department; the way a policy meeting with officials is different to that of a management meeting, such as a management advisory committee meeting; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32988/07]

**Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism (Deputy Séamus Brennan):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 158 and 159 together.

My Department has a Management Advisory Committee (MAC), which normally meets on a fortnightly basis. I attend the MAC meetings once a month together with my special adviser and press adviser. The minutes of all MAC meetings, setting out the matters discussed, decisions made and any actions to be taken are circulated to the staff in the Department.

I meet regularly with officials of my Department to deal with policy issues. These meetings differ from MAC meetings in that they focus on

specific matters which are considered in depth and in respect of which detailed decisions are taken. Matters are dealt with at MAC meetings at a more strategic and overall management level.

#### Ministerial Staff.

160. **Deputy Ruairí Quinn** asked the Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism the number of programme managers, special advisors, policy assistants, personnel on secondment and other personnel who are not part of the existing Civil Service who make up his Department, including permanent civil servants attached to the office of the Minister and Minister of States; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [33002/07]

**Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism (Deputy Séamus Brennan):** There are no Programme Managers or Policy Assistants appointed in my Department. I have, however, appointed a Special Adviser, a Press Adviser, a Personal Assistant on secondment from the Department of Education and Science, and a Personal Secretary to temporary unestablished positions. All of these appointments have been sanctioned by the Department of Finance.

My private office is staffed by one Private Secretary at Higher Executive Officer level, two Executive Officers, one of whom is employed on a worksharing basis, one Staff Officer and one Clerical Officer. My constituency office is staffed by one Executive Officer, employed on a worksharing basis, one Staff Officer and three Clerical Officers, one of whom is employed on a worksharing basis and one of whom is a Clerical Officer on secondment from the Department of Transport. There is no Minister of State appointed to my Department.

#### Sports Capital Funding.

161. **Deputy Michael Ring** asked the Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism when he will announce details of the sports capital programme 2008. [33039/07]

**Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism (Deputy Séamus Brennan):** 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 date of the next round of the Programme has not yet been decided. As in previous years, advertisements announcing the next round of the Programme will be placed in the national press and application forms will be available at that stage.

#### Sports Funding.

162. **Deputy Michael Ring** asked the Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism if the same kind of scheme and the same money will be made avail-

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able for county players that play for soccer teams in every county of the country as the schemes (details supplied) announced recently for football and hurling teams; if the same scheme will be put in place for them; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [33040/07]

163. **Deputy Michael Ring** asked the Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism if the schemes (details supplied) will be made available to other sporting organisation that represent their county; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [33041/07]

164. **Deputy Michael Ring** asked the Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism if the same kind of scheme as the one announced recently (details supplied) will be made available for the ladies football teams and players and ladies camogie teams and players; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [33042/07]

**Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism (Deputy Séamus Brennan):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 162 to 164, inclusive, together.

The agreement reached between my Department, the Irish Sports Council, the GAA and the GPA, is in recognition of the contribution of Senior Inter County players to our indigenous sports of hurling and football. The scheme provided for in the agreement is a response to a joint submission from the GAA and the GPA for support for Senior Inter County players and I have no plans to extend the scheme to other team sports.

#### Departmental Bodies.

165. **Deputy Lucinda Creighton** asked the Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism the statutory bodies for which he has Ministerial responsibility, but for which he is not accountable to Dáil Éireann for daily operational activities. [33076/07]

**Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism (Deputy Séamus Brennan):** As Minister, I have overall responsibility for the formulation of national policy in the areas of Arts, Sport and Tourism and, through my Department, for monitoring its implementation. The statutory bodies under the aegis of my Department which have responsibility for the execution of policy are listed in my Department's Statement of Strategy 2005-2007 and Annual Reports which are available on my Department's website. In accordance with long established practice, I do not answer Parliamentary questions relating to the day to day activities of the agencies in question.

Exchequer funding for these bodies is provided through the voted expenditure of my Department as set out in the Book of Estimates each year and

I attend at the meeting of the Select Committee at which the Estimates are considered. Each statutory agency is responsible for complying with normal financial procedures in relation to the disbursement of funds allocated to it.

All the funds discharged through my Department's Vote are monitored and controlled in accordance with public financial procedures established by the Department of Finance. The accounts of my Department and the State agencies under its aegis are audited by the Comptroller and Auditor General and together with his report are laid before each House of the Oireachtas.

In addition, the Secretary General of my Department and the chief executives of the State bodies under its aegis are subject to examination by the Public Accounts Committee.

#### Swimming Pool Projects.

166. **Deputy Enda Kenny** asked the Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism if the local authority swimming pools programme has been re-opened; if not, when is it planned to be re-opened; the proposals in place regarding the terms of the programme; if he will increase the maximum available grant aid of €3.8 million per project through the programme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [33091/07]

**Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism (Deputy Séamus Brennan):** A Value for Money and Policy Review Report of the Local Authority Swimming Pool Programme is being finalised at present. The Report is examining, among other things, how the programme has worked to date and what changes, if any, are required to ensure its effective and efficient delivery. The level of grant aid currently available under the programme is one of the issues addressed.

Following consideration of the recommendations and publication of the Report, it is my intention to launch a new round of the Local Authority Swimming Pool Programme. There is a provision of €184m in the National Development Plan, 2007-2013 in respect of the Local Authority Swimming Pool Programme.

167. **Deputy Enda Kenny** asked the Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism the progress made on the application by Mayo County Council regarding the provision of a new swimming pool (details supplied) under the local authority swimming pools programme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [33092/07]

**Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism (Deputy Séamus Brennan):** The project referred to by the Deputy dates back to April 1995 when the then Minister for the Environment and Local Government approved the Preliminary Report for a major refurbishment of an existing pool. The

Contract Documents for the project were approved by the then Minister for Tourism, Sport and Recreation in February 2000. However, Mayo County Council indicated in July 2002 that it intended to build a new public swimming pool on a site adjacent to a holiday village where certain sports facilities already existed. The council engaged consultants to prepare a revised Preliminary Report which was submitted to the Department of Arts, Sport and Tourism in November 2004. Some of the reasons for proposing a new site were: a new facility could be developed more quickly without any loss of amenity during the construction period of about 15 months; a new complex could be designed without the constraints which would arise if the existing structure were used; a new more efficient facility would be easier to manage and more customer friendly, particularly for people with disabilities; and much of the equipment at the existing facility was getting towards the end of its life span and would not facilitate best practice.

The work proposed for the new facility includes a 25 metre, six lane swimming pool, a children's learner pool with play features, sauna and steam room, viewing gallery, fitness gym, children's play room, meeting room and treatment room. The consultants also recommended that the building be designed in a way that other facilities could be added later.

Following detailed examination by the Department's technical advisors, OPW, the Preliminary Report for this project was approved by the then Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism in April 2005, allowing Mayo County Council to prepare Contract Documents. My Department now awaits the submission of Contract Documents for the project. It is understood that the Council intends to advance the project now that another project in the County is progressing to construction.

#### **Sports Funding.**

168. **Deputy Leo Varadkar** asked the Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism his view on sports clubs and community centres that accept large capital grants from the State but will not make their facilities available to political parties; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [33109/07]

**Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism (Deputy Séamus Brennan):** The national lottery-funded 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.

All applications must adhere to our guidelines, terms and conditions, which are reviewed annually. There is no prohibition on grantees in receipt of funding making their premises avail-

able to political parties. This is a matter for individual grantees.

#### **Sport and Recreational Development.**

169. **Deputy Leo Varadkar** asked the Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism if agreement was reached between any agency or State body attached to his Department to support or assist in any way in the development of the proposed Sonas development on the former Phoenix Park Racecourse at Castleknock, Dublin 15; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [33140/07]

**Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism (Deputy Séamus Brennan):** I am informed that no agreement was given by any agency of my Department to provide support or assistance in this matter.

#### **Social Welfare Code.**

170. **Deputy Leo Varadkar** asked the Minister for Social and Family Affairs if social welfare benefits are withheld from convicts while they are in prison; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [33137/07]

**Minister for Social and Family Affairs (Deputy Martin Cullen):** Social welfare legislation provides that a person is disqualified from receipt of social welfare payments while undergoing imprisonment or detention in legal custody. An exception to this general principle is provided for in cases where a period of imprisonment is being served in place of payment of a fine.

Notwithstanding the above, the qualification criteria for various schemes would automatically disqualify a person in such circumstances; for example, the requirement to be available for full-time work (jobseeker's payments) or the requirement to be employed for a minimum of 19 hours per week (family income supplement).

In other cases such as child benefit, where the qualified person, usually the child's mother, is imprisoned or detained, the payment is transferred to the appropriate person with whom the child resides for the relevant period.

#### **Departmental Meetings.**

171. **Deputy Ruairí Quinn** asked the Minister for Social and Family Affairs if his Department has a management advisory committee or an equivalent management committee; if it meets regularly; and if so, the frequency of same; if he and the Ministers of State attached to his Department attend the meetings; if a special advisor or advisors attached to the Ministerial Office or offices attend such meetings; if the minutes are circulated subsequent to each meeting with an indication as to the action to be taken by whom and when; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32985/07]

172. **Deputy Ruairí Quinn** asked the Minister for Social and Family Affairs if he convenes specific policy meetings with officials in his Department; the way a policy meeting with officials is different to that of a management meeting, such as a management advisory committee meeting; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32999/07]

**Minister for Social and Family Affairs (Deputy Martin Cullen):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 171 and 172 together.

My Department has a Management Board, chaired by the Secretary General, which meets regularly on a monthly basis. Minutes of the Board meetings, which note actions to be taken and the people responsible for progressing these actions, are circulated subsequent to each meeting.

A separate meeting of the Management Board is held each month which I and my advisor attend. Matters discussed at these meetings focus on major policy and strategic business issues. Minutes of these meetings are circulated subsequent to each meeting.

In undertaking my ministerial role, I meet with officials of my Department on an ongoing basis to discuss issues relating to their areas of responsibility. These meetings usually focus on a specific policy or business issue and are generally attended by officials with responsibility for the particular issue under discussion. While actions arising from such meetings are noted and acted on at official level, no formal minutes are circulated.

I am satisfied that the arrangements in place through which I consult with officials at the top and senior levels in my Department are effective in supporting me to discharge fully and effectively my ministerial responsibilities.

#### **Ministerial Staff.**

173. **Deputy Ruairí Quinn** asked the Minister for Social and Family Affairs the number of programme managers, special advisors, policy assistants, personnel on secondment and other personnel who are not part of the existing Civil Service who make up his Department, including permanent civil servants attached to the office of the Minister and Minister of States; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [33013/07]

**Minister for Social and Family Affairs (Deputy Martin Cullen):** There are a total of 13.5 staff employed in my private and constituency offices. These include 9.5 administrative staff, comprising 1 Higher Executive Officer, on secondment from the Department of Transport, 2 Executive Officers and 6.5 Clerical Officers. All of the administrative staff are established civil servants. Since my appointment as Minister for Social and Family Affairs on 14th June 2007, I have

appointed, on a contract basis for my term of office, four non-established civil servants, a Press Adviser, a Personal Secretary, a Personal Assistant and a Constituency Assistant.

There has been no Minister of State formally assigned to my Department. However, Minister of State, Ms. Máire Hctor, who is Minister of State at the Department of Health and Children, has special responsibility for older people, areas of which fall within the remit of my Department. There are no staff assigned to her office from my Department.

#### **Social Welfare Appeals.**

174. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Social and Family Affairs when an appeal in the matter of the application for rent supplement will be heard in the case of a person (details supplied) in County Kildare; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [33027/07]

**Minister for Social and Family Affairs (Deputy Martin Cullen):** The supplementary allowance (SWA) scheme, including rent supplement, is administered on my behalf by the Community Welfare division of the Health Service Executive (HSE).

The Executive has advised that it has awarded a rent supplement of €263.92 per week to the person concerned with effect from 24th August 2007. The Executive has further advised that person concerned will be notified of this decision in writing and any outstanding arrears will be issued in due course.

#### **Pension Provisions.**

175. **Deputy Richard Bruton** asked the Minister for Social and Family Affairs his views on whether private citizens are saving enough to provide for pension provision; and his further views on whether the target of 50% of working earnings is a standard that can be achieved universally. [29686/07]

**Minister for Social and Family Affairs (Deputy Martin Cullen):** The National Pensions Policy Initiative, subsequently confirmed in the National Pensions Review, estimated that 70 per cent of people at work, aged 30-65, would need supplementary coverage to meet the agreed aim in the Programme for Government to secure a retirement income from all sources of at least 50% of pre-retirement earnings. At present, 62 per cent of people in this category have pensions. In the recently published Green Paper on Pensions, a range of possible approaches to pensions development, to close this gap, were set out for consideration.

While pension coverage statistics are available from various sources, information on the expected value of supplementary pensions is less well developed. Pension levels depend on the

type of coverage (i.e., whether the scheme or pension plan is defined benefit or defined contribution). The National Pensions Review concluded that defined benefit scheme members could be expected to meet the 50 per cent level.

Benefits for defined contribution pensions can be affected by a range of risks, including investment and longevity risks. Contribution levels are a crucial determinant of final pension levels for these schemes. Research provided by CSO for the Green Paper on Pensions puts average contribution rates to Personal Retirement Savings Accounts at 10.5 per cent of income; contribution levels to occupational defined contribution schemes are broadly similar.

There are concerns that this level of contributions is not adequate to meet the aim in the Programme for Government. Furthermore, there are concerns that people without pensions are not making use of other savings approaches to fund their retirement incomes.

A major consultation process in relation to future pensions policy is now underway. Following completion of the consultation process, the Government will develop a framework for future pensions policy.

#### **Social Welfare Benefits.**

176. **Deputy Brendan Howlin** asked the Minister for Social and Family Affairs if his attention has been drawn to the fact that a person (details supplied) in Dublin 6 who has been out of work owing to a debilitating injury since April 2007 has been informed by their local community welfare officer that rent allowance will cease to be payable at the end of December 2007 and that the person concerned has been unable to secure alternative cheaper accommodation with a landlord willing to accept rent allowance; if he will intervene to ensure a more humane consideration of this person's ongoing rent allowance entitlement as regulation of the supplementary welfare scheme is a matter for his Department; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [33070/07]

**Minister for Social and Family Affairs (Deputy Martin Cullen):** The supplementary allowance (SWA) scheme, including rent supplement, is administered on my behalf by the Community Welfare division of the Health Service Executive (HSE).

Rent supplement is subject to a limit on the amount of rent that an applicant for rent supplement may incur. These limits take household size into account as the objective is to ensure that rent supplement is not paid in respect of overly expensive accommodation.

The Executive has advised that it became aware that the rent payable by the person concerned was in excess of the prescribed limits for a person in his circumstances following a change in household arrangements. The Executive had

advised that rent supplement in excess of the maximum limits applicable to the circumstances of this case, was being paid as an exceptional measure for an eight week period from 1st November 2007. This 8 week period was granted in order to allow the person concerned time to secure alternative accommodation or to make arrangements that would result in their rent falling within the prescribed limits. A further extension of rent supplement to the 19 January 2008 has now been granted by the Executive.

It is open to the person concerned to contact the Community Welfare Officer at his local health centre to discuss his entitlement to rent supplement. It is also open to him to lodge an appeal against the decision on rent supplement to the Executive's designated Appeals Officer.

#### **Pension Provisions.**

177. **Deputy Thomas P. Broughan** asked the Minister for Social and Family Affairs if he will review the formula used to determine State pension entitlements in view of concerns raised regarding the situation whereby an applicant with lower full rate and modified insurance entitlements may receive a larger State pension than an applicant with higher full rate and modified rate contributions (details supplied); and his views on whether this anomaly is fair. [33188/07]

**Minister for Social and Family Affairs (Deputy Martin Cullen):** The current system of mixed rate pro-rata pensions was introduced in 1991 and was designed to ensure that people who have contributed to the social insurance system at different rates receive a pension which reflects the proportion of full rate contributions which exists in their overall insurance record.

The pension is calculated by taking the total number of contributions (modified and full rate) a person has paid over the working life and applying the average contributions test to arrive at the rate which would be paid if all contributions were at the full rate. The actual rate to be paid is determined by the proportion of full rate contributions in the overall record. A similar arrangement applies when calculating pensions due under EU regulations or bilateral social security agreements.

I am satisfied the formula used at present achieves its objectives and ensures that people receive a pension which reflects the proportion of full rate contributions contained in their overall contribution record. However, in common with other types of contributory pension, there are issues in relation to the operation of the average contributions test, which can give rise to the type of inconsistencies raised by the Deputy.

The recently published Green Paper on Pensions includes a discussion on various issues relating to social welfare pensions including the operation of the average contributions test. A



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consultation process on the Green Paper is now underway and will remain open until mid 2008. The Government will respond to the views expressed during the consultation process by publishing a framework for future pensions policy and I expect that this will be available towards the end of next year.

### Social Welfare Benefits.

178. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Social and Family Affairs the position in relation to a person (details supplied) in County Kildare; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [33206/07]

**Minister for Social and Family Affairs (Deputy Martin Cullen):** The person concerned is in receipt of maximum rate Widow's (Contributory) Pension of €191.30 plus € 21.90 fuel allowance, per week. As her spouse had worked in England, the relevant information was referred to the Department of Social Security in Newcastle upon Tyne (DHSS) to assess her eligibility for a widow's pension. It is a matter for that Department to advise the person concerned of her entitlement. A reminder has been sent to DHSS in this case.

179. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Social and Family Affairs the correct rent support payable in the case of a person (details supplied) in County Kildare. [33208/07]

**Minister for Social and Family Affairs (Deputy Martin Cullen):** The supplementary allowance (SWA) scheme, including rent supplement, is administered on my behalf by the Community Welfare division of the Health Service Executive (HSE). The Executive has advised that following a review of the persons rent supplement assessment, it has awarded a rent supplement of €470.60 per month to the person concerned with effect from November. The Executive has further advised that payment of rent supplement at the new rate and any outstanding arrears will be issued in due course.

### Community Development.

180. **Deputy Brian Hayes** asked the Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs his views on the concerns raised at a recent meeting (details supplied); if in view of these concerns, he will re-examine the proposed areas of coverage for the new partnership schemes; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32963/07]

**Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs (Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív):** I refer the Deputy to earlier Questions on this topic, in particular my reply to Question No. 106 of 29 November 2007 and my reply to Question 10 of

1st November 2007, relating to the cohesion process.

As indicated in these replies, the core objective of the cohesion process is the alignment of local, community and rural development structures to achieve full coverage by one integrated local development company within a given area. Following three years of exhaustive consultations with and between local agencies to develop the most suitable configurations of groups, Government decided on revised areas of coverage for local development companies in March of this year. As part of this consultation process, South Dublin County Steering Group, which operates under the aegis of the South Dublin County Development Board and includes representatives of the KWCD and Tallaght Partnerships, proposed new arrangements in relation to the delivery of services in South Dublin by Partnership companies. The proposed arrangements provided that South Dublin would in future be served by two partnership companies and that the coverage areas of both companies would be aligned with the county boundaries. This was reflected in the March Government Decision, details of which were conveyed to LEADER and Partnership Groups on 4th April last.

The new service delivery arrangements will facilitate the extension of the local development programme to all areas of South Dublin. The realignment of coverage areas along county boundary lines will mean certain parts of Walkinstown and Greenhills will be covered by a different Partnership company than heretofore. For this reason, my officials met with representatives of the Walkinstown & Greenhills network on the 26th November to hear their concerns about the new arrangements. Both Tallaght and KWCD Partnership which have proposed new names for their respective organisations to reflect their wider remit and areas of coverage also attended the meeting. I understand that the Partnerships concerned have been working closely with the Network in order to ensure that linkages between the network and the emerging Partnerships are strengthened and that services for local communities are maintained and enhanced in the new arrangements.

### Departmental Meetings.

181. **Deputy Ruairí Quinn** asked the Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs if his Department has a management advisory committee or an equivalent management committee; if it meets regularly; and if so, the frequency of same; if he and the Ministers of State attached to his Department attend the meetings; if a special adviser or advisers attached to the ministerial office or offices attend such meetings; if the minutes are circulated subsequent to each meeting with an indication as to the action to be taken

by whom and when; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32976/07]

182. **Deputy Ruairí Quinn** asked the Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs if he convenes specific policy meetings with officials in his Department; the way a policy meeting with officials is different to that of a management meeting, such as a management advisory committee meeting; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32990/07]

**Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs (Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 181 and 182 together.

My Department has a Management Advisory Committee (MAC) chaired by the Secretary General that meets on an ongoing basis to address general high-level issues relating to the Department and on occasion to address specific issues. In addition, I personally meet the MAC, on a monthly basis. Ministers of State at my Department generally attend these meetings, particularly when specific items relating to their functions are to be discussed. Advisors also generally attend. Standard arrangements for formal meetings regarding minutes etc. are observed.

Office	Number	Title	Civil Servant	Non Civil Servant
Minister's Office	1	Special Adviser		Non Civil Servant
	1	Personal Assistant		Non Civil Servant
	1	Personal Secretary		Non Civil Servant
	1	Media Adviser	Civil Servant on secondment	

In addition to the above there are a total of eleven Civil Servants attached to my Office. These staffing levels are in line with those provided for in the guidelines to Ministers, and are

The table shows the staff in the Minister of State's Office

Minister of State's Office	Number	Title	Civil Servant	Non Civil Servant
	1	Personal Assistant		Non Civil Servant
	1	Personal Secretary		Non Civil Servant

In addition to the above there are a total of five Civil Servants attached to the Minister of State's, Pat Carey TD's, Office. These staffing levels are in line with those provided for in the guidelines to Ministers, and are paid for out of the vote of the Department, approved by the Oireachtas (full details of these costs were given at the estimates debate). Staffing of the Office of Minister for Integration is dealt with by the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform.

#### Departmental Funding.

184. **Deputy Leo Varadkar** asked the Minister

Separately of course I meet my officials on particular policy matters, including, at times, at the request of my officials to address either long-term policy issues, to review performance of programmes and to consider proposals for adjustments and amendments. These differ in that they tend to deal with specific policy or operational issues. These meetings can vary from the relatively formal to an informal "touching base" nature. I understand the Ministers of State at my Department operate in a broadly similar way.

#### Ministerial Staff.

183. **Deputy Ruairí Quinn** asked the Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs the number of programme managers, special advisors, policy assistants, personnel on secondment and other personnel who are not part of the existing Civil Service who make up his Department, including permanent civil servants attached to the office of the Minister and Minister of States; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [33004/07]

**Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs (Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív):** The following tables show the staff in my office.

paid for out of the vote of the Department, approved by the Oireachtas (full details of these costs were given at the estimates debate).

for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs if the National Irish Safety Organisation receives any grants or funding from his Department; the amount and timeframe of same; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [33149/07]

**Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs (Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív):** I understand that my Department has no records of any grants or funding being awarded to the National Irish Safety Organisation.

#### Departmental Meetings.

185. **Deputy Ruairí Quinn** asked the Minister

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for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if her Department has a management advisory committee or an equivalent management committee; if it meets regularly; and if so, the frequency of same; if she and the Ministers of State attached to her Department attend the meetings; if a special advisor or advisors attached to the Ministerial Office or offices attend such meetings; if the minutes are circulated subsequent to each meeting with an indication as to the action to be taken by whom and when; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [32973/07]

186. **Deputy Ruairí Quinn** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if she convenes specific policy meetings with officials in her Department; the way a policy meeting with officials is different to that of a management meeting, such as a management advisory committee meeting; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [32987/07]

**Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Deputy Mary Coughlan):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 185 and 186 together.

My Department has a Management Advisory Committee (MAC) chaired by the Secretary General which meets fortnightly. My Special Advisor is member of the Committee. Period-

ically, a meeting of the MAC is held at Ministerial level which involves the MAC and myself and the Ministers of State. I chair those meetings. Reports are prepared of all MAC meetings and are subsequently circulated.

Apart from the regular MAC meetings, there are a number of formats for meetings which I hold with senior officials of my Department. Some of these meetings are convened to discuss specific policy issues and others cover a range of topics. The attendance would normally depend on the topic or topics but would normally involve Secretary General or Assistant Secretaries as well as those officers working on the particular area being discussed.

#### Ministerial Staff.

187. **Deputy Ruairí Quinn** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food the number of programme managers, special advisors, policy assistants, personnel on secondment and other personnel who are not part of the existing Civil Service who make up her Department, including permanent civil servants attached to the office of the Minister and Minister of States; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [33001/07]

**Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Deputy Mary Coughlan):** The information sought by the Deputy is set out in the table.

	Minister Coughlan	Minister of State Brown	Minister of State Sargent	Minister of State Wallace
Permanent Civil Servants	11.1 *	2	4	5
Programme Managers	0	0	0	0
Special Advisors	1 (PCS)	0	1	0
Policy Assistants	0	0	0	0
Personnel on Secondment	1 (PCS)	1 (PCS)	2 (PCS)	0
Other non Permanent Civil Servants	3	4	2.5	5

PCS denotes Permanent Civil Servant.

\*Comprises of a number of staff on a work sharing basis.

#### Grant Payments.

188. **Deputy Michael Ring** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if a person (details supplied) in County Mayo will receive payments from her Department for 2007; if any payments have issued to them in 2007; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [33038/07]

**Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Deputy Mary Coughlan):** The person named held 23.07 payment entitlements under the Single Payment Scheme in 2007. In order to receive full payment, the applicant must declare one hectare of land in respect of each entitlement held. The person named declared 22.55 hectares of eligible lands in 2007 and received a 50% advance payment, amounting to €3,554.63, on 16 October 2007 based on the number of hectares declared. My Department issued a balancing payment for

the same amount to the applicant on 3 December 2007. Payment in relation to the Disadvantaged Areas Scheme issued to the person named on 19 September 2007 for €2,301.77.

#### Fisheries Protection.

189. **Deputy P. J. Sheehan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food the circumstances of a raid by gardaí and staff of the Sea Fisheries Authority on a premises in Union Hall on 29 December 2006; the number of personnel involved, the amount of fish and other items seized; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [33090/07]

**Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Deputy Mary Coughlan):** The Sea Fisheries and Maritime Jurisdiction Act 2006, provided for the establishment of the Sea-Fisheries Protection

Authority (SFPA). This independent authority was established on January 1st 2007. The Act clearly provides that the Authority is independent in the exercise of its functions and as such I have no remit as to its work programme or its strategic deployment of resources.

#### **Schools Refurbishment.**

190. **Deputy Eamon Scanlon** asked the Minister for Education and Science the position in relation to an application for a development grant for a school (details supplied) in County Cork to enable them to build a new class room; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [32970/07]

**Minister for Education and Science (Deputy Mary Hanafin):** The School Planning Section of my Department has recently received correspondence from the school referred to by the Deputy, requesting an application form in respect of the Major Capital Works programme. The requested material has been forwarded to the school.

#### **Departmental Bodies.**

191. **Deputy Brian Hayes** asked the Minister for Education and Science the reason her Department has to date not established Education Ireland; when this new body will be established; the level of funding that will be allocated to it; if the EFL sector will be represented on the board of Education Ireland; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [32971/07]

**Minister for Education and Science (Deputy Mary Hanafin):** During 2007, progress has been ongoing on the implementation of the recommendations of the Report of the Internationalisation of Education Services and the establishment of Education Ireland. Education Ireland will be responsible for promoting the development of Ireland as a centre of excellence for international education. Government approval has been received to proceed with the establishment of Education Ireland as a company with a view to it being set up on a statutory basis as soon as possible. Arrangements are currently underway to establish the new company and draft legislation for the establishment of Education Ireland is currently in preparation. Funding of just over €1 million has been allocated to support the work of Education Ireland. The board of Education Ireland, of up to 12 persons, will include persons with expertise in the field of language, public and private education provision, governance, marketing and business.

#### **Departmental Meetings.**

192. **Deputy Ruairí Quinn** asked the Minister for Education and Science if her Department has a management advisory committee or an equivalent management committee; if it meets regu-

larly; and if so, the frequency of same; if she and the Ministers of State attached to her Department attend the meetings; if a special advisor or advisors attached to the Ministerial Office or offices attend such meetings; if the minutes are circulated subsequent to each meeting with an indication as to the action to be taken by whom and when; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [32978/07]

**Minister for Education and Science (Deputy Mary Hanafin):** My Department has a Management Advisory Committee (MAC) and a Ministerial Management Advisory Committee (MINMAC). The MAC, which meets on a weekly basis, is chaired by the Secretary General of the Department of Education and Science and is attended by senior officials within the Department. Neither I nor the Ministers of State attached to the Department attend MAC meetings.

The MINMAC meets on a monthly basis or more frequently as required. I chair MINMAC meetings and such meetings are generally attended by the Ministers of State attached to the Department, the Secretary General, senior officials within the Department, and my Ministerial Advisor.

The minutes of MAC and MINMAC meetings are circulated to senior officials within the Department for information purposes and appropriate action.

193. **Deputy Ruairí Quinn** asked the Minister for Education and Science if she convenes specific policy meetings with officials in her Department; the way a policy meeting with officials is different to that of a management meeting, such as a management advisory committee meeting; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [32992/07]

**Minister for Education and Science (Deputy Mary Hanafin):** My Department has a Management Advisory Committee (MAC) and a Ministerial Management Advisory Committee (MINMAC). The MAC, which meets on a weekly basis, is chaired by the Secretary General of the Department of Education and Science and is attended by senior officials within the Department.

I chair the MINMAC, which meets on a monthly basis or more frequently if required, and such meetings are generally attended by the Ministers of State attached to the Department, the Secretary General, and senior officials within the Department. I also meet with the Secretary General on a weekly basis and convene meetings with senior officials within the Department as required.

### Ministerial Staff.

194. **Deputy Ruairí Quinn** asked the Minister for Education and Science the number of programme managers, special advisers, policy assistants, personnel on secondment and other personnel who are not part of the existing Civil Service who make up her Department, including permanent civil servants attached to the office of the Minister and Minister of States; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [33006/07]

**Minister for Education and Science (Deputy Mary Hanafin):** The following staff in my Department are not part of the civil service staff of the Department:

#### *Minister's Office*

- 1 Special Advisor (non Civil Servant)
- 1 Personal Assistant (non Civil Servant)
- 1 Personal Secretary (non Civil Servant)
- 1 Press officer (Civil Servant on secondment)

#### *Minister of State Office:*

- 1 Personal Assistant (non Civil Servant)
- 1 Personal Secretary (non Civil Servant)
- 2 Civilian Drivers (non Civil Servants)

There is one person who is on secondment to my Department as a Post Primary Inspector. There are 10 Civil Servants working in my Private and Constituency offices and 8 Civil Servants working in the Private and Constituency offices of the Minister of State. The staffing numbers for my offices and those of the Minister of State are within the staffing guidelines laid down by the Department of Finance.

### Schools Building Projects.

195. **Deputy Olwyn Enright** asked the Minister for Education and Science the position regarding the construction of a new school (details supplied) in County Laois; the reason for the delay in commencement of construction; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [33028/07]

**Minister for Education and Science (Deputy Mary Hanafin):** The tender report for the school referred to by the Deputy is under examination in my Department at present. The school's Board of Management will be kept advised of developments when the examination is complete.

### Schools Refurbishment.

196. **Deputy Olwyn Enright** asked the Minister for Education and Science the position of an application by a school (details supplied) in County Laois under the summer works scheme; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [33029/07]

**Minister for Education and Science (Deputy Mary Hanafin):** As the Deputy may be aware, the Summer Works Scheme was introduced in 2004. Since then, over 3,000 projects costing in excess of €300 million have been completed. Considerable extra investment has been provided in the Budget to increase funding for school buildings to almost €600 million next year. With so many small projects having been completed over the past few years, I intend to focus on delivering as many large projects as possible in 2008. There will not, therefore, be a new Summer Works Scheme as part of our building programme next year.

### Schools Building Projects.

197. **Deputy Charles Flanagan** asked the Minister for Education and Science the reason for the delay in accepting the tender for the construction of the new primary school building at Emo, County Laois having regard to the fact that the site is prepared, the planning permission has been obtained and the building construction company are in a position to commence work; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [33030/07]

**Minister for Education and Science (Deputy Mary Hanafin):** The tender report for the school referred to by the Deputy is under examination in my Department at present. The school's Board of Management will be kept advised of developments when the examination is complete.

### Youthreach Programme.

198. **Deputy Michael Ring** asked the Minister for Education and Science if a Youth Reach student (details supplied) in County Mayo will be provided with an allowance towards their travel costs in view of the fact that the nearest public transport service will leave them nine miles from home yet a private transport operator passes by their house and that their parents were told that they would be provided with transport if they proceeded with this course. [33046/07]

**Minister for Education and Science (Deputy Mary Hanafin):** The Youthreach Programme is an Inter-Departmental initiative which provides two years integrated education, training and work experience to young people aged 15-20 years who have left school early without any qualifications or vocational training.

A weekly travel allowance is in operation and is available to students who are 3 miles or more from the nearest centre. The allowance is administered at local level by the VEC.

The person concerned should contact their local VEC in relation to this.

### Schools Building Projects.

199. **Deputy Noel J. Coonan** asked the Minister for Education and Science the position in relation

to a school building project design team appointment in a school (details supplied) in County Tipperary; the reason for the delay in processing this application; the reason that the project has been put on hold; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [33057/07]

**Minister for Education and Science (Deputy Mary Hanafin):** The commencement and progression of all large scale building projects from initial design stage through to construction phase, including this project, is considered on an ongoing basis in the context of my Department's Multi-Annual School Building and Modernisation Programme.

The Deputy can be assured that my Department will continue to ensure that building projects such as the one in question will be commenced and delivered within the earliest possible timeframes. Officials from my Department will be in contact with the school authorities when the Department is in a position to authorise progression of this project.

#### Schools Refurbishment.

200. **Deputy Noel J. Coonan** asked the Minister for Education and Science the position in relation to an application by a school (details supplied) in County Tipperary who have made an application for additional accommodation; the reason for the delay in processing this application; if her attention has been drawn to the urgency of the situation; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [33058/07]

**Minister for Education and Science (Deputy Mary Hanafin):** An application for an extension/refurbishment has been received from the school referred to by the Deputy. The building project required to meet the school's accommodation needs will be considered in the context of the School Building and Modernisation Programme.

#### School Equipment.

201. **Deputy Noel J. Coonan** asked the Minister for Education and Science the status on an application for audio visual equipment for a school (details supplied) in County Tipperary; when she expects a decision to be made; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [33059/07]

**Minister for Education and Science (Deputy Mary Hanafin):** In April 2007, I announced details of this once-off scheme, which was among the priority funding measures approved for support in 2007 under the Educational Disadvantage category of the Dormant Account Fund. Eligibility for the scheme was restricted to the 873 primary and post primary schools that are participating in my Department's School Support Prog-

ramme under DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools).

The scheme provides for small scale grants primarily for the purchase of the following types of ICT equipment to support children's learning and development:

- Digital Camera
- Digital Video Camera
- Laptop
- Tablet PC
- Other Computer
- Data Projector
- Interactive Whiteboard (including software)
- Wireless mouse and keyboard
- Educational Software

In October the Government approved projects in 815 schools for funding €3,312,088. The school referred to by the Deputy was approved for a grant of €6,500. My officials issued a letter of offer of grant aid to the relevant VEC on 1 November. A form of acceptance was subsequently received by my Department on 19 November.

#### Schools Refurbishment.

202. **Deputy Noel J. Coonan** asked the Minister for Education and Science the status on an application for a demonstration library project for a school (details supplied) in County Tipperary; when she expects a decision to be made; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [33060/07]

**Minister for Education and Science (Deputy Mary Hanafin):** I assume the application for the school to which the Deputy refers was made under the Dormant Accounts Scheme. In light of the very large number of project proposals received and the level of oversubscription the Dormant Accounts Fund Inter-Departmental Committee Educational Disadvantage recommended that arrangements should be made to transfer these proposals to the Department's Planning and Building Unit for consideration in the context of the Department's overall Schools Building and Modernisation Programme. The application referred to by the Deputy will be considered in this context.

#### School Transport.

203. **Deputy Brendan Kenneally** asked the Minister for Education and Science if concessionary tickets for school transport will be issued to pupils (details supplied) in County Waterford as outlined in this Deputy's letter to her Department on 12 September 2007; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [33093/07]

**Minister of State at the Department of Education and Science (Deputy Seán Haughey):** Under the terms of my Department's Post Primary School Transport Scheme, a pupil is eligible for transport if s/he resides 4.8 kilometres or more from her/his local post primary education centre.

The scheme is not designed to facilitate parents who choose to send their children to a post-primary centre outside of the catchment area in which they reside. However, children who are fully eligible for transport to the post-primary centre in the catchment area in which they reside, may apply for transport on a concessionary basis to a post-primary centre outside of their own catchment area — otherwise known as catchment boundary transport. These children can only be facilitated if spare seats are available on the bus after all other eligible children travelling to their local post-primary centre have been catered for. Such children have to make their own way to the nearest pick up point within that catchment area.

The Transport Liaison Officer for Co. Waterford and Bus Éireann have advised that the transport service in question is operating to capacity. The families in question should continue to liaise with Bus Éireann regarding the availability of catchment boundary seats in the future.

#### State Examinations.

204. **Deputy Pat Breen** asked the Minister for Education and Science if, in respect of changes to the 2008 leaving certificate examination, she is satisfied that scheduling English paper two and chemistry on the same day does not impose unnecessary extra pressure on students; if her attention has been drawn to plans by the State Examinations Commission to review this schedule; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [33094/07]

**Minister for Education and Science (Deputy Mary Hanafin):** The new Leaving Certificate examination schedule for 2008 has been agreed with a working group representing the Partners in Education, and is designed to reduce the demand on students especially during the first week of the examinations. It advances Chemistry, which is sat by some 7000 students, and Geography, sat by some 25,000 students, to Thursday and Friday respectively of the first week, which, along with Home Economics which is sat by some 12000 students, ensures that the majority of students get a break of at least one half day during this intensive phase.

The revised schedule for the first Thursday provides for an examination day spanning from 9.30 to 5.00pm, with 6 hours 20 minutes of examination time. I am confident that the benefits of a break during the first week will outweigh any disadvantage as a result of the length of the day.

There are no plans to change the timetable for 2008. However, each year, when drawing up the timetable for the following year, the State Examinations Commission invites the input of the Partners in Education so that their experience can inform the formulation of the next year's schedule.

#### School Transport.

205. **Deputy Michael McGrath** asked the Minister for Education and Science if a group of children attending a primary school greater than 3.2 km from their home can avail of the school transport system due to the fact that their nearest school does not have the capacity to accommodate them. [33095/07]

**Minister of State at the Department of Education and Science (Deputy Seán Haughey):** Under the terms of my Department's Primary School Transport Scheme, pupils who reside 3.2 kilometres or more from, and are attending, their nearest suitable national school as determined by my Department, are eligible for free school transport.

It is open to pupils who are not attending their nearest school to apply for concessionary transport to the school which they are attending. Concessionary transport is offered subject to a number of terms and conditions, including the availability of spare seating on an existing service.

Parents of the pupils should liaise with their local Bus Éireann office to establish whether their children may avail of fare-paying transport on the foregoing terms.

If the Deputy wishes to forward the names and addresses of the children and the school in question, my Department will examine the particular circumstances of the case.

206. **Deputy Michael McGrath** asked the Minister for Education and Science the review of the school transport system being undertaken by her Department; and when the review will be completed. [33096/07]

**Minister of State at the Department of Education and Science (Deputy Seán Haughey):** The Programme for Government includes a commitment to review the school transport scheme. My Department is currently considering how best to progress this task. It is not possible at this stage to provide the Deputy with a timeframe.

#### School Accommodation.

207. **Deputy David Stanton** asked the Minister for Education and Science further to Parliamentary Question No. 431 of 3 July 2007, the further action she has taken regarding post primary schools in the Midleton and east Cork area; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [33102/07]

**Minister for Education and Science (Deputy Mary Hanafin):** As previously outlined to the Deputy, my Department is in regular contact with the relevant stakeholders including the patrons of the relevant schools in the area, at both primary and post primary levels. My Department continues to monitor, on an ongoing basis, developments in this regard.

#### **Schools Refurbishment.**

208. **Deputy Joanna Tuffy** asked the Minister for Education and Science the status of the development grant application for a school (details supplied) in County Cork; when she expects a decision to be made on this application; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [33103/07]

**Minister for Education and Science (Deputy Mary Hanafin):** The School Planning Section of my Department has recently received correspondence from the school referred to by the Deputy, requesting an application form in respect of the Major Capital Works programme. The requested material has been forwarded to the school.

#### **Site Acquisitions.**

209. **Deputy Joanna Tuffy** asked the Minister for Education and Science the position in relation to the need for a site to be acquired for a replacement school building for a school (details supplied) in County Dublin; when she expects to make a decision regarding site options that have emerged in respect of a request for offers of sites by the Office of Public Works; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [33104/07]

**Minister for Education and Science (Deputy Mary Hanafin):** The Property Management Section of the Office of Public Works, which generally acts on behalf of the Department in relation to site acquisitions, was asked to source a site for the school to which the Deputy refers. A number of site options have emerged and these are still under consideration in my Department.

#### **Schools Refurbishment.**

210. **Deputy Jimmy Deenihan** asked the Minister for Education and Science if she will approve a grant under the summer works scheme 2008 for a school (details supplied) in County Kerry; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [33156/07]

**Minister for Education and Science (Deputy Mary Hanafin):** As the Deputy may be aware, the Summer Works Scheme was introduced in 2004.

Since then, over 3,000 projects costing in excess of €300 million have been completed. Considerable extra investment has been provided in the Budget to increase funding for school buildings to almost €600 million next year. With so many

small projects having been completed over the past few years, I intend to focus on delivering as many large projects as possible in 2008. There will not, therefore, be a new Summer Works Scheme as part of our building programme next year.

#### **Schools Recognition.**

211. **Deputy Thomas P. Broughan** asked the Minister for Education and Science if she will ensure that a school (details supplied) will receive full recognition and funding; and if these children and staff might be integrated into the new school facility for children in the autistic spectrum at another school. [33181/07]

**Minister for Education and Science (Deputy Mary Hanafin):** The first facility referred to by the Deputy is not a recognised school. Some of the children involved are in receipt of home tuition arrangements. Places are available in recognised school provision for those children who are of school-going age. Arrangements can be made to transition the children to these places.

With regard to the Deputy's reference to the second school, I wish to advise him that my Department has granted temporary recognition for a special school to open in the facility in question from 1st September 2007. I am pleased to advise the Deputy that the school management has indicated that it may be possible to make provision available to the children currently enrolled in the first mentioned facility subject to them meeting the enrolment criteria. The employment of school staff is a matter for the Board of Management of the school.

As the Deputy will be aware, the National Council for Special Education is responsible, through its network of local Special Educational Needs Organisers, for the establishment of special classes for autism and for allocating resource teachers and special needs assistants to schools to support children with special needs.

All schools have the names and contact details of their local SENO. Parents may also contact their local SENO directly to discuss their child's special educational needs, using the contact details available on [www.ncse.ie](http://www.ncse.ie).

#### **Departmental Meetings.**

212. **Deputy Ruairí Quinn** asked the Minister for Defence if his Department has a management advisory committee or an equivalent management committee; if it meets regularly; and if so, the frequency of same; if he and the Ministers of State attached to his Department attend the meetings; if a special advisor or advisors attached to the Ministerial Office or offices attend such meetings; if the minutes are circulated subsequent to each meeting with an indication as to the action to be taken by whom and when; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32977/07]



213. **Deputy Ruairí Quinn** asked the Minister for Defence if he convenes specific policy meetings with officials in his Department; the way a policy meeting with officials is different to that of a management meeting, such as a management advisory committee meeting; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32991/07]

**Minister for Defence (Deputy Willie O’Dea):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 212 and 213 together.

The Management Advisory Committee (MAC) of my Department comprises the Secretary General, the Department’s two Assistant Secretaries and the Head of Corporate Services. Other officers of the Department attend meetings for particular agenda items e.g. the Human Resources Manager attends when H.R. issues are under discussion. Subject to the availability of personnel, the MAC normally meets once a week. Minutes of the meetings are kept and appropriate follow-up action taken.

Whilst it is not the practice for myself or Minister of State Kitt or any Ministerial advisors to regularly attend MAC meetings, I have regular meetings and contact with the Secretary General and the other MAC members as part of the ongoing business of the Department. I regularly meet with officials of my Department to discuss a wide variety of specific policy issues.

#### Ministerial Staff.

214. **Deputy Ruairí Quinn** asked the Minister for Defence the number of programme managers, special advisors, policy assistants, personnel on secondment and other personnel who are not part of the existing Civil Service who make up his Department, including permanent civil servants attached to the office of the Minister and Minister of States; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [33005/07]

**Minister for Defence (Deputy Willie O’Dea):** My office in the Department includes a Special Advisor, a Press Advisor, a Personal Assistant and a Personal Secretary, none of whom are part of the permanent Civil Service staff. There are also ten civil servants assigned to my Constituency and Private offices. Two civil servants are attached to the Minister of State’s office.

#### Reserve Defences Forces.

215. **Deputy Leo Varadkar** asked the Minister for Defence if there is a medical corps attached to the Reserve Defence Forces; the number of members thereof; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [33110/07]

**Minister for Defence (Deputy Willie O’Dea):** The military authorities have advised me that there are three Medical Companies within the Reserve Defence Force (RDF) as outlined below:

Medical Company	Formation	Officers	Non-Commissioned Officers	Privates	Total
62 LSB	2 Eastern Brigade RDF	12	28	36	76
31 LSB	1 Southern Brigade RDF	5	29	85	119
54 LSB	4 Western Brigade RDF	4	19	37	60
Total		21	76	158	255

#### Overseas Missions.

216. **Deputy Leo Varadkar** asked the Minister for Defence the complement of medical officers that will be sent on the mission to Chad; if the proportion of medics will be higher than on previous missions such as UNIFIL; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [33111/07]

**Minister for Defence (Deputy Willie O’Dea):** On 20 November 2007, the Government authorised the despatch of a contingent of the Permanent Defence Force for service with the UN mandated EU operation in the Republic of Chad and the Central African Republic, known as EUFOR TCHAD/RCA. Dáil Éireann approved the necessary enabling motion on 28 November 2007. Medical units deployed as part of Irish contingents on overseas missions are designed by the Director of the Army Medical Corps based on the requirements of the particular mission and

having regard to the availability of services, which may be available from other troop contributing nations/partner nations. The proposed Defence Forces initial entry force, to be deployed to EUFOR TCHAD/RCA in early 2008, will include 1 Medical Officer and 2 Medical Orderlies. In addition, the Army Ranger Wing unit will include a number of qualified medical personnel to augment the medical capability.

The main Irish contingent, to be deployed to the mission area at a later stage, will comprise some 400 personnel. This contingent will include a Medical unit comprising 2 Medical Officers, 1 Dental Officer, 11 Medical Orderlies and 1 Dental Surgery Assistant. The proposed medical deployment outlined above is subject to change depending on the final assessment of the operational environment in which the troops will operate.

In the case of the deployment of the Defence Forces contingent to the United Nations Interim

Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) in October 2006 as part of an integrated Finnish/Irish Battalion, the Irish contingent included 1 Medical Officer and 4 Medical Orderlies.

#### **Diplomatic Relations.**

217. **Deputy Leo Varadkar** asked the Minister for Defence if he has requested the Department of Foreign Affairs to strengthen diplomatic relations with Libya, Sudan, La RCA, Nigeria and Cameroon in view of Ireland's decision to send troops to Chad; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [33112/07]

**Minister for Defence (Deputy Willie O'Dea):** Policy in relation to Ireland's diplomatic relations with other countries is a matter for the Minister for Foreign Affairs. The Minister for Foreign Affairs visited Sudan and Chad during November 2007. In both countries, he outlined Ireland's expected role in the UN-mandated EUFOR Tchad/RCA mission and our commitment to the humanitarian objectives of that mission.

I have been advised by the Department of Foreign Affairs that recent years have seen a significant expansion of Ireland's diplomatic network in Africa, most recently with the establishment of an Embassy in Malawi. Ireland has a resident Embassy in Abuja, Nigeria, and has good diplomatic relations with that country. Ireland also has diplomatic relations with Chad, Sudan and Libya, and established diplomatic relations with Cameroon earlier this year. The Minister for Foreign Affairs is currently considering possible changes to the current arrangements for accreditation to Chad. Ireland does not at present have diplomatic relations with the Central African Republic.

#### **Garda Stations.**

218. **Deputy Brendan Howlin** asked the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform if he is satisfied with conditions for Gardaí employed at Wexford Garda Station; when he expects the new Wexford Garda Station to be available for occupation; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32968/07]

**Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform (Deputy Brian Lenihan):** The programme of replacement and refurbishment of Garda accommodation around the country is based on agreed priorities established by An Garda Síochána in consultation with the Garda representative associations. The programme is progressed by the Garda authorities working in close co-operation with the Office of Public Works, which has responsibility for the provision and maintenance of Garda accommodation.

I am informed that the Commissioners of Public Works have signed a contract for purchase of a site at Roxborough for a new Garda Station

in Wexford. Progress has been made in finalising the necessary legal arrangements and these must be concluded before the development phase of the project can commence. I am also informed by the Garda authorities that the situation will be kept under review and the relevant Garda officials will continue to liaise closely with the Office of Public Works to ensure that the Garda accommodation requirements are met. I am also advised by the Garda authorities that, in the interim, some remedial works have been completed on the existing station.

#### **Departmental Meetings.**

219. **Deputy Ruairí Quinn** asked the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform if his Department has a management advisory committee or an equivalent management committee; if it meets regularly; and if so, the frequency of same; if he and the Ministers of State attached to his Department attend the meetings; if a special advisor or advisors attached to the Ministerial Office or offices attend such meetings; if the minutes are circulated subsequent to each meeting with an indication as to the action to be taken by whom and when; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32984/07]

220. **Deputy Ruairí Quinn** asked the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform if he convenes specific policy meetings with officials in his Department; the way a policy meeting with officials is different to that of a management meeting, such as a management advisory committee meeting; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32998/07]

**Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform (Deputy Brian Lenihan):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 219 and 220 together.

I can confirm that my Department has a management advisory committee with whom I meet on most weeks, or as required. My special advisor normally also attends these meetings. I also of course meet on an ongoing basis with Department officials to discuss relevant matters as necessary.

#### **Ministerial Staff.**

221. **Deputy Ruairí Quinn** asked the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform the number of programme managers, special advisors, policy assistants, personnel on secondment and other personnel who are not part of the existing Civil Service who make up his Department, including permanent civil servants attached to the office of the Minister and Minister of States; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [33012/07]

**Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform (Deputy Brian Lenihan):** The position is that there is one Special Advisor in my Department.

[Deputy Brian Lenihan.]

There are no Programme Managers or Policy Assistants. The Special Advisor is not a Civil Servant.

#### Residency Permits.

222. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform the progress regarding residency status in the case of a person (details supplied) in County Galway; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [33025/07]

**Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform (Deputy Brian Lenihan):** I refer the Deputy to Parliamentary Questions Nos. 122 of Thursday, 29 March 2007, No. 252 of Thursday, 5 July 2007 and No. 1046 of Wednesday, 26th September 2007 and the written replies to those questions. The position remains unchanged.

#### Deportation Orders.

223. **Deputy Paul Kehoe** asked the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform the status of the application to have the deportation order revoked for a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [33053/07]

**Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform (Deputy Brian Lenihan):** I refer the Deputy to my reply to Parliamentary Question no. 232 of the 7th November 2007. This matter is currently under review and a recommendation will be made to me as to whether the deportation order is or is not to be revoked when my Department's investigations are completed.

#### Residency Permits.

224. **Deputy Catherine Byrne** asked the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform the status of a residency application by a person (details supplied) in Dublin 8; if he will expedite the decision in this case; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [33074/07]

**Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform (Deputy Brian Lenihan):** As the Deputy will be aware, applications for refugee status in the State are determined by an independent process comprising the Office of the Refugee Applications Commissioner and the Refugee Appeals Tribunal which make recommendations to the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform on whether such status should be granted. While it is not the practice to comment in detail on individual asylum applications, I would point out to the Deputy that delays in finalising cases can occur for a variety of reasons, including giving applicants and appellants the fullest opportunity possible to present their cases and the determination of Judicial Review proceedings.

A final decision on this application will be made upon receipt of the recommendation of the Refugee Applications Commissioner.

#### Remission of Criminal Sentences.

225. **Deputy Lucinda Creighton** asked the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform if the power to grant or refuse remission to a prisoner lies with his office or with the Courts; if these powers derive from legislation, the Constitution or common law practice; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [33075/07]

**Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform (Deputy Brian Lenihan):** Article 13.6 of the Constitution provides that the power of commutation or remission of criminal sentences vests in the President but it may also be conferred by law on other authorities. Section 23 of the Criminal Justice Act 1951 (No. 2) provides that the Government may commute or remit any punishment imposed by a criminal court subject to such conditions as they may think proper. This power is delegated to the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform (S.I. No. 416 of 1998). Section 35 of the Prisons Act 2007 (No. 10) provides that the Minister may make rules for the regulation and good government of prisons and such rules may provide for the remission of portion of a prisoner's sentence. New Prison Rules (S.I. 252/07) were signed into law on 29 May 2007 and came into force on 1 October 2007.

#### Departmental Bodies.

226. **Deputy Lucinda Creighton** asked the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform the statutory bodies for which he has Ministerial responsibility, but for which he is not accountable to Dáil Éireann for daily operational activities. [33080/07]

**Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform (Deputy Brian Lenihan):** As I set out in my response to parliamentary question 31117/07 on 27 November, there are a range of statutory bodies operating under my Department's broad aegis and the precise governance arrangements in each case varies according to the functions of the organisation and its legislative remit. While there are various circumstances where a particular organisation's independence in respect of the performance of its functions, or its capacity as a regulatory or appeals body, is such that detailed comment by me on the exercise of those functions would not be appropriate, I nevertheless retain overall responsibility to Dáil Éireann.

#### Business Permission Applications.

227. **Deputy Leo Varadkar** asked the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform the number of applications for business permission in each of

the past five years; the number which were successful; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [33129/07]

**Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform (Deputy Brian Lenihan):** The Immigration Operations Section of my Department has provided the statistical data requested by the deputy in the table below. The data covers the past five years, from January 2003 to November 2007.

Applications for Business Permission

Year	Applications Received	Permission Granted
2003	251	134
2004	350	97
2005	629	99
2006	1,179	108
2007	249	80

#### Residency Permits.

228. **Deputy Leo Varadkar** asked the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform the number of people who have been granted long-term residency for each of the past ten years with a breakdown by nationality; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [33130/07]

229. **Deputy Leo Varadkar** asked the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform the number of people who have been refused long-term residency for each of the past ten years with a breakdown by nationality; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [33131/07]

232. **Deputy Leo Varadkar** asked the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform the average length of time it takes to process an application for long-term residency for each of the past ten years; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [33134/07]

**Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform (Deputy Brian Lenihan):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 228, 229 and 232 together.

Long term residency is an administrative scheme that was introduced in May 2004 and is focused on persons who have been legally resident in the State for over five years on the basis of work permit / work authorisation / work visa conditions. Such persons may apply to the Immigration Division of my Department for a five year residency extension. To date, the Irish Naturalisation and Immigration Service has received over 6,000 applications under the scheme.

The statistics requested by the Deputy are not available for each of the past 10 years as the scheme was introduced in May 2004. I can, however, provide the Deputy with the following statistics:

Year	Refused	Granted
2006	917	1,239
2007	170	538

The number of applications currently on hand for long term residency is 6243.

The General Immigration Division of my Department deals with a variety of applications for permission to remain in the State, including long term residency. Applications for long term residency are processed having regard to the overall workload of the Division. I understand that applications received in July 2006 are currently being dealt with.

#### Citizenship Applications.

230. **Deputy Leo Varadkar** asked the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform the number of people who have been granted naturalisation for each of the past ten years with a breakdown by nationality; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [33132/07]

**Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform (Deputy Brian Lenihan):** The table below sets out the available information requested by the Deputy. Statistics are not compiled in such a manner as to provide data on the grant of naturalisation by country of origin.

Year	Certificates Issued
1997	297
1998	352
1999	416
2000	125
2001	1,048
2002	1,332
2003	1,664
2004	1,335
2005	1,451
2006	1,390
2007	1,444
	(as at 25 Nov 2007)

231. **Deputy Leo Varadkar** asked the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform the number of people who have been refused naturalisation for each of the past ten years with a breakdown by nationality; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [33133/07]

**Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform (Deputy Brian Lenihan):** The table below sets out the available information requested by the Deputy. Statistics are not compiled in such a manner as to provide data on refusal by country of origin.

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Year	Applications Refused
1997	68
1998	31
1999	79
2000	57
2001	8
2002	109
2003	179
2004	759
2005	1,867
2006	509
2007	341

(as at 25 Nov 2007)

*Question No. 232 answered with Question No. 228.*

### Citizenship Applications.

233. **Deputy Leo Varadkar** asked the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform the average length of time it takes to process an application for naturalisation for each of the past ten years; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [33135/07]

**Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform (Deputy Brian Lenihan):** The Deputy will appreciate that the time taken to process applications both now and over the past number of years has always depended on a number of circumstances, including the legislative provisions in place at the time; the complexity of the case in question; the resources available; the numbers of cases on hand; etc.

Consequently, the compilation of data relating to the average processing time for applications for each of the past ten years would require a disproportionate and inordinate amount of staff time and effort to prepare and could not be justified in current circumstances where there are other significant demands on resources.

234. **Deputy Leo Varadkar** asked the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform if he will introduce reforms to fast track applications for naturalisation and long-term residency from applicants who are high-skilled employees or run their own business; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [33136/07]

**Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform (Deputy Brian Lenihan):** Applications for certificates on naturalisation and long term residency are generally dealt with in chronological order as this is deemed to be the fairest to all applicants.

More generally, it is my intention to review the criteria for eligibility for citizenship through naturalisation and my Department is carrying out

some work on this at present. I have no proposals for a faster application process based on the skill level or employment status of the applicant but it can be examined amongst other issues during the review.

### Gaming Legislation.

235. **Deputy Leo Varadkar** asked the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform if consideration was given to amend legislation to permit casino gaming during the 1989 to 1994 period; the involvement of the National Lottery and himself in this process; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [33144/07]

**Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform (Deputy Brian Lenihan):** The Deputy should be aware that for the period in question I would not have had any involvement in the matter raised by him. The Deputy may also be aware that in 1995 following receipt of a proposal for the development of a National Convention Centre which included a casino element, the then Rainbow Coalition Government requested the Minister for Finance to establish an inter-Agency Task Force to examine all aspects of the question of the possible licensing of casinos. I understand that my Department was represented on that inter-Agency Task Force chaired by the Department of Finance. The Government following consideration of the report in June 1996 decided not to give further consideration to the introduction of legislation to provide for casinos.

As the National Lottery comes under the aegis of the Department of Finance, the Deputy should address any question relating to it to the Minister for Finance.

### Disability Act 2005.

236. **Deputy David Stanton** asked the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform the regulations or Ministerial Orders which have been signed on foot of the enactment of the Disability Act 2005; when these were signed and came into force; the further regulations or Ministerial Orders which are due to be signed as a result of the Act; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [33154/07]

**Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform (Deputy Brian Lenihan):** The Disability Act 2005 (Commencement) Order 2005 (S.I. No. 474 of 2005; signed 28 July 2005) fixed dates on which various Parts of the Act, apart from Part 2, came into operation. The commencement of Part 2 of the Act is the responsibility of the Minister for Health and Children, in consultation with the Minister for Education and Science. The Minister of State, Dr. Jimmy Devins, T.D., was delegated all Ministerial powers under the Disability Act 2005 by order (i.e. S. I. No. 556 of 2007). All Parts

of the Act for which the Minister of State has responsibility have been commenced.

The Disability Act 2005 (Code of Practice) (Declaration) Order 2006 (S.I. No. 163 of 2006; signed 6 April 2006) declared the Code of Practice on Accessibility of Public Services and Information provided by Public Bodies an approved code of practice.

The Disability Act 2005 (Commencement) Order 2007 (S.I. No. 234 of 2007; signed 18 May 2007) fixed 1 June 2007 as the date on which the provisions of Part 2 of the Act came into operation in relation to persons under 5 years of age. The Disability (Assessment of Needs, Service Statements and Redress) Regulations 2007 (S.I. No. 263 of 2007; signed 1 June 2007) made various provisions to enable Part 2 of the Act, as they relate to persons under 5 years of age to have full effect.

Section 29 of the Disability Act 2005 concerning heritage sites will come into operation on 31 December 2007 and the Minister of State has recently requested the National Disability Authority to produce a new Code of Practice in this area in accordance with section 30 of the Act. A Declaration Order will be made by the Minister of State following his approval of such a code.

#### Visa Applications.

237. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform the position in the matter of family reunification in the case of a person (details supplied) in Dublin 24; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [33202/07]

**Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform (Deputy Brian Lenihan):** I refer the Deputy to my answer to Parliamentary Question 180 of 15 November 2007. The position remains unchanged. The applications referred to were refused on the grounds that insufficient documentation was submitted and that, further, it would have been contrary to general policy to approve visas.

The normal time period within which an appeal may be submitted (two months) has elapsed. In the circumstances of the case, however, and as stated in my reply to Parliamentary Question 180 of 15 November 2007, an appeal will be considered on an exceptional basis if submitted within a reasonable period of time. As stated in my previous reply, any such appeal should include an outline of why the applicants feel that there are compelling reasons why their case should be regarded as exceptional to the general policy. To date, no such appeal has been received by my Department.

#### Asylum Support Services.

238. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform if

he can arrange for transfer to alternative accommodation to facilitate special dietary requirements in the case of a person (details supplied) in County Dublin; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [33203/07]

**Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform (Deputy Brian Lenihan):** The Reception and Integration Agency (RIA) is responsible for the accommodation of asylum seekers in accordance with the Government policy of direct provision and dispersal. The RIA has no role in respect of other types of accommodation, including private rented.

It would appear from the details provided that the person referred to in the question is currently in private rented accommodation. In order to clarify the circumstances of this case, some background is required.

The person referred to in the question was accommodated in Glen Vera Hotel Accommodation Centre in Cork on 1 October, 2002. Two years, ten months later, his spouse arrived in the State and claimed asylum, joining him two months later in the Glen Vera centre on 4 October, 2005.

Shortly after being joined by his spouse, the RIA received an application seeking self catering accommodation citing his age and his dietary requirements as justification. No specific medical condition was cited nor was any documentary medical evidence provided to support the application.

In response to the request for self catering accommodation — specifically in respect of his dietary requirements — the RIA advised that there is an obligation on accommodation centres to offer menus which reflect the reasonable ethnic needs and medical requirements of its residents. He was advised to meet with the centre chef to discuss his dietary requirements.

His spouse went missing from the Glen Vera Hotel Accommodation Centre on 8 September, 2006. She subsequently lodged a new asylum application on 26 November, 2007 and she is now accommodated in the Hibernian accommodation centre, Abbeyleix. He himself went missing from the Glen Vera Hotel Accommodation Centre on 15 May, 2007 and appears now to be in private rented accommodation.

If the person referred to in the question, who seems to be in private rented accommodation wishes to be re-accommodated by RIA, he should submit a request accordingly, citing any medical evidence in support of any particular type of accommodation requested. It needs to be clearly understood that the Direct Provision system is at the core of RIA's accommodation portfolio and that self catering forms only a very small element of that portfolio. Demand for self catering is such that demand far exceeds supply and there are no plans to increase that element of RIA's accommodation portfolio. In considering any specific

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request for accommodation, RIA must balance competing demands and make decisions accordingly.

#### **Residency Permits.**

239. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform if he will review the residency application in the case of persons (details supplied) in County Galway on humanitarian or other grounds having particular regard to the unstable situation in their homeland as confirmed by the Department of Foreign Affairs; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [33204/07]

**Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform (Deputy Brian Lenihan):** I am pleased to inform the Deputy that both of the persons to whom he refers have been granted permission to remain in the State under the revised arrangements for parents of children born in Ireland prior to 1st January, 2005, commonly referred to as the IBC Scheme. This permission was recently renewed until 6th September 2010. I have arranged for copies of the letters of permission to be issued to the persons concerned.

240. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform the residency status in the case in the case of persons (details supplied) in County Cork; if they will be given leave to remain here on humanitarian grounds; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [33205/07]

**Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform (Deputy Brian Lenihan):** The persons in question submitted applications on 3rd January, 2006 for permission to remain in the State under the revised arrangements for parents of Irish children born prior to 1st January, 2005, commonly referred to as the IBC/05 scheme. The closing date for receipt of applications under the IBC/05 scheme was 31st March, 2005 and the applications in question were accordingly received too late for consideration. Additionally, the child in question was born on 18th August, 2005 which is after the cut-off date for the Scheme. Consequently the applications and all supporting documentation were returned to the applicants on 4th January, 2006.

241. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform the current or expected residency status in the case of persons (details supplied) in Dublin 22; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [33209/07]

**Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform (Deputy Brian Lenihan):** I refer to my previous reply of 26 September 2007 in relation to the per-

sons in question. The position remains unchanged. The persons in question were originally granted permission to remain in the State based on their parentage of an Irish born child under the particular scheme which existed at that time. This permission has been renewed for the persons concerned until 03/10/2011.

242. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform the current or expected residency status in the case of a person (details supplied) in County Galway; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [33210/07]

**Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform (Deputy Brian Lenihan):** I would refer the Deputy to the Reply given by my predecessor to his Dáil Question Number 363 of Wednesday 27 September 2006 and the Reply given by me to his recent Dáil Question Number 200 of Thursday 8 November 2007. The status of the person concerned remains as set out in those Replies.

243. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform the status of the application for family reunification in the case of a person (details supplied) in Dublin 24; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [33211/07]

**Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform (Deputy Brian Lenihan):** Further to Parliamentary Question No. 263 put down for answer on the 5th July 2007 I am informed by the Immigration Division of my Department that the person in question made a Family Reunification application in October 2006.

The application was forwarded to the Refugee Applications Commissioner for investigation as required under Section 18 of the Refugee Act 1996. This investigation has been completed and the Commissioner has forwarded a report to my Department.

This application will be considered by my Department and a decision will issue in due course.

At the present time Family Reunification applications are taking approximately 24 months to process.

244. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform further to his reply to Parliamentary Question No. 959 of 26 September 2007, the reason stamp four or temporary residency status cannot be awarded to a person (details supplied) in County Cork; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [33212/07]

**Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform (Deputy Brian Lenihan):** The position regarding Temporary residence status is that it cannot be

determined until an application has been fully considered under section 3 of the Immigration Act 1999, as amended.

I expect the file to be passed to me for a decision in due course.

#### **Local Authority Funding.**

245. **Deputy Noel J. Coonan** asked the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government if staff and funding have been put in place for the processing of local authority grant aid schemes, the mobility aids grant scheme, the housing aid for older people scheme and housing adaptation grant for people with a disability; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [33066/07]

**Minister of State at the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government (Deputy Batt O’Keeffe):** The revised Housing Adaptation Grant Schemes for Older People and People with a Disability were implemented on 1 November 2007.

In relation to funding for the schemes, monies allocated to local authorities for the administration of the Disabled Persons and Essential Repairs Grant Schemes in 2007 have been redirected to fund the new Adaptation Grant Schemes from 1 November to the end of this year.

In 2008, monies previously allocated to the Disabled Persons, Essential Repairs and Special Housing Aid for the Elderly Grant Schemes will be used to fund the new schemes. Local authorities will be notified of individual allocations following the publication of the Revised Estimates for Public Services 2008.

My Department is currently reviewing the overall employment position in the local government sector, in consultation as appropriate with the Department of Finance, having regard to the need to deliver front line services, and achieve value for money within the parameters of Government policy on public service employment generally. Under Section 159 of the Local Government Act 2001, the allocation of available staffing resources to the functions within individual local authorities is a matter for the City or County Manager concerned.

The issue of additional staffing resources to administer the new framework of grant aid is also under consideration in the context of ongoing negotiations with the Health Service Executive regarding the transfer of the Special Housing Aid for the Elderly Scheme from the Health Service Executive to the local authority sector.

#### **Natural Heritage Areas.**

246. **Deputy Pat Breen** asked the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government if he will extend the date for landowners who wish to object to the proposed designations

of special protection areas for the protection of hen harriers; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32972/07]

#### **Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government (Deputy John Gormley):**

Special Protection Areas for hen harriers are proposed for designation in accordance with Article 4 of the European Council Directive on the conservation of Wild Birds (79/409/EEC) as transposed into Irish law by the European Communities (Natural Habitats) Regulations, 1997.

Under these Regulations a landowner may seek review of a proposed designation of land as a Special Protection Area by making an objection in writing, based on scientific grounds, to my Department along with a clear map of the land in question. The Regulations provide that such objections must be made within a three-month period of the site being notified. It is necessary in the context of EU infringement proceedings against Ireland under the Directive strictly to adhere to this three-month limit.

#### **Departmental Meetings.**

247. **Deputy Ruairí Quinn** asked the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government if his Department has a management advisory committee or an equivalent management committee; if it meets regularly; and if so, the frequency of same; if he and the Ministers of State attached to his Department attend the meetings; if a special advisor or advisors attached to the Ministerial Office or offices attend such meetings; if the minutes are circulated subsequent to each meeting with an indication as to the action to be taken by whom and when; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32980/07]

248. **Deputy Ruairí Quinn** asked the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government if he convenes specific policy meetings with officials in his Department; the way a policy meeting with officials is different to that of a management meeting, such as a management advisory committee meeting; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32994/07]

#### **Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government (Deputy John Gormley):**

I propose to take Question Nos. 247 and 248 together.

My Department has a Management Advisory Committee, consisting of the Secretary General and six Assistant Secretaries, which meets on a weekly basis. My Special Adviser attends these meetings for agenda items dealing with weekly Government and Oireachtas business and Ministerial diary priorities. The Ministers of State, the Special Advisers and I meet with the Management Advisory Committee generally once a month at which management and policy issues



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are discussed. Minutes of both meetings are prepared and circulated.

I also meet with the relevant officials in my Department, as required, to discuss business and policy related matters.

#### Ministerial Staff.

249. **Deputy Ruairí Quinn** asked the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government the number of programme managers, special advisors, policy assistants, personnel on secondment and other personnel who are not part of the existing Civil Service who make up his Department, including permanent civil servants attached to the office of the Minister and Minister of States; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [33008/07]

**Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government (Deputy John Gormley):** The current staffing position in the Ministerial Offices in my Department is set out in the tables below:

#### Minister's Office

Permanent Civil Servants	Temporary Unestablished Civil Servants
10.5	4 Special Advisers* 1 Personal Assistant 2 Personal Secretaries**

\*One Special Adviser is the Department's Press & Information Officer and one is Programme Manager based in Government buildings.

\*\*Two officers job share in the post of Personal Secretary.

#### Minister Tony Killeen's Office

Permanent Civil Servants	Temporary Unestablished Civil Servants
5	1 Personal Assistant 1 Personal Secretary 2 Civilian Drivers

#### Minister Batt O'Keeffe's Office

Permanent Civil Servants	Temporary Unestablished Civil Servants
8	1 Personal Assistant 1 Personal Secretary 2 Civilian Drivers

#### Departmental Bodies.

250. **Deputy Lucinda Creighton** asked the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government the statutory bodies for which he has Ministerial responsibility, but for which he is not accountable to Dáil Éireann for daily operational activities. [33078/07]

**Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government (Deputy John Gormley):** I am not accountable to Dáil Éireann for the daily operational matters of any of the agencies or bodies under the aegis of my Department.

#### Planning Issues.

251. **Deputy Paul Gogarty** asked the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government the procedures involved in the adoption of a strategic development zone plan by members of a local authority; the action that will be taken should the democratically elected members of a local authority vote down such a plan, if it is deemed to be flawed; if the council management must automatically revert to drawing up a new plan, or find another means of developing the land, or if this defeated plan goes directly to An Bord Pleanála in any case; if the elected members have a say as to what happens following the non-adoption of a plan; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [33082/07]

**Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government (Deputy John Gormley):** Under Part IX of the Planning and Development Act 2000, the Government may by Order, on foot of a proposal from the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government, designate a site or sites as a Strategic Development Zone (SDZ) to facilitate development considered, in the Government's opinion, to be of economic or social importance to the State. The Government Order will specify the development agency for the SDZ.

The Act provides that a draft planning scheme must be prepared within two years of the designation of the SDZ. The draft planning scheme is then subject to a statutory public consultation process and submitted to the elected members of the relevant planning authority for consideration along with a Manager's report which summarises the issues raised during the public consultation and gives the Manager's response to those issues.

As set out in section 169 (4)(b) of the Act, the draft planning scheme is deemed to be made six weeks after the submission of that draft planning scheme and the Manager's report to the elected members unless the planning authority decides, by resolution, to: i) make, subject to variations and modifications, the draft planning scheme, or ii) decides not to make the draft planning scheme.

252. **Deputy Paul Gogarty** asked the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government the procedures involved in the adoption of a local area plan by members of a local authority; the action that will be taken should the democratically elected members of a local authority vote down such a plan, if it is deemed to be flawed; if the council management must automatically revert to drawing up a new

plan, or find another means of developing the land; if the elected members have a say as to what happens following the non-adoption of a plan; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [33083/07]

**Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government (Deputy John Gormley):** The making, amending or revoking of a local area plan is a reserved function of the elected members of the planning authority for the area.

Section 18 of the Planning and Development Act, 2000 states that “A planning authority may at any time, and for any particular area within its functional area, prepare a local area plan in respect of that area.”

Section 19(1)(b) of the Act states that a local area plan must be made in respect of an area which meets all of the following criteria:

- (1) is designated as a town in the most recent census of population, other than a town designated as a suburb or environs in that census;
- (2) has a population in excess of 2000 persons; and
- (3) is situated within the functional area of a planning authority, which is a county council.

Under Section 19(2) of the Act, as amended by the Planning and Development (Amendment) Act 2002, the contents of the local area plan must be in consistent with the objectives of the Development Plan for the area.

Section 20 of the Act, as amended by the Planning and Development (Amendment) Act 2002, provides for public consultation on a draft local area plan, and for the Manager to submit a report to the elected members for their consideration on any submissions or observations received during the public consultation process and the Manager’s response to these issues. Following consideration of the Manager’s report, if the elected members decide to vary or modify the draft local area plan, a further public consultation period of eight weeks is provided for. The Manager will then submit a further report to the elected members for their consideration on the submissions and observations received and the Manager’s response to them. Following consideration of the Manager’s report, the local area plan will be deemed to be made or amended, as appropriate, six weeks after the furnishing of the Manager’s report.

The legislation provides that a planning authority may decide not to make a local area plan. While the legislation does not specifically state what should happen in such an event, the council executive would be guided by any resolution made by the elected members in this regard.

### Coastal Protection.

253. **Deputy Joanna Tuffy** asked the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government if the Government has formulated plans in place for dealing with the impact of climate change on coastal towns and communities here; the amount of money allocated to affected local authorities to deal with this problem; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [33105/07]

261. **Deputy Thomas P. Broughan** asked the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government if he has conducted or intends to conduct further studies on the impact of global warming on the Irish coastline including cost benefit, hydrological impact assessments and analysis of proposed high rise and high density development along Dublin Bay, Baldoyle Bay, Cork Harbour and other such locations around the coastline; and if he will issue guidelines to county and city councils on this matter. [33184/07]

**Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government (Deputy John Gormley):** I propose to take Question Nos. 253 and 261 together.

The position set out in the replies to Question Nos. 36 and 96 of 14 November 2007 has not changed.

Under the Planning and Development Act 2000, planning authorities may include in their development plans objectives regulating, restricting or controlling development in areas at risk of flooding. Guidelines for Planning Authorities on Development Plans, published by my Department in June 2007, require the objectives and strategies set out in development plans to be compatible with addressing the impacts of climate change. The Government is committed to preparing a national adaptation strategy to provide a framework for the integration of adaptation issues into decision-making at national and local level across all sectors.

### Social and Affordable Housing.

254. **Deputy Joanna Tuffy** asked the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government the number of houses allocated or given out under the affordable housing scheme in County Cork since the scheme was launched; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [33106/07]

**Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government (Deputy John Gormley):** Information on affordable housing activity up to end June 2007 in each local authority area is available on my Department’s website at [www.environment.ie](http://www.environment.ie). Information is also published in my Department’s Housing Statistics Bulletins,

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copies of which are available in the Oireachtas Library.

### **Ethics in Public Office.**

255. **Deputy Leo Varadkar** asked the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government if he will conduct a detailed review of the ethical framework governing members of local authorities; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [33121/07]

256. **Deputy Leo Varadkar** asked the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government the action being taken by his Department to pursue councillors who have not filed a declaration of interest; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [33122/07]

257. **Deputy Leo Varadkar** asked the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government the action being taken by his Department to pursue councillors who have not made a full declaration of interest; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [33123/07]

**Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government (Deputy John Gormley):** I propose to take Question Nos. 255 to 257, inclusive, together.

I refer to the reply to Questions Nos. 573 and 574 of 4 December 2007. As already outlined in that reply the Ethics Registrar in the relevant local authority is responsible for overseeing the application of the ethics framework and taking any necessary action in accordance with the relevant provisions of the Local Government Act, 2001. My Department has no role in this regard.

### **Hunting Licences.**

258. **Deputy Leo Varadkar** asked the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government if he will grant a licence for a group (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [33124/07]

259. **Deputy Leo Varadkar** asked the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government if he has received enough information from a group (details supplied) to allow him to make a decision on whether to grant a licence for the stag hunt; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [33125/07]

**Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government (Deputy John Gormley):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 258 and 259 together.

Section 26(1) of the Wildlife Act 1976 provides that I may grant to the master or other person in charge of a pack of stag hounds, a licence authorising the hunting of deer by that pack, during such

period or periods as is or are specified in the licence.

The Ward Union Hunt applied to my Department for a hunting licence for the 2007/2008 season. In my consideration of the licence application I raised a number of issues of serious concern with the Ward Union Hunt including in relation to animal welfare, conservation and protection of stags generally and compliance with previous licence conditions. Meetings were held between my Department and representatives of the Ward Union Hunt and correspondence was exchanged with the Hunt in order to convey my serious concerns and provide them with an opportunity to address these concerns.

I have given this matter my careful and urgent consideration and I will come to a definitive conclusion shortly.

### **Social and Affordable Housing.**

260. **Deputy Thomas P. Broughan** asked the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government his plans in relation to social and affordable housing lists; the way he proposes to eliminate those lists or reduce them down to a reasonable waiting period; and the number of citizens and families on social housing lists (details supplied). [33183/07]

**Minister of State at the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government (Deputy Batt O’Keeffe):** The most recent assessment of need for social housing was undertaken by local authorities in March 2005. The results of that assessment indicated that there were 43,684 households on local authority housing waiting lists. Data in relation to these assessments for each housing authority, including waiting times, are available on my Department’s website at [www.environ.ie](http://www.environ.ie). The next statutory assessment of housing need is due to be undertaken by housing authorities in March 2008.

Comprehensive information on the number of people seeking affordable housing is not collected by my Department. The Government is well placed to deliver on the commitments in Towards 2016 to start or acquire some 27,000 new homes for those in need of social housing over the next three years. The total Exchequer provision for social housing in 2007 is almost €1.4 billion — an increase of 10% on the 2006 provision. The funding will support the commencement of a significant number of new social housing units, and further progress under the regeneration programmes, as well as bringing to completion a large number of units under both the local authority and voluntary housing programmes.

*Question No. 261 answered with Question No. 253.*

### Departmental Meetings.

262. **Deputy Ruairí Quinn** asked the Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources if his Department has a management advisory committee or an equivalent management committee; if it meets regularly; and if so, the frequency of same; if he and the Ministers of State attached to his Department attend the meetings; if a special advisor or advisors attached to the ministerial office or offices attend such meetings; if the minutes are circulated subsequent to each meeting with an indication as to the action to be taken by whom and when; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32975/07]

**Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** My Department has a Management Committee which is chaired by the Secretary General. It includes the Deputy Secretary General and the Assistant Secretaries of the Department. The Personnel Officer of the Department also attends and the Private Secretary to the Secretary General is Secretary to the Committee. Meetings generally take place weekly. Minutes are circulated subsequent to each meeting including, where relevant, documenting actions to be taken by whom and when. Formal meetings between myself and the Management Committee also take place on a regular basis every 6 weeks or so. The meetings are attended by the Minister of State and by the special advisors. Minutes of these meetings are also prepared and circulated.

263. **Deputy Ruairí Quinn** asked the Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources if he convenes specific policy meetings with officials in his Department; the way a policy meeting with officials is different to that of a management meeting, such as a management advisory committee meeting; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32989/07]

Title	Minister's Office	Minister of State's Office
Programme Managers	Nil	Nil
Special Advisers	2 (1 on secondment)	1
Policy Assistants	Nil	Nil
Other Personnel (Personal Assistant/Personal Secretary)	2	Nil
Personnel on secondment	1 Special Adviser (included above)	Nil
Permanent Civil Servants	10	2

In addition, within the Department of Communications, Energy and Natural Resources, there is currently one person on secondment from the Commission for Communications Regulation, one from the Electricity Supply Board and six Stagiaires on temporary 11 month contracts.

**Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** The policy meetings that I convene fall into two categories. Firstly, I convene regular meetings with members of the Management Committee of my Department as a group, every six weeks or so and with the Sectoral Divisions of the Department on a three to four weekly basis. Secondly, I convene ad hoc meetings on policy issues with Departmental officials as they arise. These meetings may be with officials at any level of the Department and occur relatively frequently.

Meetings with Sectoral Divisions and ad-hoc policy meetings are attended by officials from the relevant sectoral area and focus on sectoral or relevant cross-Government policy issues. My meetings with the Management Committee, whilst focusing on policy, also consider corporate issues relevant to all areas of the Department. An example would be monitoring of expenditure under the Department's Vote.

### Ministerial Staff.

264. **Deputy Ruairí Quinn** asked the Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources the number of programme managers, special advisors, policy assistants, personnel on secondment and other personnel who are not part of the existing Civil Service who make up his Department, including permanent civil servants attached to the office of the Minister and Minister of States; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [33003/07]

**Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** The number of programme managers, special advisers, policy assistants, personnel on secondment and other personnel who are not part of the existing Civil Service who make up my Department, including permanent civil servants attached to my office and the Office of the Minister of State in my Department, is shown in the following table.

### Telecommunications Services.

265. **Deputy Michael Ring** asked the Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources when, in relation to the broadband action plan funding will be put in place to ensure that areas (details supplied) in County Mayo will be broadband enabled. [33043/07]

**Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** The provision of broadband services is mainly a matter for private sector providers operating in a fully liberalised market, regulated by the independent Commission for Communications Regulation (ComReg). I am informed that Ballinrobe and Claremorris are served by a number of broadband providers. In addition, under the second phase of the MANs Programme, a 7.2 km MAN in Ballinrobe town and a 9 km MAN in Claremorris town, are currently under construction.

266. **Deputy Michael Ring** asked the Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources the areas that have been broadband enabled under the broadband action plan; the areas that have yet to be done; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [33044/07]

**Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** The provision of broadband services is mainly a matter for private sector providers operating in a fully liberalised market, regulated by the independent Commission for Communications Regulation (ComReg). The role of the Government is to formulate regulatory and infrastructure policies to facilitate the provision of high quality telecommunications services, by competing private sector service providers.

The widespread provision of broadband services continues to be a priority for the Government. In that regard my Department has undertaken initiatives to address the gaps in broadband coverage.

These include providing grant-aid to broadband projects in rural areas under the recently concluded Group Broadband Scheme and investment in Metropolitan Area Networks (MANs) in towns and cities under the Regional Broadband Programme. My Department operates a dedicated website, [www.broadband.gov.ie](http://www.broadband.gov.ie). Some of the services listed on that website are offered by service providers under the Group Broadband Scheme and using the MANs.

There are still some parts of the country where the private sector will be unable to justify the commercial provision of broadband services. Accordingly, the procurement process for a National Broadband Scheme (NBS) is under way. The NBS will provide broadband services to areas that are currently unserved and will ensure that all reasonable requests for broadband in unserved areas are met.

The first phase of the procurement process Pre-Qualification Questionnaire (PQQ)) is now complete, and four candidates have pre-qualified to enter the next phase of the procurement process. As my Department indicated on 2 September 2007, the four candidates are, in alphabetical order, BT Communications Ireland Ltd Consor-

tium, eircom Ltd, Hutchinson 3G Ireland Ltd and IFA/Motorola Consortium.

The Department has invited these remaining candidates to participate in the “Competitive Dialogue” procurement process and the candidates are due to present their proposed solutions to meet the Department’s requirements for the delivery of broadband to the unserved areas of the country. It is anticipated that a preferred bidder will be selected and appointed in June 2008.

267. **Deputy Michael Ring** asked the Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources the funding allocated to the broadband action plan in each of the past three years and to date in 2007; the reason these projects are not going ahead; if there has been a cutback in the funding; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [33045/07]

**Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** The provision of broadband services is mainly a matter for private sector service providers operating in a liberalised market, regulated by the independent Commission for Communications Regulation (ComReg).

It continues to be a priority of the Government that there will be broadband coverage across the entire country. In that regard my Department has undertaken initiatives to address the gaps in broadband coverage. These include providing grant-aid under the recently concluded Group Broadband Scheme and investment in Metropolitan Area Networks (MANs) in towns and cities under the Regional Broadband Programme.

Under the Group Broadband Scheme (GBS), which was launched in 2004, 127 broadband projects are operational and the grantees received €3.1 million in grant aid.

Under the Metropolitan Area Network (MANs) Programme, Phase I, the Department offered grant aid to Local Authorities of €78 million for the construction of 27 high speed, open access fibre optic networks. All twenty-seven MANs have been completed under the first phase and are currently being managed by ENet, the Managed Services Entity.

€35 million has been spent to date on broadband initiatives during 2007 on Phase II of the Metropolitan Area Networks (MANs). Construction is currently under way in 66 towns under this Phase and contracts have been signed by Local authorities for a further €65 million.

My Department is currently undertaking a Value for Money and Policy Review of Phase I of the MANs programme. This review will help to inform decisions on the future allocation of the National Development Plan envelope for broadband infrastructure.

Expenditure on broadband infrastructure and services by my Department amounted to €26 mil-

lion in 2004, €19 million in 2005 and €32 million in 2006.

An indicative €435 million of Exchequer funds has been provided for the Communications and Broadband Programme in the 2007-2013 National Development Plan. It is not possible at this stage to give a detailed breakdown of the approximately €400 million that remains to be allocated over the period of the Plan. Some of this allocation will be expended on the National Broadband scheme and on commitments under Phase II of the MANs.

### Energy Research Projects.

268. **Deputy Simon Coveney** asked the Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources the results of the inventory compiled by his Department and SEI of energy research projects under way in 2004, including the amount that was funded by the Exchequer in that year; the amount spent by the Exchequer on energy research projects in any subsequent years for which he has figures; and the locations where annual reports for the years 2004, 2005 and 2006 in terms of outputs and outcomes of expenditure under the energy RTDI subhead of his Department's Vote and the research and related programme expenditure of SEI can be found. [33055/07]

**Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** The 2004 Energy Research and Demonstration Inventory Report (summary and project files) is available as a downloadable PDF from the following location [www.sei.ie/index.asp?locID=1030&docID=1](http://www.sei.ie/index.asp?locID=1030&docID=1). The 2005 report is available as an interactive website comprising the summary report as well as all of the individual project summaries, searchable by category, at <http://inventory.sei.ie>. Outputs for those years are contained within the respective reports.

The extensive exercise of collation of the 2006 report is under way, with publication expected in early 2008. Sustainable Energy Ireland's (SEI) Research and Demonstration expenditure for the period is available in SEI's 2006 Annual Report at [www.sei.ie](http://www.sei.ie).

The following is a summary of the expenditure for the years for which the full inventory exists:

Year	Total Energy R&D Expenditure, €m	Exchequer Funding, €m (incl. in Total)
2004	24.6	8.0
2005	12.8	8.7

### Electricity Interconnectors.

269. **Deputy Simon Coveney** asked the Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources the breakdown of the timetable that

will ensure delivery of the east west electricity interconnector with Great Britain by 2012; and when he expects Eirgrid to report to him on its cost benefit analysis and feasibility planning for further interconnection with the UK and Europe. [33056/07]

**Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** I can advise the Deputy that work on the project is progressing well. EirGrid, under the regulatory oversight of the Commission for Energy Regulation (CER), is finalising the structure of the competition to select a developer and is also progressing work on route selection and the technical specification of the interconnector.

To oversee and ensure delivery of the interconnector to schedule, a high level coordination group has been established under the Chairmanship of the CER and comprising representatives of EirGrid and my Department.

The CER has been advised by EirGrid that the interconnector will be operational by early 2012, subject to a number of critical targets being met. In particular, the delivery of the interconnector by this date is dependent upon receipt of planning permission, both in the United Kingdom and Ireland, with minimum delay and the availability of the materials for the construction of the interconnector.

I am advised by the CER that the most up-to-date timeline for delivery of the interconnector is as outlined as follows.

*Q4 2007: Competition for the design and construction of the interconnector launched by EirGrid*

EirGrid has indicated to the CER that it will be in a position to launch the competition for the design and construction of the interconnector before the end of the year.

*Q3 2008: Winning bidder selected following competition and conclusion of contract negotiations*

When the competition is completed, the winning bidder will be selected by EirGrid. Details of the contract for design and construction will be completed by the end of quarter 3, 2008.

*Q3 2011: Completion of works — subject to material availability and planning permission*

Planning applications to be submitted to the British and Irish authorities in mid 2008. Subject to receipt of planning permission and the availability of materials (such as cable and transformers), EirGrid estimates quarter 3, 2011 for the completion of works.

*Q1 2012: Completion of commissioning and testing and commencement of commercial operations*

Subject to the target of Q3 2011 being met for the construction of the interconnector, following a period of commissioning and testing, the inter-

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connector will commence commercial operations in early 2012.

With regard to further interconnection with the UK and Europe, the current focus is on the delivery of the second north/south electricity interconnector and the east/west electricity interconnector. At the Government's request EirGrid, within the next two years, will undertake cost benefit analysis and feasibility planning for further interconnection with the UK and potentially with Europe in the longer term.

### Electricity Power Lines.

270. **Deputy Joe Costello** asked the Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources if his attention has been drawn to the concerns of people regarding the erection of 400kV power lines in certain parts of the country; his views on installing these power lines underground; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [33069/07]

**Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** European Union policy seeks to ensure secure and competitively priced electricity markets into the future. Better interconnection between electricity systems is a key aspect of this policy and the White Paper "Delivering a sustainable energy future for Ireland" underlines Ireland's commitment to a more sustainable energy future through a range of measures including increased electricity and gas interconnection.

The Single Electricity Market for Ireland came into effect on 1st November this year. As part of this market development, and to promote competition and better sharing of resources, EirGrid is developing a second North South electricity interconnector. The increased capacity provided by this interconnector is also intended to facilitate fuel savings, lower emissions and increased integration of wind generated energy. In addition to the benefits on an all island basis, EirGrid is strengthening the high voltage network in Counties Meath, Cavan and Monaghan, thereby adding to the availability of bulk high quality power in the North East. Strengthening of the network in this way will greatly improve the electricity infrastructure in these areas and their attractiveness for investment.

The planning and development of these 400kV lines is an operational matter for EirGrid and I have no statutory function in this matter. I have, however, received the following advice from EirGrid on the undergrounding of 400kV power lines. Internationally, high voltage electricity lines are placed underground only in heavily built up areas. This does not apply in this case and overhead lines are the most technically feasible solution to providing a secure and reliable supply of high voltage electricity to the North East. Over-

head lines are also by far the most economic way of transporting power, with underground lines costing between 6 and 10 times as much as standard overhead lines. This is important bearing in mind that electricity networks are financed by all electricity customers. In addition, finding and repairing a fault on an overhead line can usually be done within hours, whereas the same process for an underground line can take weeks if not months to effect. A time delay in repairing a fault in a high voltage power line could cause a lengthy and significant loss of power to a large number of customers.

To the best of EirGrid's knowledge, there is no 400kV Alternating Current (AC) line of the length proposed in these two projects placed underground in any part of the world. Some 97% of the onshore high voltage transmission network in Europe is of high voltage alternating current carried by overhead lines.

In routing overhead lines EirGrid aims to keep as far away from communities and houses as possible, and a minimum clearance of 50 metres is the routing aim. The possible routes for the two 400kV power lines are currently the subject of public consultation by EirGrid.

### Departmental Bodies.

271. **Deputy Lucinda Creighton** asked the Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources the statutory bodies for which he has ministerial responsibility, but for which he is not accountable to Dáil Éireann for daily operational activities. [33077/07]

**Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** The information requested by the Deputy is set out as follows. In addition, I refer the Deputy to my reply to Parliamentary Question No. 693 on 27th November outlining those independent statutory bodies, established by the Government, for which I have Ministerial responsibility but which are legally independent in the performance of their functions.

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#### Statutory Body

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An Post  
 Broadcasting Commission of Ireland  
 Bord Gáis Éireann  
 Bord Na Móna  
 Broadcasting Complaints Commission  
 Central Fisheries Board  
 Commission for Communications Regulation (ComReg)  
 Commission for Energy Regulation (CER)  
 Eastern Regional Fisheries Board  
 EirGrid  
 ESB  
 Irish National Petroleum Corporation Ltd (INPC)  
 Loughs Agency

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 Statutory Body
 

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National Oil Reserves Agency (NORA)  
 National Salmon Commission  
 North Western Regional Fisheries Board  
 Northern Regional Fisheries Board  
 RTÉ  
 Shannon Regional Fisheries Board  
 South Western Regional Fisheries Board  
 Southern Regional Fisheries Board  
 Sustainable Energy Ireland (SEI)  
 Western Regional Fisheries Board  
 The Mining Board  
 TG4  
 Single Market Committee (SEM Committee)

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### Electricity Transmission.

272. **Deputy Simon Coveney** asked the Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources the stage the plans to transfer ownership of the electricity transmission system from ESB to Eirgrid are at; the timetable for the implementation of the transfer by end 2008 as stated in the programme for Government; if he has had recently or will hold in the near future meetings with ESB unions or the ESB ESOT to discuss issues arising from the transfer; and the outcome of talks that occurred. [33084/07]

**Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** The Government Programme commits to the transfer of ownership of the electricity transmission network assets from ESB to EirGrid by end 2008. The mechanisms to implement the transfer to EirGrid of ownership of the assets comprise a range of legislative, commercial, legal and financial dimensions, which are currently under consideration by my Department.

I will be seeking Government approval to draft the necessary legislation. The Bill will include provisions enabling EirGrid to fulfil the requirements of the Transmission Asset Ownership function and undertake any necessary borrowing. The legislation is also likely to include a range of amendments to existing electricity legislation to fully reflect the new arrangement. The advice of the Attorney General on the precise parameters of the legislation will determine the scoping of legislation.

In line with successive Partnership Agreements, there will be a full process of engagement with the management and unions of both ESB and EirGrid on implementation of the transfer of the asset ownership function. The process will also include engagement on legitimate concerns of the ESB's Employee Share Ownership Trust (ESOT).

I met with the ESB Group of Unions on 23rd July in relation to the energy policy objectives set out in the Programme for Government and the Energy Policy White Paper which impact on ESB. In inviting the unions to meet me, it was my intention to hear any concerns that they might have on the issues and to provide a clear outline of my own position and that of the Government.

I have made it clear to the Group of Unions that I am willing to discuss constructively any legitimate issues of concern that they may have. I look forward to a positive process of engagement and to further meetings as appropriate with the Group of Unions.

Government policy is clear in relation to implementation of the decision in a way that ensures the future of both EirGrid and ESB as strong viable Semi State entities, as well as reflecting the position of the State and the ESOT as shareholders.

### Alternative Energy Projects.

273. **Deputy Simon Coveney** asked the Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources the steps that have been taken since the forum on innovation and employment in energy, held on 13 July 2007, to attract higher levels of investment in the renewable energy sector here; and the progress in the whole-Government energy innovation and employment initiative announced that day. [33213/07]

**Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** On 13 July this year, I hosted a forum for senior representatives from across the Irish energy sector. The theme of the meeting was innovation and job creation in the energy sector. The purpose of holding the event was to start a dialogue with the key players in the energy sector regarding the opportunity to locate investment in clean energy technologies in Ireland.

Investment in clean and green energy technologies is growing worldwide. Ireland's advantage in renewable natural resources such as wind and ocean energy creates the potential to benefit from such investment.

Meeting the challenge of climate change and ensuring secure energy supplies into the future means adopting a radically different approach to our energy services. I believe that these challenges should be seen as presenting tangible opportunities to generate significant economic activity in the energy services and green technology sectors, with clear benefits to the economy.

This forum was the beginning of a process of regular engagement with the energy industry. On 23 November I hosted a high-level discussion for senior members of the Irish and international finance community on the subject of financing for



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sustainable energy, as a further step in the process.

This was an opportunity for discussion and an exchange of views with the finance community on the investment climate in Ireland for sustainable energy. I intend to host another forum with the

energy sector in the New Year as part of a regular engagement and dialogue.

The objective of these engagements, and of the targeted Exchequer assistance available for use of renewable energy, is to promote the development of the renewables sector in Ireland. In my view good progress is being made in this regard.