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

*Paidir.
Prayer.*

Leaders' Questions.

Deputy Enda Kenny: Yesterday Deputy Hayes raised the issue of charges on schools for the use of water. This is a problem that has reached ridiculous proportions. On the one hand, one agency of the State, the Department of Education and Science, is paying money to schools while on the other hand, local authorities levy charges on them for water. One school in County Sligo is charged €7,000, a school in County Galway is charged €8,000, a school in County Louth is charged €2,500 and this is expected to rise to €8,000 next year. This shows there is no joined-up thinking on the use of water in schools. Parents of school-children are currently making arrangements for charity walks, auctions, Christmas sales and golf outings as they are now expected to pay for the use of water in schools. This is a very real problem. I assume that when the charges are levied by the local authorities on schools, the Government, as part of that circle, will reduce the amount of money paid to local authorities. This situation is visible evidence of complete lack of joined-up thinking by Government. The parents of the children are now being forced to organise extra-curricular activities to raise money to pay for water in schools when the Department of Education

and Science pays grants to the schools and the local authorities extract this money.

The Minister for Education and Science, in response to a question from Deputy Hayes yesterday, was completely helpless and threw her hands up in despair. It is not usual for the Minister for happiness to be this way—

Deputy Brian Hayes: She is like Manuel.

Deputy Enda Kenny: —and when she said in the beginning that what she wanted was happy parents, happy teachers and happy pupils—

Deputy Mary Hanafin: A happy school is a good school.

Deputy Pádraic McCormack: They are not happy now.

Deputy Enda Kenny: This is not a happy, clappy situation where schools will be on the dry by virtue of the fact that the Government has displayed a complete lack of joined-up thinking.

What does the Taoiseach propose to do? The Department of Education and Science will screw the schools by virtue of the fact there is no system

[Deputy Enda Kenny.]

to provide for usage of water in schools and where parents will be forced to pay for it.

The Taoiseach: Deputy Kenny knows the background. The EU water framework directive dates back almost ten years to 1999—

Deputy Pádraic McCormack: We do not know what it says.

An Ceann Comhairle: Allow the Taoiseach without interruption.

A Deputy: The Deputy is not the leader yet.

The Taoiseach: At that stage all the submissions for derogation were put forward. From this country's point of view the big issue in those negotiations on the directive a decade ago was to achieve derogation for domestic water rates for residential use and we achieved that after a significant debate and battle. We did not achieve derogation in other areas, schools being one of those areas and therefore the EU water framework directive 1999 is being implemented.

School capitation grants have been increased over several years. The directive is based on methods of water conservation with which we are all in agreement. The programme for installing water meters in schools has commenced and it will take some time as there are more than 4,000 schools in the country. There is a need to achieve some kind of agreement on standards between the local authorities and the Departments of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government and of Education and Science.

This is the implementation of the EU water framework directive. Metering will help but the framework directive is based on conservation of water and therefore is based on use. This is the law we signed up to in 1999.

Deputy Pádraic McCormack: Can the Taoiseach do anything about it?

The Taoiseach: No.

Deputy Ruairí Quinn: They could be given more money.

Deputy Enda Kenny: I reminded the Taoiseach yesterday of his selective amnesia about persons who addressed the joint Houses of Congress in the United States. The Minister for Foreign Affairs forgot he received an increase of €10,000 in the past two years. I listened to the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government on the radio this morning who seems to have forgotten that he is in Bali to save the world and to discuss climate change and instead has commented on social partnership.

The Government forgets. For instance, the programme for Government, on which the Taoiseach was elected, states clearly that the

Government will examine the provision of waste and water allowances to schools, with charges becoming effective after these agreed allowances are exceeded.

The Minister for Education and Science yesterday threw her hands up in despair and said to Deputy Hayes, "I can do nothing about this".

Deputy Pádraic McCormack: She threw cold water on it.

Deputy Enda Kenny: I am now expected to leave this to the thousands of parents around the country who are being forced out to do all these charity gigs, golf outings, raffles and sponsored walks, to raise money to pay to the local authorities for water used in the schools where their children attend. This is a very real problem and the Minister for Education and Science has failed utterly to do anything about it, despite the fact that the programme for Government states the Government will examine the provision of waste and water allowances to schools, with charges becoming effective after these agreed allowances are exceeded.

The Taoiseach will be aware that when a business refuses to pay water charges, the local authority will cut it off. Will the situation arise where the school in County Galway now being charged €8,000, the school in County Louth which will be charged €10,000, the school in County Cork being charged €7,500, will all have their water supply cut off next year? Is this a situation the Government will tolerate and which the Minister for Education and Science — who has failed utterly in this matter — will also have to put up with? I bet she will not visit one of those schools on a Friday morning and appear in the middle of all the pupils and say, "We are all on the dry here".

Deputy Mary Hanafin: I have been on the dry all my life.

Deputy Enda Kenny: There is no joined-up thinking between the Department of Education and Science and the local authorities. I want to know what will happen before these schools are presented with very substantial bills. In a school of 100 pupils, the capitation grant is €17,500. The amount required to run that school is at least double that figure. I spoke yesterday to Councillor O'Connor who has a 500-pupil school in Glasluthle which is well known to Deputy Gilmore. The capitation grants paid by the Government are completely inadequate to deal with the running of the school.

What action does the Government propose to take to honour its proposal in its programme for Government which stated that the Government would look at these water allowances for schools, look for a waiver and after a certain time apply a charge? Please tell us now and save hundreds of thousands of parents much anxiety about this matter.

Deputies: Hear, hear.

The Taoiseach: At the risk of repeating myself, I have to make three points. First, this is part of the EU Water Framework Directive which is now law. It was negotiated back in 1999 and was introduced in 2000. We argued against it at the time and succeeded in getting a derogation so that the hundreds of thousands——

Deputy Kathleen Lynch: How are they going to pay for it?

Deputy Brian Hayes: How will schools pay for it?

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

The Taoiseach: Is it all right if I answer the question, please?

A Deputy: That would be a first.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Taoiseach must be allowed to answer the question.

The Taoiseach: It is part of the EU Water Framework Directive, which is law. At the time we argued that the 1.4 million houses in the country, in which the parents of all these children live, should not pay domestic water rates——

Deputy Kathleen Lynch: Will we get it in schools?

The Taoiseach: We got a derogation for that, but we did not get a derogation for schools.

Deputy Olivia Mitchell: Did you ask for one?

The Taoiseach: We have improved the capitulation rate. It is now more than €100,000 for a school of 300 pupils. For a post-primary school of 500 it is €270,000.

Deputy Ruairí Quinn: It is still not enough at post-primary level.

The Taoiseach: The Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government and the Department of Education and Science have been working together to see what they can do on the conservation matter.

Deputy Brian Hayes: It is a bit late.

The Taoiseach: To its credit, Gorey Community College saved 24,000 litres of water using conservation methods.

Deputy Brian Hayes: It is the biggest school in the country.

The Taoiseach: I hope the House is in favour of water conservation. I hope the House would

not only support us putting billions into improving our water quality standards but would also be in favour of conservation measures. Dublin City Council has already sent out conservation packs to schools——

Deputy Brian Hayes: That will be a big help when the bills come in.

The Taoiseach: ——to try to get people to work together to improve the rate of water conservation because if schools follow good practice, that will keep down water charges. We should all be trying to conserve water.

Deputy Ruairí Quinn: Will you give them a dig-out?

The Taoiseach: It is law and now we should be trying to improve on that, as good environmental practice and standards dictate.

Deputy Pádraic McCormack: What about the programme for Government?

Deputy Brian Hayes: That is a big help.

Deputy Jim O'Keeffe: The pensions will be very watertight.

Deputy Eamon Gilmore: Five or six years ago this House set up a body called the Irish Human Rights Commission, which is an independent body to oversee the way in which the State complies with its human rights obligations. Yesterday, that independent body issued a report which states the Irish State is not complying with its human rights obligations to prevent torture or inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment. That was in respect of a process that is politely known as extraordinary rendition, whereby the CIA kidnaps citizens of European countries off the streets of their own cities, bundles them into a car, takes them to an airport and flies them to a country in Africa or the Middle East where they are tortured. A number of reports, including that of the Human Rights Commission, state that Shannon Airport is one of the airports used for the transiting of these people who are being ferreted away for the purpose of torture.

This issue has been raised on a number of occasions and the Government's response is that it has received diplomatic assurances from the United States' Government that extraordinary rendition is not happening through Shannon, and it has accepted those assurances. The Human Rights Commission, however, states that is not sufficient to comply with our human rights obligations and that what is required is inspection of the aircraft. In this report, the Human Rights Commission states that since 2005 it has been asking the Government to inspect the aircraft which are going through Shannon to satisfy itself independently that people are not being moved

[Deputy Eamon Gilmore.]

through Shannon for the purposes of torture but the Government has not complied.

Why has the Government not complied with the request from the Human Rights Commission to inspect the aircraft through Shannon and is it going to start a system of inspections of the aircraft in Shannon?

The Taoiseach: The Government is totally opposed to the practice of extraordinary rendition anywhere. It is important to repeat that at no stage, despite the various investigations that have taken place in recent years, has any evidence been produced that any person has ever been subject to extraordinary rendition through this country, nor has there even been any specific allegation to that effect. That is the factual position.

In its report yesterday the commission recommended the introduction of a specific inspection and monitoring regime for aircraft alleged to have been involved at some point in extraordinary rendition, even if it is claimed to have taken place thousands of miles away. As the Government has repeatedly emphasised, the Garda Síochána already has full powers to search civil aircraft of the type alleged to have been involved in extraordinary rendition, where it has reasonable grounds for suspecting illegal activity such as extraordinary rendition. The Garda has investigated a number of allegations and found no basis on which to proceed.

It is not a case of whether we are about to start inspections; we started doing them a long time ago wherever there was any suspicion, evidence or talk.

Deputy Michael D. Higgins: There have never been any inspections.

The Taoiseach: In the most recent case where it was reported to the Government that we should watch for a particular aeroplane, the Garda searched it and found six golfers on the way to Ballybunion.

Deputy Brian Hayes: It beats the Bahamas anyway.

The Taoiseach: As recently as 29 November 2007, the position of the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform on this matter was clearly set out in an Adjournment debate. We set out in the programme for Government that we have to make sure we follow international laws in these issues. As Deputy Gilmore is aware, there is a commitment to seek a review of the Chicago Convention. The Department of Transport intends to raise this at a meeting of the sub-groups of countries which the International Civil Aviation Organisation, the parent body of the convention, intends to host in New York in the new year. The position of the Minister for Trans-

port has been set out internationally and the Minister for Foreign Affairs has gone before the European Parliament on the issue. We have clearly set out our position time and again.

Deputy Ruairí Quinn: The Human Rights Commission is wrong.

The Taoiseach: The centrality of human rights compliance on this issue to policing in this country is highlighted in section 7 of the Garda Síochána Act 2005. That was inserted into the Act when these issues arose. The objectives include the protection of life and property, and the vindication of the human rights of each individual. That is law and that is something which is complied with now by the Garda.

Deputy Eamon Gilmore: There is a fundamental difference in having a system of inspections and the system the Taoiseach has just described. What the Government is saying is essentially that if anybody in County Clare hears that somebody is being moved through Shannon for the purposes of torture and they go into their local Garda station and report it, the Garda will then go and inspect the aeroplane. If one has that kind of daft position, it is no wonder one ends up finding golfers on the aeroplane rather than anything of greater substance.

Deputy Pádraic McCormack: Did they shoot any birdies?

Deputy Eamon Gilmore: What the Human Rights Commission is seeking is that there would be a system of inspection, that aircraft going through Shannon would be inspected by the Garda, or whoever else, to see whether anybody is being moved illegally through Shannon for the purposes of torture. Since 2005, the Human Rights Commission has been asking the Taoiseach to do that, but he has not done so. That is why the Human Rights Commission has issued what in any state would be regarded as quite a serious report criticising the Government in the strongest terms for not complying with human rights law.

Does the Taoiseach accept the report that was made yesterday by the Human Rights Commission? Does he endorse the recommendations that are contained in the report and what action does he intend to take to implement the recommendations that were given yesterday by the commission?

The Taoiseach: The Ministers for Foreign Affairs and Transport will examine the recommendations made in the report given to us, but both have already made the point that there are serious questions about the effectiveness of the inspection regime proposed by the commission. We have explained this in detail to it. No other European country has such a regime. There is an

issue about highlighting Shannon Airport when there is absolutely no evidence of people, aeroplanes or anything else to do with extraordinary rendition.

Deputy Eamon Gilmore: There will be no evidence without inspectors.

Deputy Joe Costello: There is evidence.

The Taoiseach: Why put Shannon Airport on the international map as a place where something is happening, when several reports have examined the issue and found no validation? That is the point that has been made.

Deputy Enda Kenny: Did the Taoiseach read the Council of Europe report?

Deputy Eamon Gilmore: It is a State body.

Deputy Michael D. Higgins: It was taken off his map ahead of the election.

The Taoiseach: The review fails to do justice to the extent to which the Government has been active on the issue of extraordinary rendition, both domestically and on the international stage. However, I am glad to note that it acknowledges the commitments given in the programme for Government which we will implement. As I mentioned, the Minister for Foreign Affairs has already called at EU level for a review of the Chicago Conventions governing civil aviation with a view to identifying possible further measures to counter any possibility of extraordinary rendition. Obviously, if there are such measures which are accepted and implemented internationally, we will implement them. I am grateful that this has been acknowledged by the commission also. The Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform which was responsible for implementing the programme has been active in this regard. On the instructions of the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform, the Garda Síochána authorities have been requested to ensure all gardaí are appropriately trained and familiar with the relevant legislation to ensure these commitments are met. We have covered ourselves well on this issue in the past few years—

Deputy Enda Kenny: The son of the Dáil has done his job.

The Taoiseach: —and will continue to comply with the highest international standards—

Deputy Michael D. Higgins: The Attorney General has written to the Garda Commissioner.

Deputy Joe Costello: We can conclude it is a sell-out.

The Taoiseach: —but going beyond what everybody else in the world is doing for an airport when there is not a scintilla of evidence that anything has ever happened—

Deputy Joe Costello: That is not true.

The Taoiseach: —would not be a good idea.

Deputy Kathleen Lynch: Because the Taoiseach has not looked for the evidence — that is why; he does not look.

Ceisteanna — Questions.

Programme for Government.

1. **Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin** asked the Taoiseach the role of his Department in implementing the civic life section of the programme for Government; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [29235/07]

2. **Deputy Eamon Gilmore** asked the Taoiseach the progress to date with regard to implementation of the civic life section of the programme for Government; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [30822/07]

3. **Deputy Enda Kenny** asked the Taoiseach the proposed work programme for 2008 of the task force on active citizenship; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [31358/07]

4. **Deputy Enda Kenny** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the implementation of the civic life commitments in the programme for Government; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32327/07]

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

In the civic life section of the programme for Government my Department has direct responsibility for the active citizenship and volunteering section. While, as Head of Government, I have an oversight role in respect of all aspects of the programme for Government, I do not have direct responsibility for the implementation of the other areas set out. Individual Departments have primary responsibility for these areas.

As we have set out in the programme for Government, Ireland has a deep tradition of active engagement by its citizens in every aspect of our national life and culture. It is through the commitment and initiative of individuals and communities that so often social services and community leadership have been provided, as well as a sporting and cultural life for our people. The Government has set out ambitious, yet realistic goals to ensure this is safeguarded and strengthened in the years ahead. To ensure this active involvement continues, the Government

[The Taoiseach.]

has committed to acting on the recommendations of the task force on active citizenship which reported last spring. They include introducing a national active citizenship theme culminating in a national active citizenship week, introducing national presidential citizen awards to recognise outstanding contributions made by individuals to Irish society, ensuring local authorities prioritise the provision of community and recreational facilities as part of their development plans, undertaking an audit of existing community facilities to identify gaps and opportunities for improved use of existing facilities, identifying how better use can be made of schools in the evening and at weekends to act as community hubs and introducing a formal citizenship ceremony. We will also examine ways of strengthening further the relationship between the Government and community and voluntary organisations and developing a system of academic accreditation in recognition of volunteering skills.

All Deputies will agree that politicians, with others active within their own communities, can play a valuable role to safeguard and promote a continued sense of community and greater civic participation by citizens in every aspect of our national life and culture. An active citizenship office has been established in my Department and is developing an implementation plan in consultation with relevant stakeholders. The relevant Departments have examined the implications of the task force's recommendations and have identified how their existing strategies and programmes take account of the task force's recommendations. These are being considered by the office.

I am pleased to say Ms Mary Davis has agreed to chair the steering group for the office and I am confident she will guide the work as effectively as she did the task force. I intend to appoint additional members to the steering group from the public and private sectors to cover the variety of activities spanned by the task force's recommendations. The programme for Government gives a new impetus for developing strategies to ensure our communities are made more vibrant. I look forward to progressing this agenda in the period ahead.

Deputy Martin Ferris: One of the promises made in the civic life section of the programme for Government is to reform the Dáil. As the Government has decided to go ahead with the pay rises for Ministers, albeit deferred for one year, will the Taoiseach use the opportunity to increase productivity? For example, will he revert to the practice, as he did prior to the previous Dáil, where he answered questions on a Thursday? Will he also get his Ministers to answer questions more often than every five or six weeks?

The programme for Government includes a commitment to set up an independent electoral

commission. When will the commission be set up and will it review electoral boundaries before local elections are held in 2009? When will work on the new rolling national electoral register, also included in the programme for Government, start?

The Taoiseach: The electoral commission for local elections and the register are matters for the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government, Deputy Gormley, to whom a question should be tabled. One of the task force's recommendations was that an electoral commission be set up. That matter is being examined within the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government. It is the Government's intention, as Deputy Ferris will be aware, to bring the Oireachtas Commission, the constituency review groups and other related aspects together in one organisation. Obviously, the work required will be done in the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government. We hope to bring forward the results as soon as we can.

Deputy Eamon Gilmore: I want to pursue further the question raised by Deputy Ferris on the proposal to establish an independent electoral commission. This was the subject of a specific commitment in the programme for Government, that an independent electoral commission would be established to oversee the way in which we conducted elections and to assume some of the functions of the Standards in Public Office Commission. I have two questions. First, when is it intended to establish the independent electoral commission? Second, does the Government have any plans to change the membership of the Standards in Public Office Commission and, if so, will the Taoiseach outline them to the House?

The Taoiseach: It is intended to fulfil the Government's commitment to establish an electoral commission. Deputy Gilmore should table a question to the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government who is handling the matter. There will be an electoral Bill next year.

The period of office of some members of the Standards in Public Office Commission has come to an end and the Minister for Finance will bring forward proposals on the new membership.

Deputy Eamon Gilmore: Is it the Taoiseach's intention to consult the Opposition parties on the proposed changes in the composition of the Standards in Public Office Commission, as was the practice?

The Taoiseach: I do not know if there is such a protocol, but it is a matter for the Minister for Finance.

Deputy Enda Kenny: The task force set out two fundamental issues about voting, the first of which concerned the need to reach by the end of the current decade a voter turnout level of at least 60% among young people aged between 18 and 24 years, as, obviously, there is a problem. The Ceann Comhairle has an interest in this issue in disseminating information on politics in a non-party political way. It is important for young people to take an interest in politics and when I speak to them, I advise them that they should support some party. Whichever party they prefer to support is their choice. They are well able to make up their own minds. It is important that young people are involved in and exposed to the political dimensions of parties and Independents so they can make up their minds. What are the Taoiseach's views as to how to give the coming generation of 18 to 24 year olds who will decide the next general election, who are now in second year or approaching junior certificate, an idea and understanding of the political process so they can make up their minds? Has he a set strategy? If so, it should apply across the board.

A recommendation has been made to increase the level of voter participation from a CSO figure of 75.5% to at least 80% in all future general elections. This is a high target. It is difficult to get people out due to long distances and the closure of some polling stations for efficiency reasons. I suppose it is political excitement that generates passions in people and encourages them to go and vote for a political party or person.

11 o'clock

We spoke previously about the issue of election day. There appears to be a body of opinion that considers weekends favourable. The Taoiseach has made the point that in his constituency Friday or weekend voting would be disastrous. Sundays used to be taboo, but not any longer. Does the Taoiseach have a particular view in this regard? Although the calling of the most recent general election was not unexpected, it came as a bit of a shock when the Taoiseach went to the Phoenix Park bright and early on a Sunday morning. Perhaps, instead of calling elections on a Sunday, he may decide to hold elections on a Sunday. What is his view on that?

The Taoiseach: It is in the interest of democracy, regardless of what side we serve, to get people active and involved. Whatever way they vote, we get satisfaction from seeing a higher turnout, particularly in national elections. It is part of good citizenship and community activity and is one of the recommendations of the report. The report was the result of significant work, including a roadshow that travelled the country talking to community and residents' groups, teaching groups, boards of management and scouting groups etc. A small part of the resulting recommendations was to increase the number of people active in communities by 60,000 per year. The report has a loose definition of "active in

community". I might argue that it is not "active" because in the report "active" means attending meetings or pressure groups. However, I accept its definition. The aim is to increase the number of adults engaged in at least one form of civic activity by 60,000 each year.

The report sets a target that by the end of the decade there should be at least a 60% turnout of 18 to 24 year olds. The big issue in that regard is registration. The challenge for the future is to ensure we improve our electoral registers throughout the country. We know it is more difficult to achieve accuracy in commercial, private "flatland" and in apartment blocks. Not to mind the fact persons compiling the register for these areas must be good officials, politicians must be good canvassers to get into apartment land. That is a challenge I am glad to say was not there when I was younger.

It is also a challenge to increase the level of participation in general elections from 75.5% to 80%. We must increase the proportion of adults who say they agree with the statement that they can influence decisions affecting their local areas. The report suggests ways to do that. We can do our bit in the House, which I think we do. Despite what people say about reform, the House contributes by what it does. I agree with the Deputy with regard to a television channel for the House and for committees, where much of the work is done. We are here for a few hours, but much other good work takes place during the rest of the day, including good debates, in the committees of the House, including days neither House sits. This is part of the debate.

On education and debate in civic society, people, especially young people, are increasingly interested in the Third World and climate change and we must link education with those issues. Deputy Ferris mentioned the rotation of questions earlier. If we can engage on some issues, we can improve that. However, that should not take away from all the good work. Improvements can always be made.

One of the most significant challenges, not to say the others are not important, is something on which the previous Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government, Deputy Dick Roche, worked, namely, the updating of the registers. He made a good effort and it worked to a great extent. I know how hard he had to work to achieve that and the difficulties and obstacles that were raised to implementing a system that would provide greater register accuracy. This, in my view, is the most important area to deal with in order to increase participation. Many of the other things are happening, but a system to provide register accuracy, amendment of registers and quick action and the ability to check them in detail is the greatest challenge.

We saw the difficulties involved with our most recent census, which in some areas was not at as high a level as it used to be. There were all sorts of reasons for this and I am sure efforts will be

[The Taoiseach.]

made to change them before the next census. It is more difficult nowadays. I have spoken to the people involved in producing the census results and have been told this is something that is accepted in large cities around the world. However, there are things we can do to improve that.

Deputy Billy Timmins: One of the issues looked at by the task force on active citizenship was volunteers' concern about possible litigation. Fine Gael brought forward Good Samaritan legislation some years ago to deal with that issue. That concept was referred to the Law Reform Commission, which has recommended that such legislation should be brought forward. Does the Taoiseach have any intention of bringing forward that legislation, which would assist in increasing the number of volunteers in the community?

The Taoiseach: I cannot remember the actual Bill, but I know there is action in that regard. The Attorney General also had an interest in progressing that issue. Another issue mentioned in the House recently, on which I have tried to get people working, is that some of the most significant obstacles to volunteering throughout the country are insurance and liability, which are related to the issue raised by the Deputy. Local authorities now have a scheme in this regard and we need to promote that scheme, which would help promote the use of sports and community halls and schools for weekend and other activities. A significant network of infrastructure exists and we need to ensure it is used. Liability and insurance issues are significant deterrents to that. There is a scheme in existence to deal with this and the active citizenship office intends to make a big effort to promote it. Many people did not know there was such a scheme.

I will check what the position is with regard to the legislation. The issues of liability and insurance are a huge deterrent to community activity. If an active committee is hit with libel action, insurance and legal costs, it is a significant deterrent.

Deputy David Stanton: This is an excellent and important report. I welcome the Taoiseach's initiative and his commitment to it and encourage him to continue his commitment and support. I wish to put three questions to him. Two issues arise with regard to awards. National presidential citizen's awards are proposed to recognise outstanding contributions to civic and community life and a certificate award can be earned through completing at least three months volunteering or community involvement activity. How far have these two concepts been advanced and how does the Taoiseach see them working? We have had discussions in the House previously on the issue of awards. How does he see the decisions being made as to who is to get the awards?

There is also a recommendation that a formal citizenship ceremony be introduced with the aim of marking admission to the State and engaging and welcoming newcomers. It could also apply to our citizens when they reach the age of 18 years. How does the Taoiseach see this happening? Would it be managed locally or nationally? Who would present the award? Would there be an examination for citizenship, as is the case in other countries?

There is a recommendation that better use be made of schools in the evening and at weekends in the form of community hubs. Is the Taoiseach aware that across the country people are anxious to set up youth centres and youth cafés but are having problems finding suitable premises? What resources are being provided for this recommendation and how soon could schools be used in this manner?

The Taoiseach: To answer the Deputy's last question first, there is a far greater effort being made now that the group insurance scheme has been opened to members of local authorities and voluntary forums. This should be provided widely among relevant organisations. As I said, insurance is one of the recurring barriers to active citizenship cited at public consultation meetings. The scheme has ameliorated the insurance issue for community and voluntary groups by allowing them to secure considerably cheaper premiums. That is a big step towards the opening of youth halls, sports halls, GAA, rugby and soccer facilities, scouting halls and so on. I recently attended the AGM and annual dinner of the scouts organisation and I was told that this was a good scheme. It is to be hoped it will be extended to schools and other community activities. Previously, the issue of liability insurance costs was a great deterrent for school boards of management in allowing people to enter outside school hours.

It is important to help community and voluntary groups meet compliance costs by providing programme funding and ensuring these costs are proportionate and that administrative burdens for these organisations are streamlined and standardised to the greatest possible extent across the public service. The report recommends that we ensure, through the education system or local authorities, that schemes are standardised in order that small committees such as those running summer leagues will not operate by themselves. This should be carried out. I have been told by some of those involved that there is some interest among commercial entities, including insurance companies and commercial organisations with networks of outlets around the country, in joining in and helping with these schemes. I welcome this because networking by such commercial organisations can be very helpful.

The Deputy mentioned facilitating engagement, promoting a sense of community and awards. This has nothing to do with the proposal

for an honours system that we discussed previously. That is a separate debate. However, the introduction of a national active citizenship team was suggested in the report, for the remarks on which I thank Deputies. The idea is that there would be a national citizenship week to stimulate local active citizenship activities. For example, there could be a “get to know your neighbour” event, whereby all organisations in a community would get together and show their wares. There is extraordinary support for this idea among both community and commercial interests. It is their idea and they are keen to do it next year, which would be the first year of these events. The team would be selected to promote local community involvement and would draw on existing community resources and initiatives. The initiative would culminate in an active citizenship week and be a focal point for every community.

The report also recommends the introduction of a national presidential citizens’ awards scheme to recognise outstanding contributions made by individuals in communities. The awards committee would be given a limited list of individuals selected through an independent process based on nominations from members of the public. The presentation of the awards would tie in with the national active citizen award. We are in consultation with the President on how this fits in with Gaisce, the existing President’s awards scheme. The idea is that the award would be given to somebody who has done a good job in the community in a particular year, although he or she may not have been involved in any other year, perhaps running the community games or a mini football league. It does not have to be a sports activity — the person could be involved with Meals on Wheels or the Society of St. Vincent de Paul.

Another novel idea which aims to get people interested is the development of a certificate award which would be earned by completing at least three months of volunteer work or community activity. This is to encourage people to get involved with community activities for at least one summer or winter season. According to the report, research shows that this could be done either during education or in the early stages of working life. It is geared to encourage new generations of people to be active in the community. Their motivation would be to complete at least a three-month period of activity. It is not designed for older people but targets the inclusion of younger people to get them started. It is hoped that in this way they will see that they can achieve something in their local communities.

On the matter of schools and local authorities, an audit by local authorities, through the county, city and development boards, of all existing community facilities in the State is under way and is to be finished by this time next year. It aims to identify gaps in the provision of facilities and opportunities for improving efficiency of use or sharing of facilities, which is what the Deputy

referred to in his question. Many facilities currently open only from 6 p.m. to 10 p.m. could easily be used in the morning by parents, retired individuals or small children. The report states better use could be made of schools in the evening and at weekends as community hubs, as mentioned. A pilot project is planned for a number of post-primary schools in conjunction with the efforts of the Minister of State at the Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs, Deputy Carey, with regard to the young people’s facilities and services fund.

Thus, a number of good initiatives are planned, which can be carried out with sufficient support and co-ordination. There is only a small office in my Department, but the idea is that we try to co-ordinate the activities of many existing bodies. We are trying to obtain support from private sector organisations with networks around the country. I do not want advertise for these commercial organisations but many of them have been positive in their support and have made staff available to work with us to develop this network. This is very much appreciated.

Deputy Eamon Gilmore: These questions cover a wide area. My question deals with the implementation of the civic life section of the programme for Government. One of the subsections deals with ethics and investigations. This year the Government published the Ethics in Public Office (Amendment) Bill 2007, the purpose of which was to provide that where a Member of the Dáil or Seanad proposed to accept a significant gift from a friend for personal purposes, he or she would be obliged to check with the Standards in Public Office Commission whether it was all right to accept it. That Bill was passed in the Seanad but seems to have disappeared since. It has not been introduced in the Dáil and I cannot find any reference to it in the programme for Government. Is it still the Government’s intention to proceed with this legislation? This is probably a question more appropriate to the Order of Business, but the Taoiseach might give some indication of when the Bill will be brought before the House.

The Taoiseach: The Bill was due to be introduced before Christmas, but the Minister for Finance has been tied up with other issues. The Standards in Public Office Commission may have sent back a few amendments, but the Bill is ready to be brought before the House.

Deputy Eamon Gilmore: Does the Government intend to go ahead with it?

The Taoiseach: Yes.

Deputy Stanton: I asked the Taoiseach about the possibility of having a formal citizenship ceremony to mark admission to the State for newcomers. How does he see this working?

The Taoiseach: I assume the Deputy is referring to the new Irish. The survey showed that engagement and involvement among this sector were poor. The number of immigrants began to increase from the early 1990s. I cannot remember the figure for active involvement in society but it was not impressive. It was signalled that they should undertake new activities. Cumann Lúthchleas Gael put a big effort into the Railway Cup tournament recently and invited all of the communities, but it was not hugely successful. Some countries join in with communities but, from my memory, that is not great. The idea is that this will be a separate and active effort to try to engage communities.

Many of these people are here to work for a few years and go home, but many of them have put down roots here, gained citizenship and want to be citizens. I am sure the report is on the whole lot of them, but the Minister of State, Deputy Conor Lenihan, in terms of the integration process, is taking an active interest in how to try to get the various communities — Muslim, Polish, others from eastern Europe and others from African societies — involved in activities in this country. The reason it is listed as a separate issue in the report is because participation of the new Irish according to the work done, which was mainly in 2006, was not impressive.

Deputy Jimmy Deenihan: Would the Taoiseach see a role for a greater partnership between the Defence Forces and local communities? For example, gymnasias could be used by communities when the Defence Forces are not using them. Personnel from the Defence Forces, such as physical trainers or educators, could work with teachers from local schools or supervise classes. It would be a practical way of using a national resource.

Recently, the Defence Forces built a state-of-the-art gymnasium in the Curragh for €6 million, but when it is not being used by the military, it is not being used by the locals. Before the last election, the Minister, Deputy O'Dea, promised a new gymnasium in Limerick to the value of €10 million or some such. If it ever comes to fruition, it will be an ideal opportunity to allow people from Moyross, South Hill and other places in Limerick to use it for fitness and physical education classes and so on.

The Taoiseach: I do not know the specific issues around the Defence Forces gymnasium but, as a general rule and principle, wherever the State puts in infrastructure or taxpayers' money is going to provide facilities, whether directly to clubs, associations or organisations or to something in the State's hands, we should maximise its use. It is ridiculous that, as can be seen in some areas, there are a few halls that are a bit run down because their use has not been maximised and they have not been properly organised. It annoys me because the taxpayer has put in money.

In the last number of years in the youth facilities fund, we have tried to get multi-purpose and multi-use halls for all ages without elitism or groups, cabals or clubs getting their hands on them, where the halls can be open in the morning from 8 o'clock for people who are dropping their children to school to do their aerobics classes or older people to come to do——

Deputy Enda Kenny: Stretching exercises.

The Taoiseach: Whatever — maybe we all should do it. The halls can then be used by young people when they get out of school.

Deputy Enda Kenny: Treadmills.

The Taoiseach: That is how the facilities should be used. Without knowing the particular case, that is what should happen. We should maximise the use for people. We are a small country with 4,000 schools and cannot have a gymnasium outside every classroom, but we should maximise the use in cities, towns and villages.

Deputy Jimmy Deenihan: I welcome the Taoiseach's overview of the use of facilities, with which I agree. He mentioned how multi-purpose sports facilities could be used by a number of organisations, but will it be Government policy? Will the Taoiseach direct the Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism when he is allocating national lottery funding to give preferential treatment to groups that get together to provide indoor or outdoor multi-sports facilities? For example, they could have common indoor facilities and changing rooms while using a broader area for outdoor facilities, such as different pitches. This is a way forward, but what is the Taoiseach's opinion? Were he to endorse this approach, it would be important. If he would direct the Minister to fund, encourage and prioritise this type of application for lottery funding, he would make an important contribution to the provision of well-used sports facilities.

The Taoiseach: I will be very clear — wherever it is practical to do so, which should be the case. The big obstacles we talked about earlier were insurance and litigation.

I was recently in the University of Limerick, DCU and UCD. They are using their facilities for sports. The new schools being built by the Minister for Education and Science, Deputy Hanafin, in the Fingal area have increased space and facilities. One of the best schools I have ever seen in the country is in Cherry Orchard. It has pre-school, after school, cooking and play facilities.

As a policy, I am totally opposed to elitist groups saying something is built for them and locking the door, letting no one else in and only having it open for a few hours each week. There are plenty of those facilities. We have been trying through the concept of active citizenship to have

multi-purpose and multi-use facilities. It has worked well under the youth facilities fund. We worked with the local authorities where they managed it. The money was not going to one organisation and every organisation could participate. A number of those facilities have worked very well. If we do that progressively as we give money for recreation, sport and leisure, which covers a lot because it can range from the very young to the very old and is gender neutral, we can improve facilities greatly.

Deputy David Stanton: The Defence Forces Reserve has many premises that are rarely used. Rather than selling them, would it be Government policy to make them available to other clubs and organisations in local communities with a dearth of facilities?

I asked a question about applying a formal citizenship ceremony to citizens upon reaching the age of 18 years. Has the Taoiseach progressed that initiative any further?

The Taoiseach: The first question is a matter for my colleague, the Minister for Defence, but we should try to extend it. The military authorities have a say in this, but they allow community involvement at some of their facilities. For example, in this city and at their playing spaces in the Phoenix Park where they have traditionally had space, they give them over for other community uses. Deputy Stagg will help me quickly, but they do the same at the Curragh, where I have been over the years. They do it wherever possible.

Deputy Stanton raised a point about involving the new Irish. The attempt is to look at identifiable gaps in local community structures and local authorities, to try to get local civic participation structures and to try to use the county and city development boards of local authorities to experiment with modes of local democracy and local engagement to get people involved.

Deputy David Stanton: We are talking about a formal citizenship ceremony for those people and for Irish people who reach the age of 18 also.

The Taoiseach: This is to give recognition to people and to make it special for them when they take up citizenship in that they will have a formal ceremony. It is being done for two purposes, and that was clear when I attended the main conference. First, it is an honour for them to achieve it and, second, it formalises them in terms of our lifestyle and culture and the responsibilities that come with what they have achieved. That is the idea behind it.

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 number of notices under Standing Order 32. I will

call on Deputies in the order in which they submitted their notices to my office. I call Deputy Morgan.

Deputy Arthur Morgan: I seek the adjournment of the Dáil under Standing Order 32 to discuss the following matter of urgent national importance, namely, the decision by the Argos chain to fly in English scab labour, or scab labour from anywhere, to work in its stores in Ireland when its employees are striking for an extra €1 per hour, and to call on the Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment to draw up legislation forbidding foreign companies, or indeed Irish companies, from engaging in this kind of underhand, despicable tactic against workers, which is a throwback to the 1913 lock-out, and thereby refusing to deal with labour issues in an Irish setting through the Labour Court and other mediation routes.

An Ceann Comhairle: I call Deputy Costello. I call Deputy Ferris.

Deputy Martin Ferris: I seek the adjournment of the House under Standing Order 32 to discuss the fact that despite the large number of fish being taken illegally from Irish waters by non-Irish vessels, which is regularly reported to the authorities here, little action is being taken to prevent this illegal fishing, and that it is responsible for massive losses to the fishing sector here both through the loss of stock and the imposition of further penalties on Irish fishermen.

An Ceann Comhairle: Having considered the matters raised they are not in order under Standing Order 32.

Order of Business.

The Taoiseach: It is proposed to take No. 6a, motion re leave to introduce Supplementary Estimate [Vote 40]; No. 6b, motion re referral of Supplementary Estimate [Vote 40] to select committee; and No. 2, Social Welfare Bill 2007 — Second and Subsequent Stages. It is proposed, notwithstanding anything in Standing Orders, that (1) the Dáil shall sit later than 8.30 p.m. and business shall be interrupted on the conclusion of No. 19, motion re road safety; reform of penalty points system (resumed), which shall be taken for 90 minutes at 7 p.m. or on the conclusion of No. 2, whichever is the later; (2) No. 6a, and subject to the agreement of No. 6a, No. 6b (referral to select committee), shall be decided without debate and any divisions demanded thereon shall be taken forthwith; (3) the resumed Second Stage and Subsequent Stages of No. 2 shall be taken today and the following arrangements shall apply: (i) proceedings on the resumed Second Stage shall, if not previously concluded, be brought to a conclusion at 5 p.m. today; and the proceedings on the Committee and Remaining Stages shall, if not previously concluded, be brought to a conclusion

[The Taoiseach.]

at 7 p.m. tonight by one question which shall be put from the Chair and which shall, in relation to amendments, include only those set down or accepted by the Minister for Social and Family Affairs.

An Ceann Comhairle: Is the proposal that the Dáil shall sit later than 8.30 p.m. tonight agreed? Agreed. Is the proposal for dealing with Nos. 6a and 6b without debate agreed?

Deputy James Reilly: Yesterday in the House I asked the Taoiseach about this matter and he stated: "I will ask the Minister to brief the Deputy on the other issue", namely, this health Supplementary Estimate. We have been telephoning about this matter since it arose. The clerk to the committee was not sure when it would meet. A quorum could be formed and a meeting called within two hours. We are talking, on the face of it, about €1,000 but the reality is about shifting €250 million from one budget to the other. The Taoiseach promised me a briefing from the Minister and all I got was a page of gobbledegook. As far as I am concerned this is what is at the heart of what is wrong with the Health Service Executive. I got a load of figures and an indication of the health boards involved but no detail on what is being done or why it is being done. On that basis, I strongly object to this. I took the Taoiseach at his word. I expected to get a briefing. This document came through from the Office of the Whip at 6.46 p.m. last night. That is not the way to run the country or to reassure people that our health service is being taken in hand in a serious fashion. I would like an explanation as to the reason we did not get a briefing or is it his intention that we will get one before this evening?

The Taoiseach: If the Deputy did not get the brief as early as he should I regret that but it is usual at this time of the year that we would bring forward Supplementary Estimates, although not as many as was the case previously but—

Deputy James Reilly: I am sorry to interrupt the Taoiseach but we had a Supplementary Estimate only two weeks ago and we have another one now. It is bizarre stuff.

The Taoiseach: The Minister will address the Select Committee on Health and Children this evening where she will deal with the issue. All we are doing today is moving what is a technical Supplementary Estimate for €1,000. It does not involve additional taxpayers' money. Savings on subheads of €255 million, and particularly the health repayment scheme, and €260 million will offset additional spending incurred on courts services across other subheads. The additional spending of €255 million on certain subheads represents a small amount of the HSE Vote. The HSE will continue to implement its planned

efficiency measures at the end of the year. The Minister will deal with the matter in committee this afternoon.

An Ceann Comhairle: In light of what the Taoiseach has said is the proposal agreed? Agreed. Is No. 2 agreed? Agreed.

Deputy Enda Kenny: I have two questions for the Taoiseach. First, what is the expected date of publication of the Electricity Regulation (EirGrid)(Amendment) Bill, which is to give ownership to EirGrid to build and own the east-west electricity interconnector? Second, I am aware the Taoiseach and his office have a personal interest, as has the Ceann Comhairle, in the issue of Dáil reform and that he has extended an invitation to discuss that. I would be happy to take up that invitation if his office would make contact, hopefully before the Christmas recess. In the meantime we should all be engaged as fully as possible on the issue of Dáil reform on which the Whip has proposals.

The Taoiseach: Work is continuing to progress on the preparation of the heads of the Electricity Regulation (EirGrid)(Amendment) Bill. It is unlikely to progress it any time soon. The Bill is to convert the ESB into a plc under the Companies Acts and to consolidate existing electricity legislation. Talks are going on also with the unions involved.

Deputy Eamon Gilmore: At the beginning of this session the Government indicated that it intended to publish 17 Bills in this session. It has managed to date to publish three of those, two of which are the Local Government Bill, which simply transferred the roads functions from the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government to the Department of Transport arising from the appointment of Government, and the second is the annual Social Welfare Bill. I do not believe there has ever been a session of the Dáil where a Government has published less legislation. In fact, the Labour Party has published more Bills this session than the Government. I accept the Taoiseach responds to individual questions about Bills here on the Order of Business but it would appear there is something seriously wrong—

Deputy Pádraic McCormack: There is.

Deputy Eamon Gilmore: —if the Government is not able to get out its own legislative programme. What is wrong?

Deputy Pádraic McCormack: The Deputy knows well.

Deputy Eamon Gilmore: This is quite astonishing. Why is the Government not able to get out its own Bills?

Deputy Pádraic McCormack: Its eye is off the ball.

The Taoiseach: The next session brings us up to the new year and I understand a number of these Bills will come out.

Deputy Emmet Stagg: You will have a very busy Christmas.

The Taoiseach: I can go through them in detail but they include a number of complex Bills. In the case of a detailed Bill a drafter in the parliamentary draftsman's office works full-time on that Bill. Regarding the Employment Agency Regulation Bill and the Employment Law Compliance Bill, somebody effectively works full-time on those Bills. Other Bills are put back when that happens. A broadcasting Bill is due to be brought forward also and a student support Bill. There is a number of these Bills but they will be published shortly.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: Has a date yet been set for holding the referendum on the ratification of the EU treaty? Given ongoing concerns about the health service and information appertaining to it, when will legislation regarding governance of information in the health sector be introduced?

The Taoiseach: That legislation will be introduced next year. No date has been fixed for the referendum.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: There is no date for the referendum and it will be next year before the legislation on health sector information is introduced. That is a poor show from the Taoiseach. Bad job.

Deputy Kathleen Lynch: As the Minister for Health and Children is sitting next to the Taoiseach, does she intend to publish the report on diabetic services for juveniles? It is a glaring fact that services for children with diabetes in the southern region are lacking. Do we have to put up with this two-tier service? If one lives in Dublin, one has a good service but if one lives in the south, one has an appalling service. There are children as young as 18 years, as the Ceann Comhairle will be aware, who do not have access to a service.

An Ceann Comhairle: It is not in order.

Deputy Thomas P. Broughan: Does the Taoiseach have any intention of introducing legislation to bring to an end self-certification in the building industry? A pyrites infill scandal has hit homes in north and west Dublin. The media have expressed little interest in the matter because they are heavily compromised by advertising from auctioneers and builders. Some politicians are also probably heavily supported at election

time by builders. The Fingal and Dublin county managers told local authority representatives last Friday that they were urgently waiting on legislation to help those young people facing negative equity with their homes having to be rebuilt from scratch.

An Ceann Comhairle: Is there legislation promised?

The Taoiseach: No. The Deputy should table a parliamentary question.

Deputy Seymour Crawford: Yesterday the Taoiseach informed the House that the nursing home support scheme Bill would not be taken before Christmas but shortly afterwards, as there needs to be a discussion on it. When will the Bill be published in order that discussions can take place? Many are anxious about the issue.

In the light of recent events regarding drugs, for young people the most serious drug of all which leads to others is alcohol. Will the Taoiseach reconsider legislation regarding the advertising and promotion of alcohol to young people, particularly coming up to Christmas?

The Taoiseach: We hope to publish the nursing homes Bill in the next few weeks.

The Minister has received the first report from the monitoring group established to oversee adherence to the voluntary codes in alcohol sales. The Department and the Minister are considering the report and a decision on whether the legislation will be reactivated is yet to be made. It will be decided in the new year.

Deputy Kathleen Lynch: Will it take as long as the diabetes report?

Deputy Alan Shatter: Will the Taoiseach acknowledge it is unacceptable for it to have taken eight years to produce a report on serious allegations, now established, of physical and sexual abuse of children with disabilities in the Galway area? Will he indicate whether he intends to implement the recommendations contained in the report? What additional legislation will be brought forward to ensure the children and adults with disabilities are adequately protected within the criminal justice system in order that perpetrators can be properly prosecuted?

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy will have to table a parliamentary question on that matter.

Deputy Alan Shatter: This is an important issue.

An Ceann Comhairle: I am sure it is but it is not in order.

Deputy Alan Shatter: Today I tabled a private notice question on the report which has taken

[Deputy Alan Shatter.]

eight years to come out of the system. It is outrageous it has taken this long.

An Ceann Comhairle: We will deal with it through the correct procedures.

Deputy Alan Shatter: Sir, unless additional legal protections are put in place——

An Ceann Comhairle: I call Deputy Jan O'Sullivan.

Deputy Alan Shatter: ——both children and adults with disabilities——

An Ceann Comhairle: There is nothing we can do now.

Deputy Alan Shatter: ——and who are the victims of physical and sexual abuse will not be adequately protected in the criminal law. There is a urgent need for legislation. The report has highlighted the institutional failures——

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy has made his point.

Deputy Alan Shatter: ——and ultimately the HSE's abysmal failure to ensure it was published in reasonable time.

An Ceann Comhairle: It is not in order. I call Deputy Jan O'Sullivan.

Deputy Alan Shatter: I want to see the legislation before the House as a priority.

An Ceann Comhairle: Legislation is not promised.

Deputy Alan Shatter: Has the Taoiseach nothing to offer?

The Taoiseach: The question is out of order, as is the Deputy.

An Ceann Comhairle: He is completely out of order.

Deputy Alan Shatter: It has taken eight years to produce the report.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy has made his point and we cannot continue with it. I call Deputy Jan O'Sullivan.

Deputy Alan Shatter: It regards substantial allegations that have been established.

Deputy Jan O'Sullivan: I support Deputy Shatter and know my colleague Deputy McManus has been pursuing the report for many years.

An Ceann Comhairle: We have to move on.

Deputy Jan O'Sullivan: I understand from a reply to a parliamentary question that individuals referred to in the Ann O'Doherty report had been allowed to comment on it.

An Ceann Comhairle: It is not in order.

Deputy Jan O'Sullivan: Is it expected to be ready for publication before the end of this session, in other words, before next week?

A Deputy: The Deputy's microphone——

Deputy Jan O'Sullivan: Is there any indication as to when the HSE report on Portlaoise Hospital being carried out by the board of the HSE will be——

An Ceann Comhairle: Questions relating to reports are not in order on the Order of Business. That is the difficulty.

Deputy Eamon Gilmore: They have been asked before.

Deputy Jan O'Sullivan: They have been raised many times and the issues have been debated in the House. They are of huge importance to people in the midlands.

An Ceann Comhairle: I am sure they have but there are ways of raising the matter. The Deputy is experienced enough to know how to raise them. I call on Deputy Costello.

Deputy Jan O'Sullivan: A Cheann Comhairle, you have allowed the Taoiseach answer questions on the O'Doherty report——

An Ceann Comhairle: No, I have not.

Deputy Eamon Gilmore: You have.

Deputy Liz McManus: Yes, you have.

Deputy Jan O'Sullivan: We need to know when it will be published.

An Ceann Comhairle: I call Deputy Costello.

Deputy Jan O'Sullivan: The information given in the reply to my parliamentary question, the only other way I can raise the matter, was not enough.

An Ceann Comhairle: It is quite simple: the Deputy tables a parliamentary question on the matter.

Deputy Kathleen Lynch: But we cannot get it.

Deputy Jan O'Sullivan: I did and the reply did not give a definitive answer as to when it would be published.

An Ceann Comhairle: I am not responsible for the answers to parliamentary questions. I can only operate within the rules of the House on the Order of Business.

Deputy Jan O'Sullivan: The Taoiseach has replied on this matter on previous occasions.

An Ceann Comhairle: I have to move on. I call Deputy Costello.

Deputy Jan O'Sullivan: I will be raising the matter again.

Deputy Joe Costello: The Taoiseach replied that he did not know the date of the referendum on the EU treaty. Tomorrow, he will travel to Brussels to sign off on the EU reform treaty. Will he be telling his EU colleagues about the timing of the referendum? At a luncheon for journalists he promised that the enabling Bill would be passed by the end of January 2008. If it has not been yet published, how will the House pass it by the end of January? We cannot establish the referendum commission until the legislation is passed. Deputy Durkan is Chairman of the Joint Committee on European Affairs. Obviously, he wishes to organise its work around the referendum. Will the Taoiseach give an indication of the timescale of when the various items of legislation will be put in place?

The Taoiseach: We had this yesterday in the House for half an hour. Anyone listening to the debate would be clear on the matter. I did not say in reply to Deputy Durkan's question that I did not know. I said no date had been fixed. The EU reform treaty will be signed tomorrow. The Government will receive a formal report from the Attorney General and I will consult the Opposition parties. This process will be undertaken in the next few weeks. We will then move on with a plan for 2008. It was never the intention to have an enabling Bill in January when we would be signing the treaty at Christmas.

Deputy Joe Costello: That is not what the Taoiseach told the media.

The Taoiseach: It will be spring time.

Deputy James Reilly: A Cheann Comhairle, as a new Member who should be more familiar with the rules of the House but is not, will you help me? How do I find out, on behalf of women, when the Ann O'Doherty report will be made available? How do I find out when the HIQA report on cancer services in Cork which does not cover the time the Finnish pathologist was there will be made available? Is the word of the Taoiseach and the Minister for Health and Children worth now? On the Ann O'Doherty report, the Taoiseach informed us on 6 November—

An Ceann Comhairle: We cannot discuss the matter now.

Deputy James Reilly: —we would have it by the end of November. The Minister said on 7 November that she would have it by the end of November. I asked about the report yesterday but got no reply. Deputy Jan O'Sullivan asked again today and the same thing happened. How long must we go on? What is the function of the House?

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Reilly will have learned what the function of the House is by now. We must move on.

Deputy Phil Hogan: A Cheann Comhairle, you might help him.

Deputy James Reilly: I am getting deeply disturbed by it.

Deputy Phil Hogan: With all your experience, a Cheann Comhairle, you might help him.

Deputy Alan Shatter: Another eight years for a report.

An Ceann Comhairle: Stop. I call Deputy Sherlock.

Deputy Seán Sherlock: Will the sale of alcohol Bill be brought forward earlier? There is a clear indication that the consumption of alcohol with illegal substances such as cocaine is causing untold damage in our society. Young people are dying as a result. We need education measures—

An Ceann Comhairle: We cannot have a Second Stage speech now.

Deputy Seán Sherlock: Given the dearth of legislation in this term and the lack of urgency about legislation on this issue I urge that the sale of alcohol Bill be brought forward and that it provide for education on the dangers of mixing alcohol and cocaine.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Taoiseach has answered that question already today.

The Taoiseach: Yes, I have.

Deputy Ciarán Lynch: There are several matters outstanding in respect of the electoral commission, local authorities, boundaries and population. Local elections are due to take place in summer 2009. Will there be changes to the boundaries and the structure of the seats in constituencies?

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy can put that question at Question Time.

Deputy Ciarán Lynch: A Green Paper was to come before the House this week on local government reform but we will not see it until next summer. When will the Taoiseach make a statement on this matter?

An Ceann Comhairle: We cannot move into that area now.

Supplementary Estimates 2007: Leave to Introduce.

Minister for Health and Children (Deputy Mary Harney): I move:

“That leave be given by the Dáil to introduce the following Supplementary Estimate for the service of the year ending on 31 December, 2007:—

Vote 40 — Health Service Executive (*Supplementary Estimate*).”

Question put and agreed to.

Supplementary Estimates 2007: Referral to Select Committee.

Minister for Health and Children (Deputy Mary Harney): I move:

“That, subject to leave being given to introduce the following Supplementary Estimate for the service of the year ending on 31 December, 2007, the Supplementary Estimate be referred to the Select Committee on Health and Children pursuant to Standing Order 154(3) and paragraph (1)(a)(ii) of the Committee’s Orders of Reference, which shall report back to the Dáil by no later than 13 December:—

Vote 40 — Health Service Executive (*Supplementary Estimate*).”

Question put and agreed to.

Social Welfare Bill 2007: Second Stage (Resumed).

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

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: I wish to share time with Deputies Seymour Crawford and Michael Ring.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: On a point of order, we do not have a schedule for taking the various Stages of the Bill. How does the Ceann Comhairle intend to proceed with this?

An Ceann Comhairle: Second Stage will be completed at 5 p.m. and then we will move to the next Stage.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: Those details have not been circulated.

An Ceann Comhairle: The House would have had to deal with that on the Order of Business. We will proceed with the Second Stage debate.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: When I spoke last evening I referred to the need for the Minister to have regard to how the rent support system operates. Some young vulnerable couples have to supplement their rent almost to the extent of 50% of their disposable income which is generated by social welfare payments. This has been brought to the Minister’s attention before but the time has come to do something about it, particularly as rents in my area, and presumably elsewhere too, have increased by up to €300 per month in the past four or five months. No attention has been given to this just as the allowances on the medical cards are stuck.

Those who provide care for their loved ones over a long time need to be considered. In my constituency a lady cared for her daughter for 24 years until her daughter’s death. That woman devoted her life to providing a service that the State would otherwise have had to provide, at great personal sacrifice but because she has not made social welfare contributions she does not receive a pension. Sadly, that situation is replicated many times around the country. Will the Minister examine the possibility of allowing credits as contributions to qualify a person who cares for a relative, or anybody else, for a social welfare pension? There is provision for the person who leaves insurable employment to do that and return to it later. There is nothing for the person who has not contributed. This requires urgent attention.

We boast of being one of the richest nations in the world. We should consider the requirements for the contributory old age pension. People often do not have contributions of the required status to qualify for the pension. They might have J1 contributions or others that qualify them for payment as widows and orphans. This causes great hardship. It also applies to the invalidity pension which is based on contributions. A young person who suffers a stroke but does not have the relevant contributions has no means of making them without returning to work. Will the Minister ascertain the extent to which the thresholds can be moved to bring extra people into the net? These people have done no wrong but have contributed to society and deserve to be treated well by one of the richest countries in the world.

Deputy Seymour Crawford: I welcome many positive changes in the Social Welfare Bill, especially the qualified adult allowance for pensioners. For years I have lobbied for this change because many women were forced by law to give up their jobs in the public service at the time of their marriage. I am sure many young couples find it hard to believe that such a law existed. The women’s removal from work also removed their right to pay contributions so when they reached

pension age they could not receive a contributory pension in their own right, or even a non-contributory pension because of their husband's means or occupational pension. It is vital that this increased allowance, which hopefully by this time next year will be the equivalent of a non-contributory pension, would be paid directly to the spouse in his or her right. There is no reason it should have to go through the husband or wife. I also welcome the extension of the fuel allowance by one week but the Government was out of touch with the cost of fuel when it refused to increase the allowance above €18 per week.

The single biggest anomaly in this budget, as in the past eight, is the failure to increase the living alone allowance. It is clear from a meeting of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Social and Family Affairs yesterday that this is not an issue for groups such as CORI and Combat Poverty. In a rural constituency, however, such as Cavan-Monaghan, where there is little public transport, few buses and no trains, to allow pensioners to use their free travel passes, the cost of living alone is a serious problem leading to depression and unfortunately in some cases suicide. This issue can no longer be ignored and must be addressed.

Imagine the case of my friend who lost her spouse and suddenly found herself with a household income of one pension instead of two. Does the Minister not realise that she must still heat the house, pay the same tax and insurance on the car and use the same cooker to prepare food? The only difference is a little less food is needed, yet she goes from receiving approximately €400 back to €200, although, of course, she is entitled to the €7.50 living alone allowance. It would be a joke if it was not so serious.

Another issue that has improved quite significantly over the past 15 years is carer's allowance and I have been involved in discussions on this matter in the Joint Committee on Social and Family Affairs for many years. As the Minister has already stated, carers play a critical role in looking after not only the elderly, but also people with disabilities and others with serious illnesses. However, there are major anomalies and I believe that the spouse's income should be ignored in this matter. I am dealing with one such anomaly at the moment, which saw a lady give up her part-time job in Northern Ireland to look after her friend, who was not a relation, and so far she has been refused any support. Can the Minister imagine what it would cost the State to mind this seriously ill person if this lady had not given up her job?

The issue of means testing for the carer's allowance must be seriously examined. I believe when people are seriously ill, and doctors can verify this, families should not be put through the trauma and delays of means tests. While I am on the subject of means tests, I urge the Minister to stop bringing people back for them, where pos-

sible. Older people who are refused the right to a stamp because of their age dread being brought back for a means test.

Farm incomes have dropped, many farmers have gone out of business and fewer people — only 7,500 — are receiving farm assist payments than ten years ago when the scheme was introduced. I know several of these people are under extraordinary pressure as payments have fallen from €200 and more to under €100 and as low as €50. There is no justifiable reason for it.

Another anomaly is that a self-employed person can only earn €30 per week while a person on PAYE can earn €200 per week and still get the maximum non-contributory pension. This is ridiculous and is an example of how the self-employed are being discriminated against.

Deputy Michael Ring: When the budget was announced last week, the choir on the Government benches clapped because they thought it was a great budget for people on social welfare but it was not. Stealth taxes have begun and next week local authorities will send a letter to people on social welfare to have them reassessed for their council houses. This will see more money taken from increases in social welfare.

The family income supplement, FIS, is a scheme for people whose salaries do not match what they would receive through social welfare. Do employees at the Department of Social and Family Affairs make phone calls anymore? Could the Minister of State call some of these agencies to see why they no longer answer calls from the public? I know people who have been waiting up to six months for their FIS applications to be processed. It can take 16 to 18 weeks to have it renewed and I ask the Minister of State to have her officials call the Department to see if they get through. I think Mr. and Mrs. Voicemail will answer and no more will be heard from the Department. I want this investigated immediately because people on low incomes should not have to wait 16 to 18 weeks for FIS to be renewed and six or seven months to have a case processed. The Department staff are receiving benchmarking in their salaries and people on low incomes should not be forced to wait so long for FIS.

People wait months for appeals relating to carer's allowance and I have raised this matter with the Department on several occasions. People apply for carer's allowance because they are looking after a loved one in need of full-time care. When there is an appeal relating to the carer's allowance, the carer is supposed to bring the loved one with them, but nine times out of ten this is not possible because he or she is too sick. The appeals officer should visit the home of the person seeking carer's allowance because it is not being assessed with regard to the carer but the person in need of care. I have raised this matter in the committee over the years and I want the Department to examine it. There is no point wasting taxpayers' money bringing in appeals

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officers who receive travel expenses while also bringing in the carer. The problem is that, nine times out of ten, the decision is that the individual does not need full-time care. How can the appeals officer make a decision when he does not know the circumstances of the individual involved? The appeals officer should visit the home of the sick person. I have raised this point before and will continue to do so until the matter is addressed.

Last night, I raised the issue of public transport and now I wish to address free schemes. Older people in rural areas receive the free travel pass but it is of no use to them because there is no public transport. People should be given vouchers for taxis because that is the way of the future.

The Health Service Executive, HSE, will not take sick and old people to hospital appointments so they must now get up at 5 a.m. to take a bus at 7 a.m. They then must wait all day to be taken home again. This is a scandal at a time when so much money is available to the Government.

I wanted to address various social welfare anomalies regarding widows and others but have no more time.

Deputy Michael McGrath: I wish to share time with Deputy Michael Kennedy.

I commend the Minister on securing a social welfare budget of almost €17 billion for 2008 and on receiving almost half of the extra €1.7 billion that has been made available since the publication of the pre-budget Estimates. Overall, 31% of the country's gross current expenditure in 2008 will be accounted for by social welfare spending and this is a measure of the level of priority we attach to the area.

There is an excellent social welfare system in Ireland today that guarantees a minimum level of income and a basic standard of living for every citizen in the State. I am speaking from personal experience as, when I was only eight years old, my father was told he could never work again. He and my mother managed to raise five children on social welfare income and gave us the same opportunities afforded to other children.

I would like to take this opportunity to acknowledge the staff of the social welfare system who provide an outstanding service to public representatives and the public. There are fine information services available to the public, in particular the outstanding website, information leaflets, telephone lines and citizens advice centres around the country. I often find that our task is to communicate with people regarding their social welfare entitlements because many members of the public do not know their full entitlements and need information to let them apply and benefit from schemes. In this regard, I welcome the extra allocation of €1.8 million in the 2008 budget to the citizens information board. This will allow for the enhanced availability of resources and information services in the year ahead.

We have a duty to ensure a decent quality of life for elderly citizens. I acknowledge the presence in the House of the Minister of State with responsibility for older persons, Deputy Hoctor. I welcome the increase in the contributory and non-contributory State pension to €223.30 and €212 per week, respectively. Elderly people made enormous sacrifices in more difficult economic circumstances. Many worked abroad for long periods and have returned home for their retirement. It is important that we provide them with a level of income that allows them to live out their days in dignity and with a degree of self-respect.

I welcome the progress made towards the commitment to a State pension of €300, at a minimum, by 2012. I also acknowledge the improvements in recent years in the household benefits package, electricity, fuel and telephone allowances and the provision of free television licences. These measures take some pressure off older people. It is interesting to note the recently published findings of the EU survey on income and living conditions, which confirm that the risk of poverty rate for older people has fallen from just under 30% in 2003 to 13.6% in 2006. While it might seem cold and impersonal to speak in statistical terms about poverty, it is important to benchmark the progress being made. It is necessary to have an independent analysis of our efforts to address poverty among older people.

The Bill is to be welcomed for providing an increase of €27 per week in the qualified adult rate, which brings the payment to such persons to €200 per week. This represents 94% of the target figure, which will be achieved in full next year. I have argued at meetings of the parliamentary party and in other fora that the corollary of a policy of individualisation in the tax code is that one must also implement individualisation in the pension system and afford all adults full independent pension provision in their own right. I welcome the huge progress made in recent years in this regard.

We all have an obligation to engage in the pensions debate. I welcome the publication last October of the Green Paper on pensions. It addresses the challenges we face in this area and puts forward various options to tackle them. I encourage everyone to make a submission on the Green Paper so the decisions made on pensions policy are broadly based and take full account of the views of those directly affected. It is essential that we work to reduce the numbers relying solely on social welfare income in retirement.

Previous speakers referred to carers. I welcome the progress in adequately recognising and rewarding the work of thousands of carers throughout the State. Through sacrifice and dedication, such people ensure their loved ones can remain in their own homes and, in so doing, they save the State millions of euro every year in nursing home charges and other supports. Their role must be supported in every way possible. The

initiative introduced last September to allow applicants claim up to half the carer's allowance while retaining their primary social welfare income was a significant step forward. Many thousands of people have applied to avail of this benefit in recent months.

The weekly income disregard for carers is increased in the Bill by €12.50 per week, or €25 for a couple, to €665. It is important to make the public aware that a couple can now earn more than €34,500 per annum and still qualify for the carer's allowance under the means test. Several people have told me they were sure they would not qualify for the allowance. In many cases, however, their income is such that it meets the qualification criteria. We must continue to highlight the improvements in the income thresholds and disregards. One of the key Government commitments in the national partnership agreement, *Towards 2016*, is the development of a national carers' strategy. I welcome the progress in this regard and look forward to its expected completion next summer.

I also welcome the greater emphasis being placed by the Department on encouraging and facilitating people to move away from dependence on welfare towards participation in the workforce. The Minister's announcement of a revamped family support programme with a budget of €6.5 million in 2008 is a significant initiative. This will provide funding for projects run by third parties to assist welfare recipients and family members to enhance their employability through education, training and personal development. The Minister has also provided for the deployment of an additional 30 facilitators with clerical support staff to further the work in this area. These programmes will complement the schemes already in place, including the back to education and back to work allowances. There is a role for everybody in the workforce. People of working age who are physically capable of work should be required to make some practical contribution to their local community. This will afford immense benefits for themselves in terms of self-esteem and will also benefit their communities.

I welcome the improvements in the back to school clothing and footwear allowance, which is to increase by €20 per child, from €180 to €200 for children aged between two and 11 years and from €285 to €305 for children aged between 12 and 22 years. I am particularly pleased that the Bill provides for an increase of €2,000 in the widowed parent grant to €6,000.

I ask the Minister to move ahead with plans to provide a local social welfare office in Carrigaline, County Cork. I understand the OPW is considering possible sites for the office. It is important that services are provided locally to serve Carrigaline and the lower harbour area, particularly since the social welfare office in Passage West closed earlier this year.

Deputy Michael Kennedy: I thank Deputy Michael McGrath for sharing time. I welcome the opportunity to speak on this Bill and to outline the changes to our social welfare system. I was proud last Wednesday to sit on this side of the House as the Minister for Finance, Deputy Cowen, and Minister for Social and Family Affairs, Deputy Cullen, spoke about the contents of the Bill. I applaud the Ministers for their efforts to cater for the vulnerable in society. I am always reassured by the Government's commitment to insulate weaker members of society from the financial difficulties they face.

I have memories of other budgets, under other Governments, where benefits to social welfare recipients were less than generous and often unsatisfactory. Since Fianna Fáil entered Government in 1997, it has introduced significant changes and benefits for those who need them most. Throughout the recent period of unprecedented growth in the economy, social welfare payments and the associated thresholds and entitlements have increased on an annual basis. I cannot claim that this will always be the case. We live in a global economy and that will dictate our future growth. In the current economic circumstances, the substantial rate of increase of recent years had to slow down. That has been recognised in the budget.

Nevertheless, the allocation of €17 billion to the social welfare system illustrates the Government's commitment to protecting the underprivileged, poor and vulnerable in our society. This amount represents almost half of the Government's total spend and includes an increase of €980 million over the allocation for this year. That is very significant in any language.

Despite the economic slowdown, the Government remains strong on social welfare issues. As the Minister stated in his speech yesterday, the Government is faced with the challenge of providing adequate resources to address social welfare needs while protecting the economy. While taking that into account, this Bill puts a clear emphasis on protecting the living standards of those most in need. The increases provided in the Bill are well above the estimated inflation rate of 4.9% and these are especially important in maintaining the living standards of disadvantaged people.

The Bill focuses much of the €17 billion allocated on protecting the elderly and citizens on the periphery of the social welfare system, such as those relying on the entitlements of a spouse or partner. The 2,500 job seekers in my constituency will more than welcome the €12 per week increase, as will those 156 recipients of the one-parent family benefit in the Dublin North region. We have some 529 recipients of family income support, who will receive a €25 increase, which will be very welcome.

I strongly support all aspects of the Social Welfare Bill and welcome the €14 increase in the contributory State pension, as well as increases in the

[Deputy Michael Kennedy.]

contributory widow's and widower's pension, the deserted wife's' benefits and invalidity pensions. Bringing the amount to €223.30 per week is very significant and in line with the Government's commitment of reaching a target of €300 per week in its lifetime. There was a €12 increase in the non-contributory State pension, bringing it to €212 per week. I have had many calls to my office in recent days by people welcoming that.

The qualified adult allowance for spouses and partners of those depending on social welfare payments means couples in this category will have a combined increase of €41 per week, which is just and welcome. The income support payments will increase by €8 for those dependent on adults in receipt of job seeker's benefit. The Government has increased the payment for family income supports and enabled more families to claim the payment. I welcome that the widowed parent grant has increased to €6,000.

I cannot go on without mentioning the fuel allowance period, which will be increased to 30 weeks from next April. This is important and I hope in future years the Minister will be in a position, taking financial constraints into consideration, to increase that period. Quite often our weather seems warmer in spring and is colder in the summer. We should look to increase the fuel allowance period as a result.

I welcome the Government's commitment to carers and I have no doubt that we recognise the important role carers play in our society. Since 1997 there has been a sharp increase in the payment to carers and this year the increase was €14, bringing it to €200. That is justified but we should continue to improve on it.

The Government has a stated commitment to establish a national carers strategy, which was provided in *Towards 2016*, to ensure there is no monetary barrier to a person leaving a job to care for a loved one. I welcome this and exhort the Minister to bring this about as soon as possible.

I would like to see further increases in payments to qualifying adults, which would substantially ease the burden of stay-at-home mothers, spouses and partners who do not work and those who cannot work. We must ensure the higher benefits do not adversely affect other payments, grants or supplements paid to a social welfare recipient. I have indicated to the Minister that the last thing we want is to see an increase in payments tipping the balance on a young mother, for example, on rent supplement and putting her out of the scope of benefits. We must ensure any benefits we give are real in that context.

The Government has not walked blindly into this but has identified several strategic objectives it hopes to achieve. The 2008 budget and the Social Welfare Bill will go a long way to achieving these aims. It is placing €17 billion into achieving these strategic objectives. We must see a continuation of the Government's target on pensions and a significant improvement in the position of

spouses and partners, those receiving contributory pensions, and those receiving a qualified allowance.

We must be allowed to strengthen the support to carers, as this Bill provides for, to ensure people continue with this valuable and compassionate work. I cannot over-emphasise the role carers play, a fact recognised on all sides of the House. Most importantly, we must ensure the real value of payments is maintained and safeguarded, with no payment having a negative effect on any other benefit given by other authorities or bodies.

Deputy John Deasy: I wish to share time with Deputies Tom Hayes, Terence Flanagan and McHugh.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Johnny Brady): Is that agreed? Agreed.

Deputy John Deasy: My first point concerns the method by which the non-contributory pension is calculated and how the means test to assess that pension is operated. An example concerns a pensioner whose assets amounted to approximately €70,000. In calculating this person's disposable income of €6,240 from the savings amount, the Department equated this to an annual rate of return of 8.825%. However, the top deposit rate available in this country currently is between 4.5% and 5%, and this would involve both a time commitment and minimum amount.

I have checked the websites of various financial institutions and lenders and the best rates I have seen are between 4.5% and 5%, a long way off 8.8%. How is the calculation made? In contrasting the disposable income percentage from the Department and the market reality of deposit amount percentages, the two are miles apart. There must be a reason for this. Will the Minister of State explain how often these means test formulae are reviewed and updated, as any means test should surely relate to the market reality?

There is a policy in the Department of a six-month maximum backdating period for pensions, unless there is proof of extremely exceptional circumstances. For example, an individual applied for a non-contributory pension not knowing he was actually entitled to a contributory pension. He was over the income limit for the non-contributory old-age pension but no official advised him to apply for the contributory old-age pension.

After this man died his wife realised she was entitled to a widow's contributory pension and this was applied for when the exceptional circumstances involving her husband's case were outlined. The person in question was only given a payment of six months backdating, as is general policy within the Department.

It is time to review this policy and consider backdating everyday State pensions beyond the current limit of six months. If serious consider-

ation is being given to a mandatory pension regime, we can in the interim consider extending the backdating of payments for pensions that people have earned a right to.

There is a lack of information on pensions and entitlements. I distributed a booklet to every house in the city and county of Waterford last year and after doing so it quickly became readily apparent that people, particularly those over 50, did not have basic information on pensions and entitlements. For example, people around the age of 55 did not know one has to make contributions, in particular if the person is self-employed, before the age of 55 with regard to a contributory pension. They were simply oblivious to that fact. Approximately three years ago the Department issued a booklet to every house in the country. The Government should start doing that on a yearly basis because people are not informed, particularly those in that age bracket, as to their entitlements.

My next point relates to pensions of the self-employed. Self-employed people were first invited to make social insurance contributions in 1988. In 1999, the Department introduced a half-rate pension for those people who had contributed for between five and ten years. However, this was not done on a *pro rata* basis so that someone with nine years' contributions was paid the same as someone with five years' contributions. The Government needs to deal with the issue on a *pro rata* basis so that a person with, for example, nine years' contributions would get the proportional benefit of that and not a pension that only reflects five of those nine years.

My final point is a local issue, but it has some national significance. I refer to the closure of the community welfare office in Dungarvan on the grounds of health and safety. It is ironic that an office run by the HSE would be closed down on the grounds of health and safety, but that is what happened. The conditions in the office have been described as Dickensian for many years by myself and others. I have numerous parliamentary questions and letters on the matter dating back to 2001, when my father was a Deputy. For example, I have a letter from 2002 from the regional manager of the South Eastern Health Board — a man who is still in charge of the area. His letter states: "Proposals to upgrade the facilities in Dungarvan are at an advanced stage." I even met this individual last year and tried to facilitate him with office space in the town. The issue goes on and on. I even raised the matter in the Committee of Public Accounts a few years ago and was given similar empty assurances.

The straw that broke the camel's back was the plaster falling on people's heads in the office. The office was literally allowed to fall apart by the HSE. The Minister of State might ask why I am bringing it up in this debate. One of the last responses I got from this individual in the HSE, a gentleman called Dermot Halpin, stated: "The provision of community welfare services is, as you

are aware, to transfer to the Department of Social and Family Affairs and consequently the HSE is mindful of the need not to commit to long term arrangements that may not fit into that Department's future service proposals." In other words he was suggesting he had done nothing about it for the past six years and was passing it on to the Department of Social and Family Affairs. It is a hospital pass from the Minister for Health and Children, Deputy Harney, and this gentleman to the Minister for Social and Family Affairs, Deputy Cullen.

The point I would make to the Minister, Deputy Cullen, who is not here, is that Dungarvan is a good-sized town that needs an adequately located and equipped office. The hinterland is very big. I ask that the Minister investigate the matter. Somebody might ask why this is an issue of national significance. I would make the point that this is a very good example of how bad senior management in the HSE can be.

Deputy Tom Hayes: I acknowledge the opportunity to speak on the Social Welfare Bill, which is very important to us all. Deputy Deasy spoke about social welfare offices. We have examples in south Tipperary of two social welfare offices that were threatened with closure in recent years. While people were very concerned at the time, happily they remained open. Such offices form part of the infrastructure that people need. They do more than make payments. The officers can give advice, help and guidance. They know and have a link with the community. No pressure should be created to have such social welfare offices closed. If anything, their role should be expanded.

The Social Welfare Bill contains many provisions, covering a considerable budget. Some of the Government Deputies have said there was so much in it and people were so delighted that it makes me wonder if they are living in the same place that I live. I refer to the fuel allowance and the Minister of State, Deputy Hocht, will know what I am talking about. Last Sunday, I was in Dundrum for a sale of work. Among the items on sale were trailer loads of timber. I could not believe the number of people who lined up to buy those loads of timber. Some elderly people were there an hour before the sale. Each trailer load of timber was sold for €400. That was fuel for people's homes. To get €400 in one contribution is a large amount of money for pensioners. However, the fuel allowance was not increased. A few years ago, it was possible to buy a load of timber for €100 and it now costs €400. The cost of oil has increased substantially. The fuel allowance does not take into account the savage increases in fuel costs. Considering some world market issues relating to oil prices, the fuel allowance should have been increased substantially last week. People should be very concerned that it did not happen.

[Deputy Tom Hayes.]

I know that Deputy Curran will shortly speak about what he believes are great increases. However, the living alone allowance has not been increased for many years. I am concerned that most of the hardship in the country is experienced by unfortunate people living alone. The Government should seriously consider increasing the living alone allowance.

It has come to my attention in my constituency that crèches and other child care facilities that we are promoting in several areas are now required to pay rates. These crèches are badly needed by many people on social welfare and those rates will represent an additional cost and burden. The issue needs to be addressed. In one case, a small crèche catering for 30 children will need to pay more than €3,000 in rates next year.

Deputy Terence Flanagan: I welcome the opportunity to speak on the Social Welfare Bill. The rent supplement is the only housing support available to many people on low incomes. More than 60,000 people in the private rented sector depend on rent supplement. They are in a very disadvantaged position when looking for accommodation because landlords blatantly discriminate against those receiving rent supplement and will not accept them. Often this forces tenants into the worst category of accommodation. Threshold's access housing unit is carrying out a survey of landlords on their attitude to rent supplement. Preliminary findings indicate that the biggest reason landlords will not accept rent supplement is because it is paid in arrears rather than in advance, which is the norm for the rented sector. Individuals and families in receipt of rent supplement are disadvantaged because they cannot pay their deposit and first month's rent upfront. Landlords are more likely to accept tenants who can pay such moneys in advance, which means that those who rely on rent supplement are at a complete disadvantage. Landlords do not like to accept rent supplement for two other significant reasons — the insufficient level of rent supplement payments and the unacceptable delays in processing applications. The current system is not fair to landlords or tenants, both of whom should be treated fairly. Every effort should be made to assist those who face poverty. People have to wait up to six weeks to receive rent supplement payments under the current system. Some tenants are refused the supplement when their applications are eventually processed, which leaves them owing their landlords six weeks rent.

Tenants in the private rented sector are facing higher rents. The latest *daft.ie* report shows that rents increased by an average of 9% between June 2006 and July this year. The increase in Dublin alone was between 8% and 12%. According to the most recent data, the market rent per month for a one-bed apartment in Dublin 1 and Dublin 2 is €1,122, or 81% of the minimum wage and 45% of the average industrial wage. Tenants

are finding it increasingly difficult to afford rent payments. Rent caps have not changed to reflect soaring rents in Dublin, particularly in Dublin 1, Dublin 2 and Dublin 13. The current rent supplement system is insufficient because it does not respond to local rental changes or reflect the changes in the rental market.

It is accepted that the poor level of participation in the family income supplement scheme is a long-standing problem. Research undertaken by the Economic and Social Research Institute suggests that less than 33% of potentially eligible claimants receive family income supplement. Given that the supplement was introduced in 1984, it is stunning that a Minister can come to the Dáil 22 years later to tell Deputies that its take-up remains a fraction of its potential. Some 40,000 families are not receiving the supplement, even though they are entitled to €5,000 or more per annum. Many of them have to rely on dig-outs from family and friends, which should not be the case. Such persons should be made aware of their rights and entitlements. The State saves an enormous amount of money as a result of its reluctance to take a proactive approach to this matter. We need to look after the people I have mentioned. I could say much more on this matter, but I will allow my colleague to speak.

Deputy Joe McHugh: When I was at a wake last week, I met a gentleman who happened to be a Fianna Fáil supporter who said his pension represented a great increase on the pension received by his grandfather in the 1950s. Fianna Fáil supporters, including Deputies, often fail to acknowledge that increases in most social welfare payments such as fuel allowance are index-linked and subject to inflation. The Government failed to acknowledge that point during the circus that was budget day. It is natural that there will be increases in payments which are index-linked when inflation is taken into consideration.

Deputy Máire Hctor: The rate of increase is above the rate of inflation.

Deputy Joe McHugh: The Government does not account for inflation when it is considering increases in some social welfare hand-outs such as the widow's pension. Inflation is taken into consideration, however, in independent reports which recommend increases in ministerial salaries. I decided to share that anecdote with the House to assure Members that Fianna Fáil supporters in County Donegal are alive and well.

Deputy Beverley Flynn: And happy.

Deputy John Curran: And voting.

Deputy Joe McHugh: In 2006 the National Economic and Social Forum produced a report which acknowledged that there were barriers to labour market inclusivity. This is really what we

are looking at. We are not interested in the hand-out mentality. We accept that people need hand-outs at certain intervals — for example, if they are not working as they progress through their career paths. The forum's working document, *Creating a More Inclusive Labour Market*, highlighted issues such as transportation and child care. It pointed out that literacy and numeracy problems were preventing people from entering the labour market. I remind the Minister of State, Deputy Hoctor, that the report stated the poverty traps encountered by many single mothers represented one of the main barriers to labour market inclusion. The budget will not lead to the elimination of poverty traps. Does the Minister of State agree that the very good report compiled by the National Economic and Social Forum which was presented to the Taoiseach in January 2006 but is now sitting on a desk should be heeded and re-examined? Will she facilitate the synchronisation of the various Departments to try to maximise labour market inclusivity which is badly needed?

When I met one of my constituents, a good Fine Gael supporter, on Monday night, she told me that when she went to collect her Christmas bonus, she met a man at the counter who had been receiving unemployment welfare assistance for a considerable period. The woman in question who has been receiving unemployment assistance for 12 months discovered that the man she had met at the counter was getting a Christmas bonus, but she was not. Why should a woman who had paid contributions towards stamps before she left employment 12 months ago not be entitled to a Christmas bonus, when long-term welfare recipients are? I would like to voice my concerns on behalf of the woman in question.

Deputy John Curran: I would like to share time with Deputies Moynihan and Flynn.

Acting Chairman: Is that agreed? Agreed.

Deputy John Curran: I welcome the opportunity to contribute to the debate on the Social Welfare Bill 2007. I compliment the Ministers for Finance and Social and Family Affairs on the measures they have proposed in these more challenging economic times, when we are looking at an economic growth rate of approximately 3%. The social welfare budget will increase next year by almost €1 billion, to approximately €17 billion. It may have been easier not to have honoured previous commitments. I will respond to Deputy McHugh's comments about increases in the rate of inflation.

The substantial package of measures announced in the budget last week and clarified in the legislation before the House is worth approximately €17 billion, which represents a significant increase. During the general election campaign the Government gave a commitment to increase the State pension to €300 per week. The

increase of €14 per week provided for in the budget which constitutes the first step in that process will bring the contributory State pension to €223 per week. The increase of €12 per week in the non-contributory pension will bring it to €212 per week.

Deputy McHugh asked whether the increase of €14 in the State pension was in line with inflation. I will put some figures before the House in order that Deputies can judge for themselves. The State pension has increased by over 50% since 2002, from €147.30 in 2002 to €223.30 today. As the rate of inflation during that period was not close to 50%, the increase in the pension is significant. Anybody who tries to argue otherwise does not understand the manner in which we have delivered year-on-year absolute increases. It is incorrect to state the Government has not taken account of inflation in recent years.

The Government also made a strong commitment to support qualified adults. A significant increase of €27 per week has been provided for qualified adults over the age of 66 years in the budget, bringing such pensions to €200 per week, or 94% of the figure we are aiming towards. The commitment given will be honoured in the interests of equity. Those who receive qualified adult payments are mainly women who, for historic reasons, did not have an opportunity to work when this country was much different. This is a question of equity and those payments are being honoured.

It is worth noting that the household income of 42,000 pensioner couples will increase this year by approximately €41 a week, or nearly 11%. The previous speaker indicated that the increases were not inflation-proofed. I do not know what the inflation out-turn will be next year but I do not think anyone in the House would expect inflation to be anything in the order of that figure. In money terms it means a pensioner couple, of which there are 42,000, or 84,000 people, will receive in excess of €23,000, an increase of €2,200.

The respite care grant has continued to be increased and this is to be welcomed. It increased in the previous budget from €1,200 to €1,500 and again in this budget it increased to €1,700. The Government has made a commitment that this figure will hit €3,000 in the lifetime of the Government. I am glad that budget by budget this is being achieved on an incremental basis. I have no doubt this commitment will be honoured. Approximately 48,000 people are in receipt of the respite care grant and not just those in receipt of the carer's allowance but also those in receipt of domiciliary care allowance.

I note from the Finance Bill that the income disregards in respect of those in receipt of carer's allowance has also been increased, both for single people and for couples, in the case of couples to €665 a week. A couple in receipt of an annual income of €60,000 can still qualify for a reduced rate of carer's allowance.

[Deputy John Curran.]

I concur with comments made by previous speakers about family income supplement. This is a very important payment which has not had a sufficient take-up. I often wonder if this is because it is a social welfare payment. It is a payment which I actively promote in my constituency. I am astounded at the best of times at the number of people who are unaware of it. It is a significant payment for many people. Every year this issue is debated at the Committee of Public Accounts with the Department of Social and Family Affairs. I am aware the Department has tried to advertise and promote the scheme but many people who may qualify for family income supplement do not ordinarily have dealings with the Department of Social and Family Affairs because they are in employment. They are only in receipt of children's allowance and they are not familiar with the offices of the Department. I suggest a more proactive approach be adopted by Revenue rather than the scheme being solely based in the Department of Social and Family Affairs. There are tens of thousands of families who would benefit from the scheme and who are entitled to do so. The departmental officials report regularly to the Committee of Public Accounts but significant inroads are not being made and this is regrettable.

I refer to rent allowance. I do not wish to talk about the figures involved. People often say landlords do not accept rent allowance but in my constituency they do. We must be careful because the Department of Social and Family Affairs is a big player in the market and it has the potential to significantly affect prices.

I have noticed in recent times a change which may either be one of policy or a change at local level. Some time ago the majority of cheques paid for rent allowance were not made payable to the tenant but to the landlord. I have noted in the last months a number of instances where the cheques from the community welfare officer were made payable to the tenant. In some cases the tenant did not pay the landlord. This is a situation that did not exist previously and which needs to be examined as it undermines the integrity of the system if a cheque is being paid and is not being passed on. This will lead to additional problems. I concur with previous speakers that it is a difficult area. The system itself must be more clearcut.

Deputy Michael Moynihan: I welcome the opportunity to speak on the Social Welfare Bill 2007. I wish to raise a number of issues. The increases in State old age pensions have been of great benefit. These increases have been incremental over the past number of years. Many people in receipt of social welfare pensions have great regard for this payment and in the case of couples it provides a great income.

The habitual residence clause should be examined by the Government with reference to retired missionaries. These people left Ireland 40 or 50

years ago and are retiring after a lifetime of work in Africa, South America, the Philippines and other places. Provision should be made for them in the Social Welfare Bill by granting them a derogation from the habitual residency rule of two years' residence in Ireland prior to application for a State pension.

I acknowledge fewer people are now affected but when compulsory self-employed PRSI payment was introduced in 1988, a number of people contributed at the time but a number had not paid for ten years in order to qualify for a full contributory pension. In 1998 the Government conceded the need for a pro-rata pension. However a number of people had paid the ten years. A constituent of mine had paid for ten years but because of a dispute over the date of birth, the person only qualified for the *pro rata* pension. I suggest it should be considered granting a contributor seven tenths or eight tenths or whatever percentage of the contributions paid.

Since 27 September, anyone in receipt of a social welfare allowance who is providing full-time care and assistance to a family member or to anybody within the meaning of the *1 o'clock* carer's allowance scheme is entitled to an extra payment of a half-rate carer's allowance. The only people excluded from this allowance are those on jobseeker's allowance. This has been a fantastic scheme. Over the years the respite care grant has increased from €1,000 to €1,700 this year and has been of great benefit to people providing full-time care and assistance to a relative or other person in his or her own home. Those providing this care are contributing to the person being cared for but also to the State. Public representatives should always give due recognition to the people who are providing care and assistance because their dedication to their family member or to other people is second to none. The half-rate carer's allowance has been of significant benefit. Just because a person had been in receipt of an existing social welfare payment they were debarred from the payment. I have met people in my constituency office and at various functions and they have told me the payment has made a significant difference to their lives. It is right that the Government and the State should ensure older people are cared for. These are the people who worked hard in Ireland in frugal and more difficult times.

I wish to raise other issues relating to the Social Welfare Bill. It is a cheap shot for people to say single parents get everything from the State. Life can be very difficult for them. Family income supplements, FIS, are of great benefit. We must encourage people who are working for 20 hours per week to apply for FIS. Many people who have gone to political clinics or advice centres such as the Money Advice and Budgeting Service, MABS, have been informed about the family income supplement. However, not all those who are entitled to it benefit from it. We should encourage people to seek it. It is an extra pay-

ment that can be used to pay for a car, house, rent or whatever else.

The previous Government introduced free rental on mobile telephones for certain persons. An anomaly arises in regard to people with disabilities who are living at home who have a land line on which their parents pay rental. This may be due to an oversight in the introduction of various Acts and this matter should be examined.

The invalidity pension for persons who are permanently disabled is paid only to those who had paid PRSI contributions at some stage during their working life. However, people with intellectual disabilities never worked and are not entitled to this payment. The argument can be made that the disability allowance is more or less the same thing, but these people should be allowed to qualify for the invalidity pension because it provides a certain level of security. It is considered as a permanent and reckonable income for loans and otherwise. I urge that this matter would be examined.

I thank the Minister for Finance, Deputy Cowen, and the Minister for Social Welfare, Deputy Cullen, for the extra billion euro they have invested in this year's budget. Well done to them.

Deputy Beverley Flynn: I welcome the opportunity to speak on this Bill. I acknowledge the €900 million increase in social welfare payments which brings this to a very generous social welfare package. In 2008 a total of €17 billion will be spent on social welfare. Throughout the world Ireland is recognised as a country that has a very generous social welfare package for citizens who are entitled to it.

From recent debates on family income supplement, I am aware that only 40% of those who are entitled to FIS claim the payment. Deputy Curran made a good point in terms of a possible link-up with the Revenue to try to encourage people, who would not normally be in the social welfare bracket, to apply for it. Perhaps the reason the take up on FIS is so poor is due to a lack of information. I accept an advertising campaign was conducted by the Department but something else requires to be done when 60% of those who are entitled to it do not claim the payment. This is something we should work on over the next year.

I welcome the increase of €14 on the contributory pension, bringing it to €223.30, and the €12 increase per week in the non-contributory pension. I also welcome the fact the Government is working its way towards fulfilling its commitment that pensions will reach €300.

I am slightly disappointed that the Government did not fulfil its commitment to bring up the qualified adult payment to the same rate as the principal recipient's rate. I acknowledge the commitment given by the Minister on budget day on the qualified adult payment, which is significantly increased this year, that he will work towards

bringing parity in those two payments by next year. I feel very strongly about this issue. It is not justifiable that the qualified adult payment would be anything less than that of the principal recipient. I raised this matter with the then Minister for Social and Family Affairs, Deputy Brennan, last year and he did something about it. I refer to the qualified adult payment, which in 95% of cases is to the woman. In the majority of cases the principal social welfare recipient is the man and he claims for his spouse as a qualified adult.

I made the point last year to the then Minister, Deputy Brennan, that this payment should be made directly to the woman. He agreed with me and in his speech last year he mentioned that he would introduce legislation in March to enable the qualified adult payment to be made directly to, in most cases, the woman. This has not worked out in the manner I had intended. I wanted it to be acknowledged that every woman was entitled to an income in her own right. In the debate on the Social Welfare Bill 2006 the Minister stated his intention to transform the payment into what would be, in effect, a woman's pension in her own right.

The change does not apply to existing recipients of a qualified adult payment and women still do not receive the qualified adult payment directly. In the case of new applicants, if a husband ticks a box on the form stating he agrees the qualified adult portion can be paid directly to the woman, she can get the payment in her own right. That should never be the case. The point I was trying to make, which I thought was understood last year by the Minister, is that it would be accepted that the qualified adult payment would be a woman's entitlement, or indeed a man's in the small percentage of cases that relate to men, and that women would receive that payment in their own right without having to seek permission or the signature of the principal social welfare recipient.

I also seek the extension of this approach right across social welfare payments where a qualified adult payment is made. I would appreciate if the Minister would look again at this matter. Legislation was introduced last year but it has not worked out exactly as I intended. I believe it was the Minister's intention that a woman would, in effect, receive a pension in her own right. We have fallen well short of that.

I wish to refer to many other aspects of the Bill but I would be pleased if the Minister could address this one alone. I received numerous telephone calls from women on this aspect of social welfare payments. It would mean a great deal to so many women. I urge the Minister to re-examine this matter.

Deputy Jan O'Sullivan: I wish to share time with Deputy Morgan.

Acting Chairman: Is that agreed? Agreed.

Deputy Jan O’Sullivan: I welcome the opportunity to speak on the Social Welfare Bill. I agree with the points made by Deputy Flynn. I had intended to address some of those issues also, especially the need to treat all adults as individuals. I object to the use of the term “qualified adult”, even though it may be an improvement on some of the terms used in the past. This issue needs to be addressed given that there is still a difficulty with people receiving the payment in their own right without having the approval, as it were, of their spouse. I support Deputy Flynn on this matter.

The increase in payment for a qualified adult is welcome and it is not too bad for those aged over 66, but it is still a small increase for people aged under 66. We need to treat all adults as separate individuals. One adult in a household should have equal rights with the other adult in a household and should not be treated as a lesser mortal in that context.

I spoke this morning on local radio, as many of us do at various times. I referred to family income supplement and the need for people to apply for it. Members on all sides of the House stated the FIS is still not being taken up by many people who are entitled to receive it. The payment is substantial and it is worth having, especially in a low income household. We have to disseminate this information in whatever way we can. I appreciate that as public representatives we try to do this in our own way, as we are all very conscious of it. When I spoke on the radio this morning I suspected I was probably not speaking to the people who were entitled to FIS because they were out at work. We need to disseminate this information in workplaces. As others have stated, people entitled to FIS are not generally dealing with the Department in any other way and for that reason probably do not think about the Department of Social and Family Affairs as a place where they might get support. I suggest that FIS needs to be advertised more widely in work places, and particularly in places such as corner shops, factories and where people tend to be on the minimum wage or work only the 19 hours one needs to qualify for FIS, where people’s incomes are not necessarily large. The Department must continue making the effort to get the message out because many of those who see a reference to the Department assume it does not apply to them if they are at work. I am strongly of the view that it is important to get that message out because we need to provide an incentive to people who would be only a little better off by going out to work and the FIS should make a big difference to them.

While it does not relate to the Department, when it comes to medical cards and other health benefits we need to ensure that people in that income category are not losing out. All of the increased health charges and the raising of the threshold for the drugs repayment scheme, which were announced not here in the Chamber or in the budget but at a separate press conference by

the Minister for Health and Children, hit those low-income families who tend to be the ones who find it difficult to make ends meet. They do not qualify for other kinds of supports such as back to school allowance and clothing and footwear allowances, unless they qualify directly for FIS. We need to remove those disincentives wherever possible.

That brings me to rent allowance which has been touched on by a number of Members. There is a disincentive for people to go out to work because they would lose their rent allowance if they did so. Such areas need to be addressed in a more holistic, cross-departmental way than heretofore. Often lone parents, in particular, find that if they lose their rent allowance it is really not worth their while going to work.

I have just come from the briefing on the community child care subvention scheme, which also is not the responsibility of this Department, from the various child care committees around the country who argue strongly that the changes proposed will hit people who are at work and on low incomes. The scheme taking over from the equal opportunities childcare programme, which was designed to encourage women to go to work, will be focused much more on people on social welfare and may provide a disincentive to people using community child care crèches to remain in or go out to work.

I am arguing that the Ministers who deal with these Departments, which all deal with this same category of person, should tailor all of their schemes to ensure the maximum support and opportunity for those who want to go out to earn a few bob, contribute to the economy and at the same time support their families and who do not want to find themselves out of pocket by doing so.

Generally, the social welfare increases amounted to €12 per week, and €14 per week in some cases. These are fairly small increases if one is coping with the increased costs of food and fuel in particular. The telephone calls I have been receiving from people tell me that the cost of foodstuffs which make up the basic weekly household bill are constantly increasing and this increase will not make a significant difference to their household income. I am particularly concerned because every year in January I get telephone calls from people living in local authority houses stating their pension just increased by whatever sum — it will be €12 this year — and the council is taking it back by increasing the rent. It is the same argument I made about the previous issue. It is a matter of Departments working together to treat these people as individuals rather than merely ticking one box in one Department and another box in another. If one gets an increase in pension and two weeks later the rent rises, the increase is not of much use. Something needs to be done about local authorities increasing rent on the basis of increases in social welfare.

Deputy Martin Cullen: Get the councillors to oppose their estimates.

Deputy Jan O'Sullivan: The reason they do it is because they have these differential rent schemes and they are used to doing it in this way, but Government policy that would discourage local authorities from taking that money back in rent must be expressed. It happens——

Deputy Martin Cullen: I know it happens. Councillors should have a little more courage and say they will not to agree to it.

Deputy Jan O'Sullivan: The problem might be that local authorities may not have enough money.

Deputy Martin Cullen: That is no excuse. One makes choices, just as anybody in Government does.

Deputy Jan O'Sullivan: It really causes difficulty for the individual.

Like many others, I want to speak briefly about the carer's allowance. There is a large number of carers who do not receive carer's allowance because of the means test. My party has clearly and firmly stated the means test for carer's allowance should be removed. That is the only way to reach a position where the Department pays carers for their work, which is saving the State a fortune in terms of what it might cost if the person being cared for had to be institutionalised. We must keep improving the lot of carers and my position is we should remove that means test altogether.

I want to raise another issue in the time available. People who are laid off due to a shortage of available work or illness cannot claim for the first three days out of work. It is a particular problem for people who suddenly find themselves out of work with three days in which they are not entitled to any kind of social welfare payment. Resolving this would not involve much money but it would make a considerable difference for these families who suddenly find themselves with all the bills they have been used to paying out of their wages and without any money whatsoever for three days. I note the Minister has received a letter dated 15 November last from an individual in my constituency on the matter and I ask him to see if there is anything he can do about that anomaly which hurts families which suddenly no longer have an income.

I support Deputy Moynihan's point about mobile telephones. These telephones have become so common that the Department should be able to transfer to them a person's right to fixed charges for land-line telephones.

Deputy Arthur Morgan: I welcome the opportunity to address the Social Welfare Bill and thank the Labour Party for sharing time.

Every year in early December there is quite a fuss over the budget. As every week there is a budgetary announcement of some kind or an increase through the various stealth charges, it is ironic that there is such a big fuss over the December budget.

Somebody once said that a society can be judged by how it treats its weakest. I accept that it can be difficult for a government, in a period of slowing economic growth, to budget a state's finances but it is at such times that a government's commitment to its most vulnerable is tested. Sadly, last week this Government was found wanting in that regard.

While we debate the Social Welfare Bill, which allows the most modest increases for our least well off, there are some figures that we must keep in mind. There are 290,000 people living in consistent poverty in this State — it is a shameful figure — many of whom are children. There are 770,000 people at risk of poverty, many of whom also are children. Last week this Government had the opportunity to take a decisive step towards meeting the national target of reducing consistent poverty to between 2% and 4% by 2012, and to eliminating it completely by 2016. It did not take the opportunity.

Our social welfare system is so wrought with complexities and anomalies that the initial approach to last week's budget should have involved a complete overhaul of the system as it stands. The Minister should have, upon entering new office, examined the system and realised a new criteria for benchmarking needs to be set so welfare rates can reflect current living expenses in the State. He should have recognised that the system needs to be simplified and should have abandoned the 12-page application forms, such as the one for family income supplement. Automatic flagging systems should be put in place, perhaps through the taxation system.

Alarm bells should ring when the Department's staff says it does not understand some of the rules and regulations. The Minister should have identified the welfare traps the system creates when it fails to allow for smooth transition from welfare to work by, for example, not raising income thresholds for rent allowance supplement, which allows an individual to earn very little before he or she loses his or her rent supplement and, potentially, his or her home. He should have realised that "qualified adult status" is both hugely underpaid and discriminatory. He should also have learnt by now that our activation system needs to be overhauled. Paying job seekers a benefit that reflects nothing of what they earned before losing their jobs, then shunting them on to a FÁS course after three months, does not make an "activation" system.

The new Minister, who could have taken the opportunity to do these things and relay them to his colleague in the Department of Finance, along with a list of required resources, did none of this — a complete waste of an opportunity. The allo-

[Deputy Arthur Morgan.]

cation to the Department of Social and Family Affairs has been distributed with little or no imagination, no foresight and no tangible results — just €10 or €12 of an increase. The record of the Government is to make grand gestures and throw out figures, while quietly and sneakily taking away increases with the other hand through stealth taxes and the like.

Last week, we were again forced to witness the Minister for Finance, Deputy Brian Cowen, pretend to be Santa Claus, handing goodies out of his budget bag. Those of us who know how hard it is to survive on welfare were crestfallen when we heard the minimal increases. To add further to our disappointment, we heard of increases that will directly affect groups like the working poor, such as vehicle tax, accident and emergency and hospital stay-over increases. We can add to these the significant VAT our citizens pay and the ability of local authorities to set refuse charges. Any respite that should have been offered against these charges in the form of the Social Welfare Bill will mean nothing now to those citizens. There is only an increase of €12 per week for people out of work, €14 for pensioners and not a cent increase in the living alone or the fuel allowance. FIS income limits were raised by only €10. The majority of my colleagues across the Chamber would spend more than those amounts on a starter before lunch.

The Bill fails to ease the burden of the working poor. Almost a third of all households at risk of poverty are headed by a person with a job. The minimum increase in the FIS income threshold is a prime example of how little concern the Government holds for this group. These are the people we should target for the medical card. Instead, we had no increase in the medical card threshold and the threshold remains lower than the smallest social welfare payment. How does the Minister explain that?

The Bill fails to improve the living standards of pensioners. The Government lauds itself on the fact that it is on track to increase the pension to €300 by 2012. With the average industrial wage currently between €570 and €670 a week, how much value does the Government think €300 will hold in 2012? Pensions should have been increased by at least €20 this year.

The Bill does nothing for children. The early child care supplement does not solve the child care problem, even after the Minister flings another €100 a year at it. The failure to increase maternity leave and to introduce paid paternity leave shows how little the Government is committed to solving the child care problem. The back to school allowance does not reflect the true cost for families sending their children into our not so free education system, where school books alone can cost anything up to €500. The €2 million extra for the school meals programme will hardly do enough to ensure a State-wide roll-out

of school meals. Children will continue to go to school hungry.

There was nothing new in the budget. There was no inspirational thinking and nothing along the lines of Sinn Féin's budget proposals, which called for the Government to overhaul the system to allow for better welfare to work measures and to ensure work is profitable for those on the lowest wages. There were no fresh ideas, like introducing a dietary and clothing allowance for pregnant women or allowing asylum seekers to take part in some form of paid work while they await news from our lengthy application procedures. Instead, the budget leaves them struggling on a direct provision of €19.10 a week.

The Government must get over the notion that social welfare is like a charity and that it, because it is holding the purse strings, must dole out resources like alms to the poor. Our society decided long ago that it wanted a welfare system. The system is not meant as a long-term solution for everybody, though there are some who will always be dependent on the State, but as a means to survive until circumstances improve. The Government is charged with distributing our resources fairly within that system. Every cent taken into the Exchequer belongs to the public. When a marginalised group such as children, the elderly or the disabled say they are struggling to survive, I demand, as a citizen, that they are given the welfare they need. They should not have to come cap in hand to either the Minister for Finance or the Minister for Social and Family Affairs to plead for increases.

Sinn Féin has submitted amendments to this Bill that call on the Minister to review a number of payments and the method by which they are paid. We will support the Bill, on the basis that any increase in welfare must be welcomed, but we will do so stating clearly that we want the Minister to get on with the job he is paid handsomely to do and make our social welfare system work. He must not let next year's budget be another in a long list of paltry, insulting hand-outs.

Deputy Barry Andrews: I wish to share time with Deputies Cyprian Brady and Chris Andrews.

Acting Chairman: Is that agreed? Agreed.

Deputy Barry Andrews: I would be amazed if any of the Opposition ever said anything nice about the Government or if any of them welcomed the great increases the Minister for Social and Family Affairs has achieved in his Department, on which I congratulate him. If the Opposition was honest, I am sure there are elements of the budget, if not whole sections of it, that it would love to have supervised. If it was honest it would concede that and that in the past ten years we have had unbelievable increases in the provisions under the Department of Social and

Family Affairs, up to €12 billion, if I am not mistaken. In 1997 it was below €5 billion.

Deputy Martin Cullen: It is up to €17 billion.

Deputy Barry Andrews: That is almost unbelievable. This is in a context where unemployment fell from 10% to approximately 4% now. These are revolutionary changes. It is not charity or generosity, but part of what Fianna Fáil believes in. Anybody who has independently analysed the budget, has admitted that Fianna Fáil has always been loyal and committed to providing proper social welfare in a fair manner.

The most encouraging aspect of the budget and of what the Minister had to say concerns the qualified adult allowance, about which everyone is excited. I would be amazed if members of the Opposition were not also encouraged by this development whereby qualified adults will be recipients in their own right. We have been heading in that direction for some time, not only in the tax code which has moved to individualisation, but in the fact that savings are assessed separately and that qualified adults can claim separately, albeit in restricted circumstances, as described by Deputy Beverley Flynn earlier. This was remarked on during the general election campaign.

Debate adjourned.

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

Ceisteanna — Questions (Resumed).

Priority Questions.

Defence Forces Reserve.

44. **Deputy Jimmy Deenihan** asked the Minister for Defence the steps that have been taken to implement the recommendation of the Reserve Defence Force Review Implementation Board report, which was accepted by the Government, that the current members of the First Line Reserve of officers-men be reactivated and become involved in training of the RDF and that suitable members on discharge from the Permanent Defence Forces should be encouraged to enlist with the FLR; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34476/07]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Willie O'Dea): The Reserve Defence Force review implementation plan provides for a phased approach to enhancing the capabilities of the Reserve Defence Force, RDF, over the period to the end of 2009. The introduction of new organisational structures, the development of new training syllabi and improvements in equipment and clothing have been successfully delivered as part of phase

1 of the plan. Phase 2 of the implementation plan is currently being carried out and a pilot scheme for the integrated Army Reserve has been initiated. A total of 180 personnel have completed the required training.

In line with the timeframe of the implementation plan, recommendations with respect to the First Line Reserve, FLR, are to be carried out during phase 2. The implementation group is currently working on these recommendations and I am looking forward to reviewing them in due course. Development of the FLR is also included in the modernisation agenda agreed with the Defence Forces representative associations in the context of Towards 2016 and will be advanced accordingly. The experience and knowledge of former Permanent Defence Force personnel of the FLR is extremely valuable and my primary objective is to ensure that this resource is utilised for the maximum benefit of the Defence Forces.

Deputy Jimmy Deenihan: I am sure the Minister is aware that since the reform of the Defence Forces back in the early 1990s a large number of officers have retired and gone into alternative employment. This vast resource is now available to the Minister and with a bit of encouragement and incentive they could become part of the FLR. It was recently reported that there has been an alarming fall-off in the number of people joining the RDF. This was recently the subject of a question by Deputy O'Shea. Former officers could play an important role in revitalising the RDF because of their expertise, skill and training, which in many cases cost the country a lot. How will the Minister encourage these people to come back and join the FLR?

Would the Minister agree that since the reform of the Defence Forces there have not been as many Permanent Defence Force personnel available for training the Reserve Defence Force? They are just not available because they have so many duties, including those overseas. The group of people referred to in the question could fulfil that role and may even be more suitable, in the integrated Defence Forces, for travel abroad because they have previous experience of being abroad.

Deputy Willie O'Dea: I will deal shortly with the question on the fall-off in numbers joining the RDF. To answer Deputy Deenihan's initial point, I agree there is a vast reservoir of potential talent that should be utilised. This was the view of the Reserve Defence Force Review Implementation Board. The Deputy will recall that the implementation plan for the RDF was to be delivered in two phases. Phase 1, which is all but complete, involves reorganisation and the provision of better training, clothing and equipment, and represents the start of the development of an integrated element in the RDF. We have now moved on to phase 2. We have specific recommendations from the implementation group that will be

[Deputy Willie O'Dea.]

carried out. We are also awaiting comment from the military authorities on the recommendations with regard to the FLR.

However, my view and that of the implementation group, which I know we share with Deputy Deenihan, is that the FLR is a reservoir of talent and a valuable resource, although it has been allowed to fall into disuse since the mid-1980s. It only numbers about 375 at the moment because people are not being chased up, as the Deputy rightly pointed out. The FLR should be used and it has an important role to play in the integration programme we have planned for the RDF proper.

Deputy Deenihan: Will the Minister agree that this group could have a vital role to play in attracting more people back to the RDF? Some of the reasons for the fall-off in numbers include organisational difficulties and the question of the presence of professionals at all times at training camps and other exercises. The importance of attracting this reservoir of talent, as we have both described it, back into the Defence Forces is all the more important in that sense.

Deputy Willie O'Dea: I agree that the FLR has a vital role to play in attracting people back into the RDF. That is the view of the implementation board. This is one of the uses to which it will be put in our programme. I hope to expand on this in later questions.

Overseas Missions.

45. **Deputy Brian O'Shea** asked the Minister for Defence the position in regard to the proposed deployment of Irish troops to Chad; if a new date for the operation has been set; if the issue of air support for the operation has been dealt with; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34478/07]

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. Dáil Éireann approved the necessary enabling motion on 28 November 2007.

It was initially expected that a Defence Forces initial entry force, comprising an advance party of approximately 50 personnel of the Army Ranger Wing and support elements, would deploy to the mission later this month. The main contingent, comprising some 400 personnel, which is currently undergoing selection and concentration prior to detailed mission-specific training, was expected to deploy in February or March 2008. However, the deployment of the initial entry force has been deferred until the new year as vital enabling elements such as helicopters, tactical aircraft and medical support associated with the launch of this operation are not yet in place. This deferral may — I emphasise the word “may” —

have a knock-on effect on the deployment of the main body of the force.

I assure the House that there is no question of the Defence Forces deploying in theatre without the required enablers being in place. The shortfalls in vital key enablers for the mission are being actively examined and addressed by the operation commander in consultation with the European Union Military Committee. As I indicated to the House on 28 November 2007, I expressed my concerns about these shortfalls at a recent meeting of EU defence Ministers in Brussels. I urged my ministerial colleagues to consider the shortfalls and to actively support the mission, ensuring that it is adequately resourced and capable of fulfilling its mandate.

The current situation demands that all options should be explored in an effort to overcome the capability shortfalls for this mission. We need to do this expeditiously in order to reinforce the credibility of the ESDP as an EU instrument. To this end, I wrote to my EU ministerial colleagues last week appealing to them to consider constructively how they might be able to contribute to the successful launch and operation of this mission without further delay. The European Union has an opportunity to make a real and substantive contribution in Chad. If anything, the recent failure of the ceasefire and increase in hostilities points to the need for the international community, particularly the EU, to act to stabilise the situation and ensure vital humanitarian support for those on the ground.

Deputy Brian O'Shea: Could the Minister tell us whether the other EU defence Ministers are responding to his call to play their part in providing the necessary support? I know the Minister only wrote to them last week, but has there been any response yet? How does the Minister view the reported declaration by rebel forces in Chad that a state of war will exist against foreign soldiers? Is there a real prospect that the 400 members of the Defence Forces may not be sent as peacekeepers to Chad? Is the danger from militias and bandits worsening? Has the Minister had any recent reports from the representative of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees?

Deputy Willie O'Dea: To answer the Deputy's last question first, I do not recall receiving anything from the UN High Commissioner for Refugees. Something may have come to my Department but I certainly have not seen it personally. The recent declaration by the rebel forces is obviously a cause for worry. That cannot be gainsaid. However, this is not the first time that one or other of the militias there have declared that they would behave in a hostile way towards any foreign troops on Chadian soil. This is because they think the foreign troops are coming in to aid the French, who were previously the colonial masters of Chad and still have a substantial

involvement there. However, we have been emphasizing that this is a UN-mandated EU humanitarian mission. The fact that the French, because of their interest in and knowledge of the area, are the main contributors to the mission is neither here nor there. We are going in to perform humanitarian tasks, protect refugees and save lives. We have factored in all these elements, including the possible attitudes of the militias, in our threat assessment. Having done so, the advice available to me is that we are confident the troops are sufficiently trained, prepared and equipped to meet the mission's substantial challenges.

On Deputy O'Shea's first question, the answer is, happily, yes. Other EU Ministers are responding and there is movement. Without being too specific, one country that I do not wish to name because it has not gone through the internal process yet has offered the medical supplies required. A number of others are discussing providing funding to assist yet other countries to supply necessary logistical support, including aircraft etc. It is possible that a new force generation conference will be arranged for next Wednesday. If so, it is a sign that we are on the verge of a breakthrough.

Deputy Brian O'Shea: Regarding air backup, particularly in terms of the number of helicopters required by MINURCAT, does the Minister agree with the number of 20 arrived at by the French? Is he confident that something like that will emerge from the European Council of Defence Ministers?

Deputy Willie O'Dea: I do not want to get into numbers. In the Abéché area where the Irish troops will likely be based, we would need at least three med-evac helicopters and one fixed wing med-evac aircraft. More will be needed in other parts of Chad. We are making progress, the signs are hopeful and the operation commander, an Irish general — Lieutenant General Pat Nash — will not deploy the force until he and the EU Military Committee are satisfied beyond any shadow of a doubt that sufficient air support and other logistical supports are in place.

46. **Deputy Jimmy Deenihan** asked the Minister for Defence the projected cost of transporting all Irish troops and their equipment, personal and otherwise, to and from Chad over the duration of the participation of the Defence Forces in the forthcoming EU mission there; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34559/07]

Deputy Willie O'Dea: The proposed deployment of a Defence Forces contingent to the UN mandated EU operation in the Republic of Chad and the Central African Republic will be the most expensive operation on which the Defence Forces have ever been deployed.

As the House will be aware, Chad is landlocked and nearly 2,000 km from the nearest port facility. There are few if any roads or infrastructure over which to transport personnel or equipment. It is essential that the contingent be completely self-contained and capable of undertaking its operations without depending on the availability of immediate resupply or reinforcement.

Due to the remote location of the mission's area of operations, deployment and resupply of the contingent will mainly be by air transport and, therefore, extremely expensive. It is estimated the cost to the Defence Vote arising from the Defence Forces' participation in this mission for 12 months will amount to approximately €57 million, including Ireland's €1.3 million contribution to common costs. Provision to meet the additional costs of the operation has been made in the Defence Vote in the Estimates for 2008. Preliminary estimates indicate that the cost of transportation of Defence Forces personnel and equipment to the mission area, including resupply and rotation flights, will be in the region of €20 million.

I appreciate that participating in this mission will present many challenges for the men and women of the Defence Forces. However, the Government is committed to ensuring that all of the necessary resources are provided. While the expenses associated with the mission are substantial, it will be undertaking a vital task in providing basic security for more than 400,000 refugees, many fleeing the Darfur crisis.

Deputy Jimmy Deenihan: A figure of €20 million justifies the call I made to the Minister for Ireland to have its own transport capability. The figure of approximately €50 million has been mentioned in respect of two smaller aircraft with the capacity to transport people to and from Chad.

Last year, the Defence Forces acquired six new helicopters built to military spec. Why are they not being taken to Chad? They are supposed to be used by the military for military operations. Why are we leaving our people exposed in Chad if we have these at home? What are they being used for?

Deputy Willie O'Dea: The cost of the type of aircraft necessary to transfer troops and equipment like Mowags to a destination such as Chad is in the order of €75 million. I am also told that the equipment is expensive to maintain and use.

I realise that €20 million for transportation — I can give the Deputy a breakdown — is a great deal of money. This is the most expensive mission in which we have engaged and never before have we spent €20 million to transport troops as a result of a UN mandate. The location of Chad causes particularly difficulties in this regard.

Concerning acquiring such an aircraft, the opinion of the Department of Defence and the military is that the amount of use to which it

[Deputy Willie O'Dea.]

would be put would not justify the outlay or ongoing expense. Deputy Deenihan will be aware that the Government is committed to producing another White Paper on defence to cover the ten year period following 2010. It will propose a cost benefit analysis of acquiring such an aircraft.

Regarding Deputy Deenihan's comments on our helicopters and the troops being exposed in Chad, I have lost count of how many times I have stated that there is no question of our troops being exposed to unnecessary danger.

Deputy Jimmy Deenihan: What about sending our helicopters out there?

Deputy Willie O'Dea: I have told the House again and again that the force commander and the EU Military Committee will not deploy the force, including Irish troops, until they are fully satisfied——

Deputy Jimmy Deenihan: That is acceptable.

Deputy Willie O'Dea: ——beyond a shadow of a doubt that all necessary logistical supports are in place.

Deputy Jimmy Deenihan: What about sending our helicopters?

Deputy Willie O'Dea: We cannot send our helicopters because they do not have the range. It is a vast country that contains the Sahara Desert and is as large as France, Spain and Germany put together, if not larger. Our helicopters do not have the range to do the job of air transport in such a huge interior.

Deputy Jimmy Deenihan: May I ask a brief supplementary question?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The time for this question has expired. The Deputy may ask a brief supplementary question.

Deputy Jimmy Deenihan: It will be short. When not on military missions, could the aeroplanes not be used in the overseas aid programme, which is worth nearly €1 billion? We are spending a large amount of money to transport that aid around the world. Is there not a case for both uses?

Deputy Willie O'Dea: Deputy Deenihan asked a question that I forgot to answer, namely, for what are the helicopters used. They are used for training purposes, search and rescue missions, as Garda backup and as Navy backup in fisheries protection. Regarding their use for foreign aid, that is certainly something that——

Deputy Jimmy Deenihan: I am discussing going forward.

Deputy Willie O'Dea: I appreciate that. It is worth considering and I will discuss it with my colleague, the Minister for Foreign Affairs.

Defence Forces Reserve.

47. **Deputy Brian O'Shea** asked the Minister for Defence his views on the reported resignation of almost 5,000 members from the Army Reserve during the past four years; the current membership of the Reserve and its establishment level; the steps he proposes to take to stem the flow of members from the Reserve and to replace those who have left; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34479/07]

Deputy Willie O'Dea: The White Paper on Defence 2000 outlines the blueprint for the Reserve Defence Force, RDF. The Reserve Defence Force review implementation plan provides for the phased enhancement of Reserve capabilities over the period to the end of 2009.

The plan provided for a non-integrated Army Reserve with an establishment of 9,292 personnel and a Naval Service Reserve with an establishment of 400 personnel, and these revised organisational structures came into effect in October 2005. As of 31 October 2007, there are 8,939 effective personnel, comprising 8,598 in the Army Reserve and 341 in the Naval Service Reserve. In addition, the plan provides for the development of an integrated Army Reserve. In accordance with the implementation plan, a pilot scheme has been initiated in 2007 and 180 personnel have completed the required training.

It should be noted that, as part of the implementation process, a more rigorous approach is now being taken to removing the names of non-effective personnel from unit rolls. This accounts for part of the fall in numbers. It is widely accepted that the retention of volunteers, in today's world, is increasingly difficult. I do not believe this is specific to the Defence Force Reserve. It is well known that many organisations have experienced difficulties in retaining volunteers. The challenge is to ensure that the Reserve remains an attractive and challenging option for members while ensuring that the appropriate capabilities are developed.

The many changes that have been introduced on foot of the Reserve Defence Force review implementation plan are addressing some of those key issues. Improvements in clothing, equipment and quantity and quality of training have been delivered. These factors were identified as being important issues for members of the Reserve, as well as being necessary to improve the overall capability of the Reserve.

Additional Information not given on the floor of the House.

The piloting of the integrated element of the Reserve is also providing the opportunity for those members of the Reserve who wish to avail

of the increased training opportunities that this provides.

In recognition of this increased commitment by members of the Army Reserve and Naval Service Reserve, I have brought forward proposals to the Minister for Finance for a significant increase in the gratuity that is paid to members of the Reserve who complete specified voluntary training. The outstanding elements of the implementation plan will be addressed over the period to the end of 2009.

Deputy Brian O'Shea: The Minister will agree that when 40%, over 5,000 members, of a force disappear over a four year period it is a serious matter, although I accept the point that some of those would be non-effective personnel. What effort has been made to ascertain the reason people left? Was a questionnaire provided, for example, either on a straightforward or confidential basis to ascertain why people left? If that has not been done, will the Minister take up the matter with the Defence Forces? That would be a worthwhile exercise because if the Minister does not know the reason people left, it is difficult to rectify the deficiencies in the current system.

Deputy Willie O'Dea: I would not agree with Deputy O'Shea that there has been a fall-off of 40% in strict numbers terms. I have some figures in that regard. It may be 40% but the recent emphasis on taking non-active people, those who do not turn up for training on a regular basis, off the rolls has played a major part. Efforts were made to find out the reason people left. The Reserve Defence Force Implementation Group did a detailed survey on the reason people left and it was the results of that survey that informed the plan it has put forward. Some of the reasons it found were insufficiency of training, the financial rewards and alternative activities for people to do. It also found that the way the process was structured and organised in different locations throughout the country was not done to best effect. There is a detailed report on that which I can supply to Deputy O'Shea should he so wish. As a result of that investigation the group has made those recommendations. They are to be developed in two phases. We have substantially delivered on the first phase and we are now moving on to the second phase.

Deputy Brian O'Shea: In the period in question up to September of this year I calculate that 8.7% of officers, 17.9% of NCOs and 43.6% of privates have left. That is a matter of concern. Does the Minister know of any specific reason officers, for example, would have left? Are there any area specific proposals in this regard? In other words, are we simply embarking on a "one size fits all approach" or are there specific proposals for constituencies like mine which does not have a permanent Army presence similar to the

one in the Minister's constituency and in a number of other constituencies?

Deputy Willie O'Dea: It is not a case of taking a "one size fits all" approach. The geography is important, as I pointed out. The Deputy will find that in the report and also in the recommendations.

On the numbers, the target in the White Paper between the integrated element of the Reserve and the ordinary element is approximately 11,800. The standing amount was approximately 8,939 on 31 October, almost 9,000, and therefore we are 2,500 to 4,000 short. That is a challenge we must meet in an environment where people have increasing demands on their time.

Defence Forces Training.

48. **Deputy Jimmy Deenihan** asked the Minister for Defence his views on a role for the Defence Forces in establishing standards or benchmarks for fitness levels for people of various ages including primary and secondary schools; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34560/07]

Deputy Willie O'Dea: The role of the Defence Forces is laid out in the White Paper on Defence. It commits the Defence Forces to being actively involved in providing a broad range of services at home and challenging deployments overseas.

I have previously outlined the position on the forthcoming mission to Chad and the House will be familiar with the other overseas missions with which the Defence Forces are deployed. In addition, the Defence Forces have ongoing operational commitments at home in accordance with the roles set out in the White Paper. Some examples include fishery protection, cash escorts, prisoner escorts, guarding public installations, etc. In order to sustain the level of operational deployments the Defence Forces are undertaking, the Defence Forces must continuously undertake appropriate training.

Fitness is an integral part of overall Defence Forces training, with the objective of ensuring that personnel have appropriate fitness levels to perform the challenging tasks they are expected to perform. The personnel of the Defence Forces are excellent role models in that regard and I appreciate Deputy Deenihan's recognition of that fact.

Enhancing the health and fitness standards of military personnel formed one of the cornerstones of the modernisation process in the Defence Forces. There has been a major effort in implementing appropriate regimes of physical training. However, the Defence Forces do not have the mandate or resources to tackle this issue for the population as a whole. Accordingly, there are no plans for the Defence Forces to take on a role with regard to the fitness levels of school children.

[Deputy Willie O'Dea.]

The health of the general population is a matter for my colleague, the Minister for Health and Children, and provisions with respect to school curricula are a matter for my colleague, the Minister for Education and Science.

Deputy Jimmy Deenihan: Since the Defence Forces set their own levels of fitness in the 1980s and refined them in the 1990s, the fitness levels of our Defence Forces members have increased considerably. One can see that in those escorting cash transits, for example, and when members of the Defence Forces are in public. Perhaps I am being misunderstood to some extent but I suggest the Defence Forces could set the levels. I am not asking that they should be involved in visiting schools or the general population but they could set the levels of fitness attainment as they have done with their own personnel. That is done in West Point, in the United States. Universities throughout America look to West Point for the desired levels of fitness for particular age groups. There is nothing like that in primary and post-primary schools here where we now have a major obesity problem, with one in five children under 12 obese or overweight. There is a similar problem in the adult population.

There is a need for someone to set the standards because the Minister for Education and Science has failed. There is no great interest apart from a number of small initiatives from the Department of Health and Children. No one is taking responsibility for the general fitness of the population or even issuing guidelines that are credible and the Army could have a role to play in this regard. The Army could allow the public access to their facilities throughout the country. For example, the new gymnasium in the Curragh cost €6 million but it lies idle when the military are not using it. That facility could be used. Before the last election, the Minister promised to provide a new state-of-the-art gymnasium-sports hall in Limerick. I suggest that the schools in South Hill, Moyross and elsewhere should be allowed use that facility when it is built.

Deputy Willie O'Dea: Perhaps I did misunderstand Deputy Deenihan's statement issued over the weekend.

Deputy Jimmy Deenihan: I did not issue any statement.

Deputy Willie O'Dea: I read a statement in the paper.

Deputy Jimmy Deenihan: I was coming to that. That is the next question.

Deputy Willie O'Dea: I assumed you issued it as it was in your name.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Will the Minister address his remarks through the Chair?

Deputy Jimmy Deenihan: I did not issue any statement. Somebody was reading my mind.

Deputy Willie O'Dea: I am sorry somebody is issuing Deputy Deenihan's statements and putting his name to them.

Deputy Jimmy Deenihan: No. There was no statement issued about anything.

Deputy Willie O'Dea: If it does not involve the Army going out to schools, I am relieved to hear that because we have approximately 25 fitness instructors in the Army and there are 4,000 schools in the country.

Deputy Jimmy Deenihan: There are 300 personnel—

Deputy Willie O'Dea: I am giving the Deputy the official figures. There are 25 full-time and 90 part-time instructors.

Deputy Jimmy Deenihan: There are 300 qualified—

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Allow the Minister reply.

Deputy Willie O'Dea: There are not 300 qualified. The figures are 25 and 90; those are the levels.

As regards setting the standards, if the Minister for Education and Science, who has responsibility in this area, wants to use the physical standards set by the Army as the standards by which physical education is to be taught in schools, I have no problem with that. They can have access to what we have got; there is no difficulty in that regard.

Regarding access to public facilities, such as gyms etc., Deputy Deenihan can be assured that when we build the new gymnasium in Limerick,

3 o'clock I will ensure people from those areas have access to it. It is a matter for the military commander in each individual area. I will have a word with my people in the Curragh about use by the general public.

Deputy Jimmy Deenihan: The other element of defence force training is posture development. I have an interest in this from my days of teaching physical education. The Defence Forces have the best expertise to encourage posture correction and development. We have a major problem with posture in schools because young pupils are crouching over their desks or slouching in chairs. The principles used by the Defence Forces in posture development could play an important role in tackling this.

Deputy Willie O'Dea: If the Department of Education and Science wishes to take any initiative in that regard, we will co-operate in every way.

Other Questions.

Defence Forces Recruitment.

49. **Deputy Brian O'Shea** asked the Minister for Defence if his attention has been drawn to claims made at the recent RACO conference that the military medical system is in a state of virtual collapse; the number of qualified medical doctors serving with the Defence Forces; the establishment level for the medical corps; the steps being taken to recruit additional medical personnel; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34147/07]

55. **Deputy Noel J. Coonan** asked the Minister for Defence if a report on the revised structure for the delivery of medical services for the Defence Forces has been completed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34437/07]

Deputy Willie O'Dea: I propose to take Questions Nos. 49 and 55 together.

As part of the modernisation agenda agreed under Sustaining Progress, a review of the provision of medical services in the Defence Forces has been ongoing. This review, involving the representative associations, has included the level of service to be provided to members of the Defence Forces and the resources required for the delivery of that service.

The review, carried forward into the modernisation agenda agreed under Towards 2016, has already delivered an agreed medical services patients' charter. Work on developing a revised structure for the delivery of medical services for the Defence Forces is ongoing.

The key issue is the acknowledged shortage of medical officers-doctors in the medical corps. The establishment for doctors provided for in the new organisation of the Defence Forces, introduced on foot of the White Paper on Defence, is 47. However, the current strength of medical officers serving in the Defence Forces is 22. There has been recruitment of medical officers each year but the number attracted to work in Defence Forces has just served to address natural wastage.

The problems with recruitment of medical officers into the Defence Forces have endured for some time, despite the concerted efforts of the Department and the Defence Forces to address the root causes. The pay and allowances of doctors and dentists in the Defence Forces were recently increased substantially, in consultation with the Minister for Finance. This linked their pay to public health doctors and dentists. In addition, the Defence Forces have recently undertaken an intensive recruitment campaign. The results of both of these initiatives, however, have been disappointing. Civilian general practitioners are regularly engaged to provide primary care where medical officers are not available.

The development of the capacity of the medical corps also forms part of the programme for Government. I am committed to providing a medical service to meet the needs of the Defence Forces both at home and abroad. I am reviewing progress of the ongoing structural review and considering concrete steps to ensure our commitments in this regard.

Deputy Brian O'Shea: I note the Defence Forces have lost a doctor since November as the House was informed last month that the strength of the medical corps was 23.

What is the Minister's view on comments by RACO and its general secretary, Colonel Brian O'Keeffe, that the Department of Defence needs to think outside the box and introduce creative thinking on this matter? RACO also proposed annual check-ups of military personnel should be contracted outside the medical corps.

I am concerned with the drop in medical corps numbers when soon six doctors will be required to accompany the peacekeeping mission to Chad. RACO also gave a startling figure that only one Irish doctor has been recruited in the past five years.

Deputy Willie O'Dea: No member of the Defence Forces will go out without medical treatment. That we do not have a full complement in the medical corps means expertise from outside the Defence Forces must be hired, which is done.

There are compelling reasons for the difficulties in recruitment to the medical corps. First, it is not the ideal career opportunity for a doctor as they may not get to widen their medical expertise. One complaint made concerned pay which has been increased substantially by kind permission of the Department of Finance.

The Army is not unique in this regard. Other armies have informed me they have great difficulty in filling their medical corps complements. I agree with Colonel Brian O'Keeffe that we must think outside the box. We are considering engaging consultants to give ideas on progressing the matter.

In the United Kingdom, the army medical corps and the NHS have partially integrated. Specific wards in several hospitals are set aside where army doctors treat military personnel and general patients, allowing them to widen their range of expertise. I am not suggesting this will be the model to follow but such arrangements are being examined.

Doctors in the Army, except when they are abroad, will treat healthy and fit young people, with a small range of ailments. It is known as occupational medicine. We are examining ways of attracting doctors to give them extra skills and qualifications for their time spent in the Army.

Deputy Jimmy Deenihan: Last week the Minister said the complement of the medical corps stood at 21, so it has gone up one this week.

Deputy Willie O'Dea: It is a moveable feast.

Deputy Jimmy Deenihan: Of the 22 doctors, what is the breakdown between native Irish and non-national doctors?

The Minister accepts incentives must be given. The greatest incentive would be to provide child care facilities to young doctors. Up to 3,000 military personnel are based in the Curragh and, with decentralisation, another 500 will be located there. However, it has no crèche facility. That is not an incentive to a young married person to join the Defence Forces.

Deputy Willie O'Dea: With all due respect, there will not be a flood of doctors into the Army if a crèche is provided in the Curragh.

Deputy Jimmy Deenihan: It is a required facility. It has been ongoing problem.

Deputy Willie O'Dea: I do not want to be facetious but it is a deeper problem than that.

Deputy Jimmy Deenihan: The Minister is avoiding it.

Deputy Willie O'Dea: I am not avoiding it but it is a deeper problem. It is a problem that has occurred under successive Governments, including that of the Deputy's party, if I can think back long enough to remember when it was last in power.

Deputy Jimmy Deenihan: The Minister is getting narky. This is Deputy Willie O'Dea at his best.

Deputy Willie O'Dea: The problem in attracting personnel to the medical corps is not unique to Ireland. We are working on the problem and we will do our utmost to attract more doctors into the Army. While there is nothing wrong with private medical practitioners, we do not want to rely on them.

Deputy Brian O'Shea: The numbers are moving between 21, 22 and 23. RACO's figures last month were between 18 and 20. Does the Minister stand over his figure of 22 doctors?

A mechanism often used by State services when short of professionals is to provide university scholarships to attract applicants. An applicant, when qualified, would then give a specific length of service to the State service sponsor. Such a scheme would not require people to contract for life to the Army. With such a contractual arrangement, a certain number of doctors will come on-stream in the Army on an ongoing basis.

Deputy Willie O'Dea: I can only stand over the number written. My officials advise me that the present complement is 22. Members of the Army can apply to go to university and enter into their own arrangements to do so. The Deputy's suggestion of attracting individuals who want to study

medicine might be a good one and we will put it into the mix.

In response to Deputy Deenihan, I think the figures are 14 national and eight non-national. I will confirm these figures and let the Deputy know.

Deputy Jimmy Deenihan: I wish to ask a final supplementary question. I am disappointed that the Minister trivialised the crèche issue.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: That is not a supplementary question.

Deputy Jimmy Deenihan: This is an ongoing problem. A committee is sitting to discuss the provision of a crèche at the Curragh and elsewhere. Can the Minister give us any assurance that the committee will be asked to report as soon as possible? If so, will he provide a crèche? There is one in the Oireachtas. I do not know how much it is used but it is available for us in the Houses. Surely there should be one at the Curragh if the Minister wants to provide an incentive, among the many he will need to provide, to attract people into the military.

Deputy Willie O'Dea: I will find out what is happening about the crèche at the Curragh. The increase in the Defence Forces Vote this year was 7%, probably its highest increase in the past 25 years. We are getting a lot of money and spending it to best effect.

Deputy Jimmy Deenihan: It is still under 1% of GDP which it was in our time.

Deputy Willie O'Dea: GDP was very small in the Deputy's time.

Deputy Jimmy Deenihan: It is getting smaller.

Departmental Expenditure.

50. **Deputy Joan Burton** asked the Minister for Defence if he will make a statement on the Estimate for his Department for 2008. [34152/07]

Deputy Willie O'Dea: The gross total allocation for my Department in 2008 is €1,078 million, comprising €888 million in the defence Vote and €190 million in the Army pensions Vote. This represents an increase of 7% on the 2007 allocation.

Almost 70% of the defence Estimate is expended on the pay and allowances for an average of 10,500 Permanent Defence Force personnel, some 880 civilian employees and approximately 380 Civil Service staff. The Estimate includes additional funding of €37 million for the proposed mission to Chad, the bulk of which will be expended on transport costs. This additional funding will ensure our troops in Chad will have the best possible equipment and facilities in what will be a very challenging environment.

The ongoing investment in modern equipment and facilities for the Defence Forces will continue in 2008. Among the more significant payments expected to be made next year are final payment of €13 million on two AW 139 helicopters, final payment of €5 million on upgrade of Casa maritime aircraft, final payment of €6 million on contract for 25 additional Mowag APCs, €4 million for the purchase of 500 general purpose machine guns and initial down payment on proposed purchase of light tactical armoured vehicles. Over €43 million will be available in 2008 for the upgrade, refurbishment and maintenance of buildings and facilities for the Defence Forces. This will enable the major programme to provide modern accommodation and facilities for the Defence Forces which has been ongoing in recent years to continue in 2008.

The process of acquiring three new replacement vessels for the Naval Service is under way. The evaluation of stage one proposals and the preparation of a detailed specification for the "invitation to tender" stage are in progress, with tenders expected to issue in April 2008 and a contract awarded in late 2008 or early 2009. A token sum of €1 million has been provided in the 2008 Estimate to facilitate a down payment on the first of the new vessels. That will enable us to sign the contract.

Overall, the increased level of resources underlines the Government's commitment to ensuring the modernisation process in defence will continue to make solid progress. The Army, Naval Service and Air Corps will be fully equipped to meet the challenges which lie ahead.

Deputy Brian O'Shea: In the Estimates some figures stand out. The reduction in the allocation for consultancy services from €50,000 to €32,000 is welcome. I am concerned, however, about the 17% reduction in the Reserve Defence Force allocation from €12.5 million to €10.5 million. There is an 18% reduction in the figure for compensation from €7.6 million to €6.2 million. There is a 26% increase in costs arising from Ireland's participation in the European Union's Common Security and Defence Policy from €1.2 million to €1.6 million. Will the Minister explain the major reduction in appropriations-in-aid, down from almost €25 million to €10.7 million, a reduction of 57%?

Deputy Willie O'Dea: These are estimated figures. On compensation, it is a demand-led scheme. Experience of the past few years has shown us that a provision of €6.2 million will be sufficient but if we have to compensate individuals above that level, a Supplementary Estimate will be required. Last year €12.5 million was provided for the Reserve Defence Force but only €9.5 million was spent. This year we estimate the cost at €10.5 million.

Deputy Jimmy Deenihan: Will the Minister not increase the figure in case he needs more?

Deputy Willie O'Dea: Yes, €10.5 million represents an increase on €9.5 million; therefore, we will be spending 10% more. The increase in the contribution to the European Union's Common Security and Defence Policy arises because we are tied into a fixed percentage of the cost of running the agency concerned, which has increased slightly.

The main element of appropriations-in-aid is rebates from the United Nations in respect of overseas missions. We do not expect to receive many such rebates this year because there is a difference between a UN mission, directly organised by the United Nations, and a UN mandated EU mission, for which we receive no rebates, in this instance, the Chad mission.

Deputy Jimmy Deenihan: For what percentage of GDP does the Defence Vote account? I understand it is approximately 0.7%. Not so long ago it was 1%, albeit of a smaller GDP but it was even smaller before we took over.

Deputy Willie O'Dea: I do not have the precise figure but will get it for the Deputy. I refer not only to the Vote but also to the other measures in which the Department of Finance has allowed us to engage such as selling off property assets surplus to requirements, the proceeds of which we have reinvested in the defence Vote. We have a slimmed down, highly trained, well equipped Army in comfortable barracks, well used to foreign missions, the pride of the country. If Deputy Deenihan were to study the budget contributions of his colleagues on the Front Bench, he would not agree with increases in expenditure. Deputy Bruton tells us we are running the country into bankruptcy because we are spending too much but the Deputy is suggesting that we spend more.

Deputy Jimmy Deenihan: I am talking about the return.

Deputy Willie O'Dea: The Opposition cannot have it both ways.

Deputy Jimmy Deenihan: I am asking about what is provided in the budget.

Deputy Brian O'Shea: Do the Estimates provide fully for the figure of €57 million estimated as the cost of the mission to Chad or are we likely to see a Supplementary Estimate at the end of the year, if the mission goes ahead?

Deputy Willie O'Dea: The Estimates fully provide for it. We were able to provide €20 million from our own resources. The extra allocation was €37 million.

Deputy Jimmy Deenihan: If the mission does not go ahead, where will the money be spent? Limerick.

Deputy Willie O'Dea: We will find a way.

Defence Forces Personnel.

51. **Deputy Ulick Burke** asked the Minister for Defence if he has considered the request made by RACO at its recent biennial delegate conference that he amend Defence Forces Regulations S6 to provide that the rank of brigadier general would be among those represented by the association; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34431/07]

Deputy Willie O'Dea: The Defence (Amendment) Act 1990 and Defence Force Regulations section 6 provide for representative structures for members of the Defence Forces. In accordance with the regulations, the Representative Association of Commissioned Officers, RACO, represents officers of the Permanent Defence Force in respect of the matters specified in the third schedule to the regulations. The ranks involved are colonel, lieutenant-colonel, commandant, captain, lieutenant and second-lieutenant and cadets.

The rates of pay of brigadier general are determined by the Review Body on Higher Remuneration in the Public Sector. The review body is an independent standing body whose primary function is to advise the Government on the general levels of remuneration appropriate to higher public servants, members of the Judiciary, and political officeholders. As the rank of brigadier general is the third highest rank in the Defence Forces, I am satisfied the review body is the appropriate forum for determining the pay rates of brigadier generals.

I have no proposals nor have I received an approach from the general staff to amend the regulations to provide that the rank of brigadier general be amongst those represented by RACO.

Deputy Jimmy Deenihan: There are only nine brigadier generals in the country and they are not represented by any organisation in pay negotiations. I accept the chief of staff and his two assistants, who in a way are Government appointees, would not fall into this category. In the Civil Service assistant secretaries are represented and brigadier general seems to be the only category that is not. Brigadier generals are dependent on the goodwill of the review commission and I see no reason why they should not be represented; the Minister should give consideration to this.

Members of RACO have indicated to me that they would be favourably disposed towards including brigadier generals in their association.

Deputy Willie O'Dea: I do not doubt what the Deputy says and if the people involved approach me I will give this matter consideration. The second last report of the higher review body caused distress amongst the general staff and they made their views known forcibly to the body. The review body responded by saying it did not want to be perceived as undervaluing the contribution made by senior Army officers.

The latest report granted a pay increase of 4% to brigadier generals and, in the course of deliberations, the review body evaluated the post of brigadier general. If they wish to change I will be happy to listen to them.

Deputy Jimmy Deenihan: Brigadier general is the highest level of commander in the Defence Forces and they are responsible for training, organisation and the three regions. Brigadier generals may be the most powerful people in the Defence Forces. Given the level a brigadier general occupies the increase mentioned seems very small compared to that recently proposed for Ministers. The Minister should consider allowing brigadier generals be represented by RACO and I will convey the Minister's desire to have the association approach him in this regard.

Deputy Willie O'Dea: If the association wishes to have its representation changed it can approach me and I will make the appropriate inquiries.

Regarding Deputy Deenihan's comments on pay rates, it is certain that, like all bodies covered by the higher review group, brigadier generals will be paid immediately and will not see their pay increases deferred. I find the attitude of some Members of this House to independent bodies curious. This morning Deputy Gilmore spoke of an independent body on human rights and suggested the Government must obey it. Everyone feels independent bodies must be obeyed until they recommend certain levels of pay for the Government. At what point do independent bodies cease to be independent?

Deputy Jimmy Deenihan: Is the Minister one of the Cabinet members who agreed with the pay rise?

Deputy Willie O'Dea: I do not deny it.

Emergency Planning.

52. **Deputy Charlie O'Connor** asked the Minister for Defence his proposals as chairman of the Government's task force on emergency planning, for a public information campaign on emergency planning; the form the campaign will take; when it is proposed to run the campaign; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34023/07]

Deputy Willie O'Dea: As chairman of the Government task force on emergency planning, I have emphasised the importance of raising public awareness of this issue and the work that is being undertaken by Government Departments and public authorities.

In October last year the Government approved my proposals to implement a public information and awareness campaign on emergency planning and I am pleased to say that preparations are at an advanced stage. I intend to launch the campaign in the early part of 2008.

The campaign will have a number of elements. Its main focus is the publication and distribution to every household in the country of a handbook on emergency planning. This will be the first time that information on all of the State's emergency plans are presented to the public in this way. The handbook will also provide practical advice on how individuals can prepare for some of the more common emergencies and where they can obtain further information.

The distribution of the handbook will be accompanied by an extensive media advertising campaign to let people know what it is about and to reassure them that there is no cause for alarm.

Deputy Charlie O'Connor: As the Minister knows there is no Army barracks in Tallaght but that does not stop me taking an interest in defence matters. I thank the Minister for his reply and note he mentioned distribution of a handbook.

Deputy Jimmy Deenihan: This question is a good plant.

Deputy Charlie O'Connor: I am always happy to hear from Deputy Deenihan and it is kind of him to be here, along with the Labour Party spokesman on Defence, for my question.

Deputy Brian O'Shea: Is Deputy O'Connor seeking a barracks for Tallaght?

Deputy Willie O'Dea: He is not seeking a barracking.

Deputy Charlie O'Connor: I am always happy to support Ministers.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Will the Deputy refer his contributions through the Chair?

Deputy Charlie O'Connor: I will and I thank the Leas-Cheann Comhairle for his protection.

What is the timeframe for this campaign and what preparatory work has been done by the Department? Can the Minister tell us what he hopes to achieve through this campaign? Will there be roles in it for other Departments?

Deputy Willie O'Dea: I brought this proposal to Government last October and we did some research that came to some startling conclusions. The vast majority of people think we are unprepared for emergencies and an even greater percentage of people would not know what to do in the event of an emergency.

A booklet will be accompanied by an extensive advertising campaign on radio and in newspapers. There will not be television adverts as they can be expensive but the campaign will be very effective. We hope to reassure people and let them know that detailed emergency plans are in place. We want to give ordinary people practical advice on what to do in the event of an emergency and

let them know where further information is available.

Other Departments will have a role to play because our emergency response system sees the Departments taking leading roles while the Department of Defence co-ordinates. Getting information and co-operation from other Departments has delayed the advertising campaign but we are now on schedule.

Deputy Charlie O'Connor: In considering the drafting of the handbook and the advertising, has the Minister taken account of the need to avoid causing panic among the public, not only in Tallaght but in Kerry, Kildare, Limerick, Wexford and throughout the country?

Deputy Jimmy Deenihan: Maybe they need panic buttons.

Deputy Willie O'Dea: Tallaght has been mentioned twice in 30 seconds and that must be a record.

I have taken account of the possible panic the Deputy mentioned. This operation has been done in other countries, such as the UK and Australia, and one must be careful with the terminology used and how information to be given is drafted. The objective is to reassure the public rather than cause panic and I hope we achieve this.

Overseas Missions.

53. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Defence the number in the proposed deployment of Irish troops overseas on EU or UN missions; the extent of training and the availability of military hardware prior to the commencement of such missions; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34376/07]

63. **Deputy Niall Collins** asked the Minister for Defence when he expects members of the Defence Forces to deploy to Chad; the safeguards and procedures in place to ensure their safety while serving there; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34021/07]

71. **Deputy Thomas P. Broughan** asked the Minister for Defence if all the security of supplies for Irish troops in the proposed mission to Chad have been addressed; if he has satisfied himself that appropriate supply lines will be in place to ensure the contingent will be able to access safe water, fuel and other crucial supplies; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34149/07]

74. **Deputy Joan Burton** asked the Minister for Defence the arrangements that will be put in place to provide medical services for the contingent of Irish troops due to go to Chad; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34151/07]

76. **Deputy Richard Bruton** asked the Minister for Defence the expected date for the commence-

[Deputy Richard Bruton.]

ment of the Chad mission; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34428/07]

85. **Deputy Barry Andrews** asked the Minister for Defence the situation regarding the deployment of members of the Defence Forces as part of EUFORT Chad/RCA; the contacts he has had with his EU counterparts and the operation commander to ensure the necessary equipment and supports are in place; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34032/07]

88. **Deputy Thomas P. Broughan** asked the Minister for Defence if the budget for the Defence Forces will be adequate to fund the proposed Irish contingent for Chad, without resulting in cutbacks in other areas; the estimated cost of the mission; if additional funding has been sought from the Department of Finance for this purpose; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34150/07]

90. **Deputy Liz McManus** asked the Minister for Defence if he has received a full report on the loss of human life in the battles at Abongouleigne, eastern Chad on 26 November 2007; the implications for the planned Irish contingent in Chad; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34164/07]

92. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Defence the position in regard to the proposed deployment of Irish troops to Chad; the expected strength and composition; the availability of adequate supply and transport facilities; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34375/07]

93. **Deputy Andrew Doyle** asked the Minister for Defence if it has been confirmed that the EU Mission to Chad will have EU standard medical support as sought by PDFORRA at its recent annual conference. [34423/07]

102. **Deputy Liz McManus** asked the Minister for Defence if he will provide a breakdown of the €57 million required for the Army's humanitarian mission to Chad; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34165/07]

168. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Defence when he expects the deployment of Irish troops to Chad to take place; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34598/07]

Deputy Willie O'Dea: I propose to take Questions Nos. 53, 63, 71, 74, 76, 85, 88, 90, 92, 93, 102 and 168 together.

Currently, a total of 414 Defence Forces personnel are serving overseas, full details of which are listed in the accompanying statement which will be available to the House.

Ireland has offered, through the United Nations standby arrangements system, to provide up to 850 military personnel, configured as a light infantry battalion, for overseas service at any one time. This figure equates to some 10% of Ireland's standing Army, excluding reserves, and demonstrates Ireland's commitment to the cause of international peace. This is the maximum sustainable commitment that Ireland can make to overseas peacekeeping operations. There are no plans at this time to increase the level of our commitment to the United Nations standby arrangements system.

Ireland receives requests from time to time in relation to participation in various missions and these are considered on a case-by-case basis.

In response to a request from the EU, the Government, on 20 November 2007, 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. Dáil Éireann approved the necessary enabling motion on 28 November 2007.

It was initially expected that a Defence Forces initial entry force to the new EU mission in Chad, comprising an advance party of approximately 50 personnel of the Army ranger wing and support elements, would deploy to the mission area this month. The main contingent comprising some 400 personnel, which is currently undergoing selection and concentration prior to detailed mission-specific training, was expected to deploy in February or March 2008. However, the deployment of the initial entry force has been deferred until the new year as vital enabling elements, such as helicopters, tactical aircraft and medical support associated with the launch of the operation, are not yet in place. This deferral may have a knock-on effect for the deployment of the main body of the force.

I assure the House that there is no question of the Defence Forces deploying in theatre without the required enablers being in place. The shortfalls in vital key enablers for the mission are being actively examined and addressed by the operation commander in consultation with the European Union Military Committee. As I indicated to the House on 28 November 2007, I expressed my concerns about these shortfalls at a recent Defence Ministers' meeting in Brussels. I urged my EU ministerial colleagues to take another look at the shortfalls and actively to support the mission, thus ensuring it is adequately resourced and capable of fulfilling its mandate.

The current situation demands that all options should be explored in an effort to overcome the capability shortfalls for this mission. This must be done expeditiously to re-enforce the credibility of European security and defence policy, ESDP, as an EU instrument. To this end, I wrote to my EU Defence ministerial colleagues last week appeal-

ing to them to consider constructively how they might be able to contribute to the successful launch and operation of this mission without further delay.

I assure the House that our ability to protect the safety of our personnel is of paramount concern when considering any mission. While no absolute guarantees can be given with regard to the safety of troops serving in missions, it is the policy and practice to ensure that Defence Forces personnel are appropriately trained and equipped to carry out their mission. Troops selected for overseas service undergo a rigorous programme of training designed to help them carry out their peacekeeping mission and to provide for their protection. Pre-deployment training is updated in the light of up-to-date threat assessments. Prior to deployment on missions, training packages, including realistic mission readiness exercises, are conducted and validated to ensure units are thoroughly prepared. Defence Forces personnel serving on all overseas missions are equipped with the most modern and effective equipment. This equipment enables troops to carry out the mission assigned, as well as providing the required protection specific to the mission.

A detailed threat assessment and reconnaissance was conducted prior to a decision being taken to participate in the EU mission to Chad. This informed decisions regarding the configuration of the contingent and its armaments and protection. The Irish contingent to be deployed to the new mission will be based on a mechanised infantry battalion group comprising manoeuvre elements and combat support and combat service support elements. Given the nature of the operation and the mission area and environment, the Defence Forces will deploy Mowag APCs and close reconnaissance vehicles, which will provide armoured protection, mobility, firepower and a communications platform.

As regards the security of supplies for Irish troops to be deployed to the mission, the Defence Forces have developed a comprehensive plan of logistics support for the planned deployment. All aspects of the supply chain, including the security of supplies, have been evaluated in the context of the planned theatre of operations and remain a constant planning consideration by the military authorities. All life support issues have been investigated, estimated and planned for. An integrated plan for water, fuel and other commodities is being prepared.

Regarding medical services for the personnel to be deployed to the mission, health care will be provided to EU common standards of health and medical support. All 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 mission and having regard to the availability of services that may be available from partner nations and

other nations contributing troops. The proposed Defence Forces initial entry force, to be deployed in early 2008, will include one medical officer and two medical orderlies. In addition, the Army ranger wing unit will include several qualified medical personnel to augment the medical capability.

The main Irish contingent, to be deployed to the mission area at a later stage, will include a medical unit comprising two medical officers, one dental officer, 11 medical orderlies and one dental surgery assistant. The proposed medical deployment outlined is subject to change depending on the final assessment of the operational environment in which the troops will operate.

Additional information not given on the floor of the House.

It is estimated that the cost to the Defence Vote arising from the Defence Forces participation in this mission for 12 months will be some €57 million, including Ireland's €1.3 million contribution to common costs. The figure also includes costs of deployment of personnel and equipment, rotation and re-supply flights, overseas allowances, ordnance, clothing and catering, purchase of military vehicles, medical costs, communications and information technology, barrack expenses and engineering equipment. Provision to meet the additional costs of the operation has been made in the Defence Vote in the Estimates for 2008.

The Defence Estimate includes additional funding of €37 million for the proposed mission to Chad, the bulk of which will be expended on transport costs. This additional funding will ensure our troops in Chad will have the best possible equipment and facilities in what will be a challenging environment. The ongoing investment in modern equipment and facilities for the Defence Forces will continue in 2008. The major programme to provide modern accommodation and facilities for the Defence Forces, which has been ongoing over recent years, will continue in 2008.

I am aware of reports of clashes that have erupted in eastern Chad since 24 November 2007. I am advised that despite claims by the Chadian army and the rebels, there is no reliable confirmation of casualties. In regard to the threat posed to Irish troops proposed to be deployed as part of the EU force, it is assessed by the military authorities that the recent violence is the result of all sides attempting to influence the situation on the ground prior to the EUFOR deployment. While at least one rebel group, the Union of Forces for Democracy and Development, has declared that it considers itself in a state of war against the French, or any foreign army on Chad's territory, it is thought unlikely it will attempt to engage with EUFOR troops.

[Deputy Willie O'Dea.]

I assure the House that ongoing threat assessments are carried out in mission areas. We continually review both personal equipment and force assets to ensure Defence Forces personnel

are appropriately equipped to fulfil their roles. I am satisfied that all appropriate security measures are in place to ensure the safety of all Defence Forces personnel serving overseas.

Members of the Permanent Defence Force Serving Overseas as of 07 December 2007

	Number
1. UN Missions	
(i) <i>UNIFIL</i> (United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon) HQ	7
(ii) <i>UNTSO</i> (United Nations Truce Supervision Organisation) — Israel, Syria and Lebanon	14
(iii) <i>MINURSO</i> (United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara)	3
(iv) <i>UNMIK</i> (United Nations Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo)	4
(v) <i>MONUC</i> (United Nations Mission in Democratic Republic of the Congo)	3
(vi) <i>UNOCI</i> (United Nations Mission in Ivory Coast)	1
(vii) <i>UNMIL</i> (United Nations Mission in Liberia) FHQ	1
TOTAL	33
<i>UN Mandated Missions</i>	
(viii) <i>EUFOR</i> (EU-led Operation in Bosnia and Herzegovina)	41
(ix) <i>EUFORTCHAD/RCA</i> (EU-led Operation in CHAD and the Central African Republic) HQ	17
(x) <i>KFOR</i> (International Security Presence in Kosovo) Framework Nation	57
<i>KFOR</i> (International Security Presence in Kosovo) HQ	11
<i>KFOR</i> (International Security Presence in Kosovo) 37th Inf Group	204
(xi) <i>ISAF</i> (International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan)	7
(xii) <i>AMIS</i> (EU support to UN authorised African Union Mission in Sudan)	3
Total number of personnel serving with UN missions	373
2. EU Missions	
(i) European Union Monitor Mission (<i>EUMM</i>) to the former Yugoslavia	5
TOTAL NUMBER OF PERSONNEL SERVING WITH EU MISSIONS	5
3. Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE)	
(i) OSCE Mission to Bosnia & Herzegovina	1
(ii) OSCE Mission in Montenegro	1
(iii) OSCE Presence in Albania	2
(iv) OSCE Mission in FRY	2
(v) Staff Officer, Higher Level Planning Group, Vienna	1
Total number of personnel serving OSCE	7
4. <i>EU Military Staff</i>	
Brussels	7
New York	1
5. HQ EU Nordic Battlegroup	12
6. Military Representatives/Advisers/Staff	
(i) Military Adviser, Permanent Mission to UN, New York	1
(ii) Military Adviser, Irish Delegation to OSCE, Vienna	1
(iii) Military Representatives to EU (Brussels)	4
(iv) Liaison Office of Ireland, NATO/PfP (Brussels)	2
(v) Military Representative to NATO/PfP Co-ordination Cell/Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE), Mons, Belgium	1
TOTAL NUMBER DEFENCE FORCES PERSONNEL SERVING OVERSEAS	414

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: I thank the Minister for his comprehensive reply. Does he agree that in a deployment of this nature, given the

vastness of the area concerned, it would be highly advisable to make available helicopters for the rapid transport of troops and equipment from

one area to another? Does he also agree it is absolutely vital in such situations to have adequate communications equipment and adequate numbers deployed to ensure troops are not left isolated or vulnerable. Unfortunate incidents have occurred in the past. Events at Srebrenica, for example, represent a classic case of underdeployment leading to tragedy. Will the Minister confirm that the officer commanding the deployment will be absolutely satisfied in advance that adequate logistical support is in place in terms of the availability of military hardware of all types?

Deputy Willie O'Dea: I am pleased to assure Deputy Durkan on those points. I agree that adequate equipment is necessary. As the Deputy observed, the vastness of the area makes air transport necessary, as well as effective communications. Troops can be easily and quickly isolated in a place of this magnitude. It is a hostile environment. I assure the House that the force commander will not deploy unless he is satisfied beyond a shadow of a doubt that sufficient logistical supports are in place.

It is a judgment for the Irish military as to what equipment is supplied with the troops. We will supply a large quantity of Mowag APCs and heavy mobility lift vehicles. We will also supply a large amount of construction equipment because there will be extensive building work to be undertaken, including airports, roads and so on. A detailed specification is available for that. I am glad Deputy Durkan has afforded me the opportunity to assure the House on these matters.

Deputy Niall Collins: We are correct to highlight the dangers associated with the mission, but we must be mindful not to overstate them and so cause unnecessary stress to the troops who will serve and their families. What reassurance has the Minister received as to the safety of Irish troops who will take part in this mission? What level of pre-deployment training will they receive? Will the Minister indicate the criteria considered before deciding on deployment contingents of the Defence Forces for overseas missions? What are the criteria for selecting troops for such duties?

Deputy Willie O'Dea: I assure Deputy Collins that military personnel have travelled to Chad on reconnaissance work. They have studied the environment to ascertain what is required in terms of equipment, transport and communications. These are people of the highest expertise who have organised previous foreign missions. They know what is required and will ensure it is supplied. One cannot offer absolute guarantees but we are extremely mindful of the safety of our troops. I assure the House that everything possible will be done on our side to ensure the troops are entirely safe. I can speak for Lieutenant General Nash in assuring Members that he will not deploy unless the logistical supports that it is

incumbent on other EU countries to provide are put in place.

Troops will take part in an intensive period of some ten to 12 weeks' pre-deployment training. Many of these troops have previously served abroad in Liberia or Lebanon and know what is involved. When considering whether to accede to a request for a mission, one of the criteria is the current level of commitment. We have a top level of 850 personnel and that cannot be exceeded. We also consider how well the mission is financed, how it ties in with our foreign policy and whether it has a clear political objective. The main consideration, however, is the risk involved to our troops. That weighs very heavily when we are deciding whether to commit to a mission.

The criteria for selection of personnel would include factors such as seniority, family circumstances, experience abroad and reports from commanding officers. A particular expertise would give personnel an advantage also.

Deputy Brian O'Shea: One of the questions in the group referred to the €57 million cost of the mission and if it will be at the expense of any existing activities of the Army. There is an additional sum of €37 million but a €20 million in saving specified. Will the Minister assure us this is a saving that would otherwise be spent on people here rather than coming from cutbacks in other areas?

On the logistical plan, I understand there is only 400 km of roadway in Chad, and I foresee extreme difficulty in keeping lines open. I hope the Ranger wing will plan for a camp when they go to Chad in January but are we getting ahead of ourselves when we speak about being ready to go in when we do not have the experience on the ground of the Ranger wing and the professionals with them? Is there a possibility, in spite of the information held by the Minister, that the mission could be beyond the capability of the supports that may be in place?

Deputy Willie O'Dea: We got €37 million extra for the Chad mission and supplied €20 million from within our own resources. If there was no question of us going to Chad we would undoubtedly have found other ways to spend that €20 million. Perhaps we would have got €20 million less from the Department of Finance.

I reassure the Deputy that the amount of money we will spend in upgrading equipment this year, in excess of €30 million, and the amount of money we will spend to upgrade buildings such as barracks and accommodation, at approximately €43 million, will at least equal the figure from last year. It may even exceed that amount so there will be no shortfall in that regard.

There is always a possibility of what the Deputy suggested in his final point and we cannot be completely sure until personnel are in theatre. That is the reason I replied to Deputy Durkan

[Deputy Willie O'Dea.]

earlier by stating we need good communications and air support to take people out of danger quickly if the need arises.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I am anxious to allow questions from two more Deputies before the time concludes. I will allow questions from Deputies Deenihan and Barry Andrews.

Deputy Jimmy Deenihan: I read that Lieutenant General Nash may retire in May. Will the Minister confirm he will be there for the duration of the mission? Is there a possibility the duration of the mission could be extended after a year if so demanded?

With regard to water supply, I received reports from people who served in Liberia that the water supplied there by the United Nations was totally inadequate. The Swedes had a different system and I understand the Irish military personnel took water from the Swedes. Although the tents used in Liberia were air-conditioned, they were still very uncomfortable. I know people who lost a stone and a half or two stone in weight while there because of the humidity. Being in theatre in the middle of Africa will be much more challenging than Liberia.

I understand the Swedes had a much more comfortable accommodation unit. Is there a chance the type of accommodation used by personnel will be reviewed? Surely we are not taking the same tents to Chad?

Deputy Barry Andrews: The EU reform treaty referendum will come up next year and as a member of the Joint Committee on European Affairs I have discussed the importance of the EU having some kind of shot in the arm in terms of public relations. Is the Minister cognisant of the importance of this mission in that if it is successful and effective, those of us advocating the reform treaty can indicate it as an example of the EU being effective? God knows what happened in Rwanda did not reflect any glory on anybody in this part of the world. Does the Minister agree that the mission is important in that respect?

Deputy Willie O'Dea: I will answer the specific points raised by Deputy Deenihan in the first instance. I assure the Deputy that although Lieutenant General Nash's formal retirement date is in May, he is to be appointed for the duration of Ireland's participation in the mission. The initial deployment is for a year but it may be extended. That will be a decision for Government when we come to the end of that year.

On the issue of tents and the conditions, I was in Liberia twice and I assure the Deputy it was pretty warm outside the tent, whatever about inside the tent. We have learned certain lessons. There is also provision for bottled water to back up the water supply and we are working on that issue.

In response to the comments of Deputy Barry Andrews, it will be devastating for the credibility of the EU if we cannot put the mission together. A couple of months ago at a defence ministers' meeting in Brussels we agreed to put in place a system whereby up to 90,000 troops can be deployed by the EU at three months notice with sufficient back-up. If, after three or four months, we cannot deploy 4,000 troops with sufficient back-up, I cannot see how we will be in a position to deploy 90,000 troops in two years. It will have a devastating effect on the credibility of the EU if we cannot quickly put the mission together.

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 Michael D. Higgins — the urgent need to resolve the contradiction which has emerged between the Department of Education and Science and the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform regarding the rights of children whose parents are on student visas to avail of primary education in their locality; (2) Deputy James Bannon — the need for the Minister to provide urgent core funding for the continuation and expansion of osteoporosis services, which are currently provided by the Irish Osteoporosis Society, a charitable organisation surviving with a skeleton staff of two and which will be forced to close without such funding, leaving the public and health professionals without a point of contact; (3) Deputy Michael Creed — the issue of the forthcoming closure of a company in County Cork (details provided) with the loss of 120 jobs and to highlight the need for replacement industry; (4) Deputy Paul Connaughton — redundancies in the FÁS community employment schemes; (5) Deputy Joe Costello — the need to put an effective inspection regime in place to prevent extraordinary rendition flights passing through Irish territory; (6) Deputy Tom Sheahan — the need for the Minister to put funding in place (details supplied) to hold the invaluable services provided by a counselling service in County Kerry as a matter of urgency and to make a statement on the matter; (7) Deputy Martin Ferris — the failure to prevent illegal fishing by non-Irish vessels in Irish waters; and (8) Deputy Kieran O'Donnell — the need to promote the provision of IDA supported jobs in Limerick and the mid-west.

The matters raised by Deputies Paul Connaughton, Kieran O'Donnell, and Joe Costello have been selected for discussion.

Social Welfare Bill 2007: Second Stage (Resumed).

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

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy Barry Andrews had the floor. There are 18 minutes left in his slot and I understand he is to share time.

Deputy Barry Andrews: I propose to share time with Deputies Cyprian Brady and Chris Andrews.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Is that agreed? Agreed.

Deputy Barry Andrews: Perhaps the Leas-Cheann Comhairle will let me know when there are 14 minutes remaining.

Much of the Opposition comment has been to the effect that this budget was mean-minded, lacked generosity and was not cognisant of issues of poverty and people on lower incomes. I made the point that the value of the social welfare was in the region of €12 billion but it is actually €17 billion, up from less than €5 billion in 1997. This is in the context of unemployment being halved in the same period. It runs counter to the direction one would expect social welfare payments to go.

This is a measure of Fianna Fáil's commitment to lower income families and to people in the margins of society. Much has been made in the debate about those in consistent poverty or at risk of poverty. It is worth noting that the office of social inclusion set down guidelines last year that were updated this year. They were designed to assess policies and their impact on those in poverty or at risk of poverty. That precludes the suggestions made by those in Opposition of the possibility that those on lower incomes have not been considered.

These poverty impact assessment guidelines assess the possible negative and positive impact of decisions made in this area, both on social inclusion and welfare issues and taxation. It is based on the ERSI switch model, a tax benefit model. According to the budget figures, there is a 5% to 6% improvement in the income of those in the lowest 20% bracket of income earners and a 0.5% to 1% increase for those in the top 20%. It is clear that in this budget and the previous five this process has been stitched into the assessment of increases and how increases would be brought about. As such, it runs contrary to the possibilities described by Opposition Members. An example is the early child care supplement which, in being assessed by the poverty impact assessment guidelines, passes muster because it has a much more positive impact on those on lower incomes in receipt of the flat-rate payment than those on higher incomes. Accordingly, the €100 increase is worth considerably more to those on lower

incomes. The same could be said for a range of the benefits outlined in the Social Welfare Bill.

There have been great benefits in the area of child care in recent years. However, great reform is still necessary. The provision of community-based child care facilities is too limited. Most other countries have a much wider range of community-based child care facilities than we do. Child care is provided privately in the vast majority of cases and, accordingly, very expensive. The average EU percentage of income spent on child care is 12%, whereas in Ireland it is 20%. Nevertheless, there have been very significant increases, which indicates we have been dealing with a very low historical base in terms of direct support for people with children. In 2008 those with two children under the age of six years will receive direct payments of more than €6,000 during the course of the year.

We need to consider the issue of benefit-in-kind. Naturally, the benefits that an employee receives from an employer are taxed. There are provisions, whereby if an employer provides child care facilities on site, the cost can be discounted for tax purposes. However, this is not used in this country. It is virtually a redundant provision in the tax code. If the matter were approached in a more sensible way and we had a new system of ownership linked to the benefit-in-kind system, we would begin to get to the level of child care provision on a community basis in other EU countries. In the meantime, I welcome the increases and commend the Bill to the House.

Deputy Cyprian Brady: I welcome the opportunity to speak on the Social Welfare Bill. I would like to discuss the benefits of budget 2008 in terms of social welfare contributions to senior citizens and those who dedicate their lives to caring for people who are ill or infirm. We can never do too much for senior citizens who have played a very important role in making this country the pride of Europe. They have served our communities for many years as neighbours, employers, workers and parents. When times were tough, it was our senior citizens who made sacrifices. It was they who laid the foundations of the economy through hard work. They made sure that their children, the workforce and the leaders of society today, got a decent education. As a member of Fianna Fáil, I take very seriously the responsibility of looking after senior citizens. Our commitment to deliver for them has always been apparent. We have consistently refined and improved the services and payments for them. We will continue to improve benefits because we owe it to them, Ireland's parents and grandparents, to provide them with a decent quality of life. I am very proud of what we have achieved in the past decade which is continued in the budget. The welfare package of €900 million will benefit more than 1.5 million people. It will bring the

[Deputy Cyprian Brady.]

total welfare spend by the Department of Social and Family Affairs in 2008 to a record €17 billion.

I commend the Minister, Deputy Cullen, for including in the budget a special provision for the spouse or partner of a person receiving the weekly contributory pension. The weekly payment to the spouse or partner, defined in the Department of Social and Family Affairs as qualified adult dependant of contributory pensioner, will increase in 2008 by up to €27. This will bring the qualified adult rate for those aged 66 years or over to €200 per week. The spouse or partner will now receive a substantial special increase where he or she is aged 66 years or over. 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. This gives due recognition to the work that has been done and continues to be done by women working in the home. When these payments are combined with the increase in the personal pension rate, the impact of this measure means that more than 42,000 pensioner couples will see their household income increase by up to €41 a week or nearly 11%.

I am honoured to be part of a Government providing a €336 million package of supports specifically for older people which will benefit almost 420,000. Next month pensioners will receive an increase of €14 per week to €223.30 in the State contributory pension and an increase of €12 per week to €212 in the non-contributory pension. Since 2002, the level of the State contributory pension has increased by more than 50% from €147.30 to €223.30 after the budget. Fianna Fáil continues to deliver on its commitment to improving the living standards of older people enabling them to face the future with a greater sense of security.

I would like to highlight the important role carers play in society. As a public representative, visiting households in Dublin Central, I see the work these unsung heroes carry out quietly every day of the week. There are no headlines, or radio and television coverage. They are the son or daughter, neighbour or relative who devotes his or her time to looking after a person with a disability, an illness or a senior citizen requiring assistance due to old age. It is fitting, therefore, for the Government to continue to support these carers and increase payments in order that all carers will directly benefit from budget 2008. I thank the Minister for increasing the rate of carer's allowance by €14. This will bring the rate for carers over the age of 66 years to €232 per week and the payment for carers under 66 years to €214 per week. I am also glad to see that the rate of carer's benefit will also increase by €14 per week. These increases represent a continuation of the Government's commitment to improving the lot of carers. Last year the important respite care grant increased from

€1,200 to €1,500; this year the Minister has included a further €200 increase, bringing the grant to €1,700. I see the benefit of the grant every day. Sometimes the person being cared for benefits just as much as the carer. Some 48,000 carers will benefit from this payment and it is a positive step towards our commitment to increase the respite care grant to €3,000 per year over the lifetime of the Government.

The Minister also announced an increase in the level of the income disregards for carer's allowance to €332.50 per week for a single person and €665 per week for a couple. This is very important, as it will ensure all those on average industrial earnings will continue to qualify for a full carer's allowance.

Although we can never do enough for senior citizens and carers, the Government has genuinely contributed to improving their quality of life. The welfare improvements announced in budget 2008 must not be seen in isolation. The budget focuses on improving health services, roads and public transport, security, education and training. Investment in these key elements also contributes to the well-being of senior citizens and other vulnerable sections of society. Our ability to manage and maintain a strong, growing economy means that we can continue to improve and develop the supports put in place for all senior citizens and carers.

Deputy Chris Andrews: I fully support the changes being introduced by the Minister, Deputy Cullen, in the Social Welfare Bill 2007. The increase of €900 million in next year's social welfare support package will benefit more than 1.5 million people — one third of the population of the State — and will bring total social welfare expenditure to a record €17 billion in 2008. I am proud to live in a country with a Government that places such importance on social welfare and equality. It is a great time to be Irish because the Government is ensuring that the weakest and most vulnerable people in society are protected.

Critics of Fianna Fáil sometimes suggest that it does not prioritise welfare and justice. They argue that it is more interested in economics than in

people. Anyone who examines the provisions of budget 2008 will see that the hallmark of this Fianna Fáil-

led Government is its willingness to protect the incomes of vulnerable people and support ordinary working people. Approximately 76% of the money allocated under the recent budget will be spent on health, social welfare and education. The provision of public goods in such a manner will be of direct benefit to lower-income families. This budget clearly puts people first. It makes significant improvements in the supports given to pensioners, carers, families, children and people with disabilities, all within the overall framework of the programme for Government, Towards 2016 and the national action plan for social

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inclusion, which sets out a long-term strategic vision and a road map for the future.

A generous €336 million package is to be put in place to support older people. The contributory pension will increase by €14 per week and the non-contributory pension will increase by €12 per week. Almost 420,000 pensioners will benefit from those pension increases. The increases being made in this Bill represent the first step towards achieving the target, set in the programme for Government, of increasing the old age pension to €300 per week by 2012. As Deputy Brady said, older people deserve to be treated well and with respect and dignity. It is important that we protect the status of older people in society by ensuring they receive decent pensions. A more generous pension system will also ensure a higher standard of living. At a time when loneliness and social inclusion are constant threats, of which we always have to be vigilant, we must continue to ensure that older people receive recognition for what they have already contributed to society.

I support the work of the National Council on Ageing and Older People. I welcome the appointment by the Government of Deputy Hctor as Minister of State with special responsibility for services for older people. The Minister of State has demonstrated her commitment to working in that role to help older people. There is a vibrant community of active retirement groups in my constituency of Dublin South-East. For example, the Ringsend active retirement group does endless work to build on the supports which are provided by the Government. This Bill will extend the duration of the €18 fuel allowance season by one week, to 30 weeks, which will benefit older people and those who are less mobile or housebound. The extension of the fuel allowance season is welcome at a time when we are experiencing a more unpredictable climate. As the percentage of the population over the age of 65 will increase rapidly over the next two decades, it will be more and more vital to continue to protect older people.

As Deputy Cyprian Brady said, this year's budget recognises the importance of the input of carers, who contribute a great deal to society in a quiet and understated way. They work hard in difficult circumstances without always receiving the recognition they deserve. I am pleased to welcome the increase of up to €14 per week in the rate of payment for all carers. The earnings threshold for carer's benefit will increase by €12.50 per week, to €332.50, which is to be welcomed. Carers are critical for the support of older people, persons with disabilities and those with long-term illnesses. The recent improvements in the carer's schemes mean that 34,000 carers will receive carer's benefit or carer's allowance.

The respite care grant is to be increased to €1,700 from next June. The recognition of carers is a priority for the Government. It can be emotionally and financially difficult to care for

someone who needs long-term care. It is vital that carers are given as much support and recognition as possible. Many areas and groups deserve extra financial support. It is not always possible to achieve all our targets immediately. The Government will have to make difficult choices when it prioritises key areas in the medium and long terms. Significant resources will be used to protect the weakest and most vulnerable people in society under the recent budget and this legislation. As an aunt of mine says, a good start is half the work. This Bill represents a good start in implementing a five-year strategy. It will ensure that our recent economic growth is used in a sustainable and socially responsible manner.

Deputy Leo Varadkar: I would like to share time with Deputies Clune, Doyle and O'Donnell.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Charlie O'Connor): Is that agreed? Agreed.

Deputy Leo Varadkar: I would like to make a few points on the Social Welfare Bill 2007. Like all other parties, Fine Gael will not oppose social welfare increases. It is reasonable to acknowledge that the increases sanctioned by the Government in recent years, particularly in the pensions sector, have certainly kept pace with inflation and have probably kept pace with wage growth. However, rather than tackling the opportunity presented by this Bill to bring about real reform, the Government has chosen the soft option of more of the same, just as it did in the budget. In previous years, social welfare legislation was used to make real changes — I refer to the introduction of the early child care supplement, for example — but there are no innovations in this Bill. It provides for the same old system, with a couple of euro more in certain areas.

Some aspects of our welfare system need to be reformed, obviously. The social welfare budget now stands at €17 billion, which is a huge amount of money. It is becoming increasingly financially unsustainable, outmoded and, in some cases, socially regressive. I consider the family income supplement scheme, which works very well, to be an exception in that regard. Not everyone who should claim the supplement does so, unfortunately. That our welfare system is becoming financially unsustainable is clear when one considers that 49% of this year's increase in the Government's current spending will be accounted for by social welfare. Such a considerable share of the increase in current spending will not be sustainable in the long term, when we will need to find resources for education, justice and health, etc. The social welfare system accounts for one third of our current expenditure at a time when we have virtually full employment and a relatively young population. Serious issues will have to be considered as we move away from full employment and the population gets older. Will

[Deputy Leo Varadkar.]

we be able to keep the system as it is, with 40% or 50% of current expenditure in this area?

When one compares our welfare system to the social welfare models which exist in places like Israel, Singapore and the Nordic countries, it is clear that it is becoming outmoded. The systems we use are old-fashioned and socially regressive, with exceptions like the family income supplement scheme. Our social welfare system condemns many people to a life of welfare dependence and poverty. The Government and the social partners are happy to give people in certain groups €210 per week and to forget about them after that. We should not tolerate such an approach to welfare. It is about time we had a grown-up and reasoned debate on this matter. I hope the Deputies opposite are willing to have such a debate about the crying need for real welfare reform. That debate was initiated to an extent when the Green Paper on Pensions was published. However, I have little confidence that we will see any real pension reform during the lifetime of this Government.

We need to pay particular attention to the needs of jobseekers and those on unemployment allowance. We have a hard core of long-term unemployed people. No effort seems to be made to address who they are, the reason they are long-term unemployed and what is to be done about it. I make a comparison with many of the Nordic countries which have a much higher percentage of labour force participation than Ireland. It is not only because they have more women in the workforce but also they do not wash their hands of the long-term unemployed but rather do something about them. This is an area where we in Ireland are doing very little.

FÁS needs to be radically reformed. Most of its budget is currently expended on community employment schemes which are essentially a form of sheltered employment. We should accept them as such and call them what they are and fund them in that way. FÁS should be moved towards supplying more valid training so that it becomes an organisation that brings people from unemployment into work and from welfare into work which it does not do now, even though it costs €800 million.

The area of disability benefit should be examined. I do not think anyone would argue that the Irish race is less healthy than any other race yet we have a very high proportion of people on disability benefits and the reason for this must be questioned. I refer to Denmark where rather than condemning people on disability benefits to a life of relative poverty, they train them for jobs for which they are fit and help them to enter the economy and become workers in their own right. This is not the practice in Ireland. We decide that people are disabled and they are given €200 a week for the rest of their lives and they are forgotten about. This is the wrong attitude.

Benefits for one-parent families need to be examined. I note that 32,000 one-parent families do not have any children under seven years. Whereas the one-parent family benefit is very justifiable where there are young children, there are questions to be asked when they are aged eight, nine, 13 and 16 years old. I respect the fact that in 60% of one-parent families the single parent is in the workforce. A lot more could be done to support women participating part-time in the workforce by offering child care assistance and so on.

On another day I might talk about sick pay issues and long-term sick pay which again in Ireland is really out of control. I hope we will follow the Dutch model in that regard. Another time I will talk about the Singaporean personal pension and provident fund which should be emulated by Ireland in terms of welfare reform. I will also speak at another time about the large-scale social welfare fraud being committed by a small number of foreign nationals in particular. That is a bigger debate for another day and it should be discussed at some stage.

Deputy Deirdre Clune: We all welcome measures in the Bill which increase payments to those who are dependent on social welfare. I wish to focus in my contribution on the areas of concern to me.

The old-age pension has been increased, with the contributory pension increased by €14 per week and the non-contributory pension by €12 per week and this is to be welcomed. However, anyone in contact with elderly people dependent on social welfare will be aware that much of that increase will be eaten up by food costs and inflation and fuel costs. I recognise the fuel allowance has been extended by one week but I do not believe the contribution matches the real cost of heating for those elderly people, many of whom are living in old houses that are not equipped to retain heat. I have raised this matter with the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government and will do so again.

I wish to raise the issue of qualified adults who should be entitled to claim their payments in their own right. Many of the 123,000 qualified adults are elderly women. If they wish their payments to be paid directly to them, this must be signed off by the adult on whom they are dependent. They are not really recognised as independent adults in their own right. It should be recognised in this day and age that many of these people are women who have been at home rearing their families or working in the community but they have not been in recognised employment. At this stage in their careers, it behoves us all to recognise them as individuals. The State should pay them directly, considering funding is being given in their name to another person. I have strong opinions on this issue and we should recognise that people deserve this form of recognition.

There is a very low take-up of family income supplement. It is a payment designed to support those in employment on low incomes with families to help them bridge a gap that may exist. According to the ESRI, there is a less than one in three take-up of this payment which I find amazing. I constantly encounter people looking for support from their community welfare officer who are not aware of this payment and who have not been made aware of it. There are ways and means of communicating with these people, particularly if they are in employment. Revenue knows what their income is and they probably pay a low rate of tax. We are living in an era of information technology and information is available on the system. I suggest some joined-up thinking should be used and people should be informed of their entitlements in this regard.

Lone parents are not necessarily women; they may be lone parents following a marriage break-up or they may be widows or widowers. Census 2006 showed 121,000 lone-parents with at least one child under the age of 20 years, making up 22% of all families. As one would expect, the breakdown of lone-parents show that 90% are female and 10% are male. This category of parent is more at risk of poverty. It is estimated that approximately 7% of the population is in consistent poverty. In households headed by a lone parent, figures show that approximately 27% are living in consistent poverty. This is an area which needs attention. Many negative comments are made about lone parents and not all such parents are young women. A total of 2% of lone parents are younger than 20 years of age and the majority are between 35 and 39 years of age. It is not necessarily a young person's issue. Lone parents need to be supported in education. I welcome the changes in the rental accommodation scheme that allows them to take up work. Funding for lone parents is an investment in their children and will ensure those children will break out of the poverty cycle while also facilitating the parent to develop themselves and to enter employment and so reduce their dependence on welfare. The issue of lone parenting needs to be addressed on a consistent basis.

Acting Chairman: Seven and a half minutes remain between Deputies Doyle and O'Donnell.

Deputy Andrew Doyle: That means three and three quarter minutes each. I will try to deal with as many points as I can quickly.

It is good to welcome all increases and nobody wants to be a killjoy in saying the increases announced in the social welfare package are not welcome. The qualifying adult entitlements which are long overdue give recognition at last to people such as mothers and women who have stayed at home just as the Family Home Protection Act granted them protection. For many years women were glorified slaves. I refer to Deputy

Clune's point about allowing women to apply for benefit in their own right. This would complete the recognition of their rights as individuals.

The increases are based on a couple of basic principles announced by the Minister for Finance. He stated he would pin inflation next year to 2.4%, a halving of this year's rate of inflation which is 4.8%. From January to October 2007, the price of bread increased by 17.3%, milk and butter increased by 16.4% and eggs increased by 16.9%. That has already happened. We would be foolish not to acknowledge that this has a disproportionate effect on the poor and lower income families in society than on higher income families. I spoke to members of the local St. Vincent de Paul organisation who said that this year they are looking for food, not toys, in their collection. We collected food to send to Kosovo and other places but there is a need for this at home now. The increased cost of groceries is beginning to impact on poorer families.

Ireland has the sixth highest consumer debt ratio in the world at 154% of disposable income. That is an indication of the sticky wicket we are on. In announcing the social welfare package, the Minister referred to "below trend growth". That is an acknowledgement that things are slowing down. Approximately one third of people in or close to the poverty trap are from families where at least one person is at work.

Young carers sometimes take care of both parents. While these people are cost-effective for the State, they are not being rewarded. Approximately 40,000 people receive the carer's payment but it is estimated that 160,000 people provide over 3.5 million hours of work, which underlines the fact that the majority of carers are not paid.

Inclusion Ireland stated it is disappointed that the cost of disability is not related to people's needs, as opposed to their income. I asked a parliamentary question about the provision of medical cards to families with children with autism, to which the Minister replied on 5 December that she has no plans to provide for the granting of medical cards to any particular group as a whole, yet it was announced in the budget that the issue would be reviewed by the end of 2008.

An increase of €14 per week can be considered meagre in the context of inflation and other factors. I have more to say—

Acting Chairman: No. Go raibh maith agat. The Chair has to be impartial.

Deputy Andrew Doyle: —but I will save it for another occasion. I thought you were a friend of mine.

Acting Chairman: Thank you.

Deputy Kieran O'Donnell: Many of the issues have been touched on already. The key point for me is that the contributory and non-contributory

[Deputy Kieran O'Donnell.]

old age pensions have increased by 6%. On the face of it, that appears fine. However, when one views this in the context of inflation on food and heating, which is as much as 17%, it is grossly inadequate.

There has been no increase in the living alone allowance since 1997. People living on their own, be they unmarried or widowed, are one of the most vulnerable sectors in society. If a spouse passes away, the person who remains faces a significant loss of social welfare income. The living alone allowance must be increased.

The carer's allowance has only increased by €14 and the disability allowance has increased by €12. The costed disability payment, which was sought by Inclusion Ireland, was not given even though many costs are associated with having a disability.

The Government made a commitment to raise the income limits for medical cards to double the limit for parents with children under the age of six and also to treble the income limit for parents of children with a disability under the age of 18. We must put more resources into the area of disabilities.

The next issue is one I raised previously in the House. I refer to a change that could be introduced without great difficulty. When a person reaches 65 years, he or she is entitled to a contributory old age pension and at the age of 66 a person is entitled to a non-contributory old age pension. People should be given prior notice approximately nine months in advance of retirement age, as it is taking five or six months to process these claims. In the case of late applications, no arrears are paid on non-contributory pensions. In the case of contributory pensions, one year's full payment is paid in arrears but otherwise the payment is made on a *pro rata* basis. We should be able to link with PPS numbers so that a person coming up to retirement age is notified. The increase in social welfare pensions is not high enough but if there were a linked system at least people would get paid from the date on which they are entitled to receive the payments. I feel strongly about this issue.

We should find a way to ensure that everybody who is entitled to FIS claims it. This is about delivery of service, which harks back to public sector reform. A proper delivery of service is required for people who are entitled to benefits. These are the keys points I wish to make. Obviously there are other areas to which I would like to refer but time is limited.

Deputy Martin Mansergh: I wish to share time with Deputies Gogarty and Blaney.

Acting Chairman: Is that agreed? Agreed.

Deputy Martin Mansergh: I welcome the Bill and the overall size of the social welfare package which is just short of €1 billion. This would cer-

tainly be one of the larger packages of recent years and has allowed increases to be made substantially ahead of inflation, giving a certain margin of safety, even allowing for the fact, as has been pointed out in contributions opposite, that certain items are rising disproportionately.

The measure I welcome most of all is the increase for dependant spouses of pensioners. This means a couple will get €423.30 which is up from €382.30. In 2009, the dependant spouse will be on an equal level. This increase represents 11%, which is certainly far ahead of inflation.

We are on target to hit one of the most important of our election pledges, which is to increase the pension to €300 by 2012. As the Minister pointed out, this is having an impact, in that there has been a decline in the risk of poverty among the elderly from 30% five years ago to 13.6% in 2005 or 2006. The figure will probably be lower again next year.

An extra week of the free fuel allowance worth €18 per week has been announced. Given the rise in energy prices, I would like to see a focus on this in the future also.

I welcome the increased carer's allowance. Carers do an enormously important and valuable job which deserves recognition.

Child benefit, which used to be called children's allowance, is also up to €166 a week, which compares to just over £30 in 1997. I am also pleased to see the grant of €1,000 has been increased by 10% to €1,100. Since 1997, child care costs have risen considerably and nobody is pretending this covers all or most of the extra cost but, nonetheless, it is a valuable contribution in what was up to ten or 12 years ago a very neglected area.

Deputy Varadkar referred briefly to community employment schemes. He correctly stated that they are in some respects sheltered employment, but they are valuable, not alone for the participants but for a variety of community and non-commercial organisations. There are artificial rules applying to the older cohort, rather than the people in their 20s or 30s, where they are happy in employment doing an invaluable job. Their positions should be secured as they can be difficult to replace.

I would be interested in a debate on social welfare reform. To be fair to Ministers dating back over 20 years to the Commission on Social Welfare report, there has been a good deal of social welfare reform and the present project will bring qualified dependants to the levels of spouses.

This debate has been peppered with comparisons between pay rises for the Taoiseach and Ministers and welfare. Much of this has been driven, not just by the Opposition but by the media. Today's *Irish Independent* referred to lavish rises being foolish and so on. I got out from my horde of cuttings an article from 6 May 2002, "O'Reilly's salary more than doubled in a year", which states that Independent News & Media

executive chairman Dr. Tony O'Reilly was paid a total of €876,000 last year, up from €390,000 in 2000. There was a row in *The Irish Times* two or three years ago about the basic salaries of the editor and the manager of approximately €323,000 — more than we are speaking of. I do not object to what those organisations pay themselves, but could they please spare us some of the hypocrisy and crow thumping of the editorials? I regard the editors of those newspapers as having no moral authority to speak on the subject.

Deputy Paul Gogarty: First, if I may beg the indulgence of the Acting Chairman, Deputy O'Connor as this will be my only opportunity before the event to announce that, in my capacity as Chairman of the Joint Committee on Education and Science, in light of the proposed water charge levy on schools which is a concern to all Deputies in this House and having heard the comments of the Taoiseach, the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government, Deputy Gormley, and Deputy Kenny, I have called an extraordinary meeting of this committee for Tuesday next at 2.30 p.m. to see if we can come to some solution. A solution can be found between the Departments of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government and Education and Science. It is important because schools cannot afford to pay this. I am sure there must be a way of giving a free water allowance and then, if a school went over a certain level, of paying for the difference. I hope the non-partisan debate from all Members will sort that out.

Acting Chairman: Deputy Gogarty might speak about the Bill now.

Deputy Paul Gogarty: It will be a pleasure to speak about the Bill. Some said I was a little critical of the budget in my contribution last night when I stated it was a little like the curate's egg, good in parts but turning one's stomach in others, when I referred to my education portfolio. The reason I said so was that I felt the investment in education was wholly necessary and it will cost the taxpayer in the long run.

With this legislation, I am delighted to see that the axe did not fall on social welfare. The Minister obviously felt the need to curtail some areas and I brutally disagree with him on education. Thankfully, most of the social welfare increases have exceeded the level of inflation and that will be welcomed.

Deputy Mansergh mentioned pay. I agree with him in some senses and disagree with him in others. Trying to speak about social welfare increases that are lower than the increase Ministers or Deputies get sends out a wrong message, for example, on deliberations in partnership talks. I very much welcome the belated decision to postpone the ministerial pay rises. It provides for more credibility in terms of the smaller increases proposed in this Bill. A couple of years ago when

the Deputies' pay rose by 13% I described it as urinating on the less well off, where pensioners were only getting 6%.

This time around we know the economic situation. I agree with the Minister that we must tighten up a little, although it is not quite a recessionary budget. Deputy Varadkar may agree with me on the stamp duty changes, that the measures will not have much of an effect and will result in a net cost to the Exchequer. Next year's provision for stamp duty receipts will be €340 million less. I am not sure how much of that €340 million is as a result of the stamp duty measures, but in a falling market we should have let the market continue to fall, let the first-time buyers pay the lower prices and perhaps include measures for those who will suffer as a result of negative equity. That €340 million, or whatever proportion of it, could have been spent better on education and, possibly, on increasing the social welfare measures.

That said, on the whole the provisions made were good and were necessary, and particularly, for example, the contributory pension which increases by €14 per week to €223.30 per week and the non-contributory pension which increased by €12 per week to €212 per week.

Another measure I welcome is the family support programme, which is now being revamped and will have a €6.5 million budget 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.

I would include there a point made by Opposition Deputies, that there are those who are entitled to the family income supplement but are not aware of it. Sometimes unfair comments are made about people who are dependent on the State, that they know every scam in the book to get their entitlements. That is plainly not the case. Many people who suffer social deprivation are not aware of half of their entitlements and lose out as a result, and perhaps more needs to be done to ensure that people collect their full entitlements. The better off in this society can claim every tax break in the book.

I welcome the fuel allowance increase, which is almost €2,200 up on the pre-budget position. I welcome the carer's allowance increase, which is necessary and is fantastic.

I take issue with the €2 per week increase in the qualified child allowance, which is not enough. CORI has stated that the momentum in tackling child poverty is lost by not dealing with this issue. The increase is less than the rate of inflation and in that context, perhaps next year we should look at increasing it by a substantial amount.

Deputy Niall Blaney: I thank Deputies Mansergh and Gogarty for sharing time with me.

[Deputy Niall Blaney.]

I welcome this opportunity to speak on the Bill in the House today. With a vibrant economy like ours, it is important to remember those who are vulnerable and perhaps less well off and to look after our carers and the elderly. Carers provide an invaluable service to their loved ones, a care for which one could not possibly be rewarded enough. Our nursing homes are pretty full, and yet we have so many dedicated caring people to care for their loved ones at home or elsewhere. We all have experience of the people concerned as we have them in our community and, some of us, in our families. For this reason, I was particularly pleased to see the hike in the home carer tax credit of €130 per year, to €900, in the budget delivered by the Minister for Finance, Deputy Brian Cowen, last week. There will also be a rise in carer's allowance and carer's benefit of up to €14 per week. The earnings threshold for entitlement to carer's benefit will increase by €12.50 to €332.50 per week, effective from April 2008.

The budget also delivered good news for older people with a €14 increase per week for contributory pensioners, with payments to qualified adults increasing by up to €27 per week. Non-contributory pension rates will increase by €12 per week to €212. Also — importantly for many elderly people — the duration of the fuel season will be extended by one week to 30 weeks, which is very welcome. There will be proportionate increases for those on reduced rates, from the first week of January 2008. The respite care grant will increase by €200 to €1,700 from June 2008.

The Government has reaffirmed its commitment to easing the burden on parents with young children through the budget. There is a hike in child benefit, with the lower and higher rates to increase to €166 and €203, respectively, per month. The early child care supplement is set to increase by €100 per child per year to €1,100. This supplement is of significant benefit to parents and families. The back to school clothing and footwear allowance, of which many avail, will increase by €20 to €200 for children aged between two and eleven years and by €20 to €305 for children aged 12 to 22 years, where appropriate. These measures will take effect from June 2008. Some €2 million extra is also to be provided for the school meals scheme. I am confident more schools will take up this initiative.

There is also an increase in maternity and adoptive benefit of €14 per week in the minimum rate, bringing it to €221.80 per week, effective from January 2008. The upper income threshold for entitlement to the one parent family payment will increase by €25 per week to €425 from May 2008. A single reformed method for assessing benefit and privilege from parents' income for the jobseeker's allowance will be introduced from April 2008. The annual grant payable as part of the back to education allowance scheme will also increase by €100 to €500 from September 2008.

I commend the Minister for Social and Family Affairs, Deputy Cullen, who is well aware of the needs of the more vulnerable members of society, whether the elderly, the less well-off or carers. I know from speaking to my constituents in County Donegal how appreciative they are of the measures he has introduced and the increases in social welfare that have taken effect in recent years. I am sure he will continue in the same vein and I assure him of our support. These measures will help to foster a more secure living environment for those most in need, which has proven to be a priority for the Government. I look forward to further successful years for the Minister in the Department of Social and Family Affairs.

Acting Chairman: I now call on the Minister for Social and Family Affairs, Deputy Cullen, who is very welcome. The Chair has been directed to put the question by 5 p.m.

Minister for Social and Family Affairs (Deputy Martin Cullen): I thank all colleagues for their contributions to the debate on the first of the two social welfare Bills. There is a general welcome on all sides of the House for many of the proposed measures. This is important, as we seek to ensure those in society who need support are given that support and that we target resources to the less well-off. In recent years the Government has done outstanding work in putting together packages in this regard, particularly in the case of old age pensions, carer's allowance, children, etc.

I know colleagues on the other side of the House can pick out some areas and suggest payments should be greater. That may be true and would be all very well if we only had one payment to make. However, we have a significant range of areas to deal with. The budget for the Department of Family and Social Affairs which has risen dramatically during the years is now just under €17 billion. It has risen at a time when unemployment has dropped to almost record lows; we effectively have full employment. This demonstrates that the policy changes made in the Department have been significant and far-reaching and reflected the needs of the country now compared to ten, 15 or 20 years ago when most of the Department's resources and efforts were aimed at the high numbers of unemployed.

We now look to a much more constructive, interventionist approach with specific policies across a significant range of areas, which is an important responsibility. In that context, we have choices to make as to how best to use our resources. While I respect and accept the fact that people will seek dramatic and substantial increases in isolation in certain areas, when one puts together a social welfare package, one must look right across the spectrum to maximise the resources available. I acknowledge and thank my officials for their assistance in doing this and

working through the different areas with me to see how we could do it.

Many Deputies raised interesting and important issues. Deputy Shortall spoke about the State contributory pension. One of the main commitments influencing the formation of the 2008 budget package with regard to weekly rates of payment for pensioners was the commitment to increase the basic State pension by approximately 50%, to at least €300 per week by 2012, as set out in the programme for Government. The budget package provides for increases of €14 in the State contributory pension, bringing the weekly rate to €223.30. Increases in pensions over many years have been one of the major achievements of the Government. Since 2002 the level of the State contributory pension has increased by over 50%. It has increased from €147.30 to €223.30 following the budget. By national or international measures, this is a significant increase. I am satisfied the Government will continue to build on this and that the target of €300 a week by 2012 will be achieved over the next four budgets.

Deputy Enright and others referred to the living alone allowance. This allowance is an additional payment of €7.70 per week made to persons aged 66 years or over who are in receipt of certain social welfare payments and who live alone. It is also available to persons under 66 years of age who live alone and receive payments under one of a number of invalidity type schemes. The allowance is intended as a contribution towards the additional costs pensioners face when they live alone. However, the downside is that this is lost when they need to live with someone else.

The policy for many years with regard to support for pensioners has been to give priority to increasing the personal rates of pensions, rather than supplements such as the living alone allowance. This aims to improve the position of all pensioners, which is the correct approach. We have substantially improved the lot of pensioners right across the spectrum, which has been of far greater significance than just increasing the living alone allowance for a smaller number. While colleagues in the House have spoken about this in the past, it has not been raised for some time. There is a logical reason for this. We have done much for the generality of pensioners and the increases have been significant. That was the correct approach. At the time the living alone allowance was introduced pensions were much smaller than they are now and there were not as many resources. This was recognised at the time and an effort was made. Nowadays, however, more effort is put into increasing the size of the pension. As I said, since 2002 the contributory pension has increased by more than 50%. This has been far more meaningful and far better for all pensioners, including those living alone, than targeting of the living alone allowance would have been. I intend

to maintain a strong pace towards the target of €300 per week by 2012. That is the correct approach because those living alone also benefit directly.

The take-up of child income support and family income supplement, FIS, was raised by Deputies Enright, Shortall and Curran. The Government remains focused on substantially reducing child poverty. The level of commitment was particularly prominent in budget 2008, in which I announced a range of targeted measures and supports costing more than €147 million in a full year and €194 million if we include the early child care supplement which goes through the Department of my colleague, the Minister of State at the Department of Health and Children with responsibility for children. This package of just under €200 million is specifically to benefit children in low income families and those on social welfare. The budget provided social welfare dependent families with increases of at least 6% in overall child income support through a combination of child benefit, qualified child increases, back to school clothing and footwear allowance and the early child care supplement. This is well above anticipated increases in prices and earnings for 2008. For example, a social welfare dependent family with two children, one under six years and one between six and 12 years of age, will receive more than €8,000 per year or €77 per week in child support.

Children are members of families and the main route out of family poverty is employment. Therefore, it is important to avoid creating disincentives to employment through child income support measures while addressing child poverty. That was one of the messages stated by the various groups with which I met when we discussed these matters at the forum. There is a fine line which must be carefully monitored between providing support and removing the incentive to go out to work and get back into society, thus making a contribution. It is clear that improving the circumstances of children by facilitating their parents in going out to work is better for everybody concerned.

The revamped activation and family support programme will have a budget of €6.5 million next year. Among other things, the programme will provide or co-fund training and development programmes for particularly disadvantaged social welfare customers and their families, including very young lone mothers. The latter, in particular, is an area that needs to be dealt with. The education of many young parents is not up to a great standard. Many also have low levels of literacy. We need to provide the resources to allow them to return to the workplace. This new programme will seek to address specifically the issues and deficiencies they have in their ability to return to the workplace. As I said, research has shown that poverty is more likely to be concentrated in larger families. In this context, the new FIS thresholds,

[Deputy Martin Cullen.]

with substantial increases in all payments, concentrate additional resources on larger families. This year's threshold increase of €10 per child continues the refocusing towards larger families.

Since the 1994 ESRI survey referred to by Deputy Enright, there have been substantial improvements with consequent significant increases in the take-up of FIS. Deputy Shortall also raised this issue. In the period 1997 to 2007 the take-up has increased from under 13,000 families to over 21,000. It is expected this will increase to approximately 29,000 families in the coming period when claims in hand are processed. This is a significant expected increase and due to the efforts made, as mentioned by a number of Deputies, to alert people who are not in the social welfare system but are in low income employment that in many cases FIS is available to support them. This is a definite help to many families. Because it is aimed at those in employment, it represents a move away from keeping people in the system and towards supporting them in the workplace, while recognising that they do need the support of the State.

A number of Deputies mentioned carers, including Deputies Enright, Shortall and Durkan. According to the 2006 census, there are approximately 50,000 people providing care for more than 43 hours per week, or just over six hours per day. Of these, 14,068 are classified by principal economic status as being at work. There are more than 34,000 in receipt of carer's allowance and carer's benefit, while approximately 42,000 received a respite care grant in 2007. The 2006 census does not give information on the number of hours worked by persons in employment; however, a significant proportion of the 14,068 classified as being at work are working more than 15 hours per week. As such, they would not satisfy the full-time care and attention requirement for carer's allowance, carer's benefit or the respite care grant.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: Is it not a problem that persons who are providing significant care do not qualify for these allowances?

Deputy Martin Cullen: I will not argue the point, but I would like to see the ceilings change and will continue to consider this. As the Deputy can appreciate, because the base is already so high in many areas, even marginal movement can impose a huge cost on the taxpayer. However, I recognise the value of carers, as care in the home has a positive impact from the point of view of the State. I would like to see an expansion of the allowance schemes for carers, although they have become a lot more flexible in recent years compared to the tight criteria that applied in the past. We must continue to do more.

Deputy Enright correctly pointed out that it would be inconsistent with European Court of

Justice jurisprudence to rely on a two-year or any definitive period for determining habitual residence. Since the introduction of the habitual residence condition in May 2004 the Department has used the five European Court of Justice criteria to determine the issue. Thus, the two-year rule does not apply. This approach was set down in published guidelines from the beginning. For greater transparency, the five criteria established by the ECJ were last year included in primary legislation, namely, the Social Welfare and Pensions Act 2007. As with decisions on other aspects of social welfare claims, the customer can exercise full rights of review and appeal.

With effect from 24 September, payment of the qualified adult allowance in all new State pension claims is made directly to the pensioner's spouse or partner. Deputy Flynn spoke about this at some length. This change is in line with the commitment in the programme for Government to provide qualified adults — the wives, husbands or partners of those receiving social welfare allowances — with their own pension payments. From September the allowance has automatically been given to the partner. It is not a matter of someone ticking a box on his or her behalf; the partner is entitled to the payment in his or her own right. If couples already receiving allowances want to receive separate payments, this can be facilitated. However, from now on separate payments will be made automatically.

Deputy Olwyn Enright: Does that mean couples currently in receipt of allowances will have to apply for separate payments as it will not change automatically?

Deputy Martin Cullen: No, it is more complex than that. Many issues come into play in that regard. Most seem to be happy with the current arrangement, although there are a few who are not. However, if they want to change the arrangement, we can facilitate them.

Deputy Olwyn Enright: Do both members of a couple need to agree?

Deputy Martin Cullen: There must be agreement, yes. There are historically complex issues involved.

Question put and agreed to.

Social Welfare Bill 2007: Committee and Remaining Stages.

Section 1 agreed to.

NEW SECTIONS.

Deputy Arthur Morgan: I move amendment No. 1:

In page 3, before section 2, to insert the following new section:

2.—The Minister shall, within the next 12 months, complete a review to determine and set new longer term benchmarks against which the evolution of social welfare rates can be measured.

There are systematic weaknesses or bottlenecks in the system that need to be ironed out. It would be constructive if that were accepted from the outset. My first amendment addresses one bottleneck, namely, the benchmarking issue. A target was set under the national anti-poverty strategy in 2002 to achieve a rate of €150 per week, equivalent to approximately 30% of the gross average industrial earnings in 2002, for the lowest rates of social welfare by 2007. The minimum level of social welfare will be €197.80 once this legislation takes effect.

It is time to examine a long-term benchmark against which to measure the real cost of living or the real threshold for social welfare payments.

The Minister should introduce such a measure anyway, that is, to do a review within a year. I have couched my amendment in terms of one year because various Ministers have often told the House of reviews or examinations that can stagger on for four or five years before we learn of a result. In this context, I have sought for the review to be conducted within one year. I hope the Minister will consider accepting my amendment.

Minister for Social and Family Affairs (Deputy Martin Cullen): I appreciate the tradition in debates on the Social Welfare Bills is to table amendments in the same guise as Deputy Morgan's so as to create debate because Deputies are unable to table amendments that put a charge on the Exchequer. I do not mind this.

Deputy Olwyn Enright: We do.

Deputy Martin Cullen: The appropriateness of benchmarking social welfare rates has been actively considered for some time. In 2001, the Social Welfare Benchmarking and Indexation Group was established to examine the issues involved in developing a benchmark for the adequacy of adult and child social welfare payments. The group published its final report in September 2001 but did not achieve a consensus position on the desirability of establishing a formal benchmark. However, I would not accept that we are not using clear public indicators. The illustrated benchmark options examined in the report included 30% of the gross average industrial earnings and 50% of average weekly household income. The group could not agree which would be the better option, as there were advantages and disadvantages associated with each.

The report provides a valuable resource for the assessment of implications of adopting particular approaches to the uprating of social welfare payments and was considered by the Government as

part of the review of the national anti-poverty strategy, NAPS, in 2002. Recognising that the exact rate was a matter for the Government, the strategy set a target of €150 per week in 2002 terms for the lowest social welfare payments to be met by 2007. This target was achieved in budget 2007.

The current social partnership agreement, Towards 2016, commits the Government and the social partners to working together to achieve the NAPS target and to maintain the value of the lowest social welfare rates at this level during the course of the agreement subject to available resources. The programme for Government reiterates this commitment, but based it on maintaining the value of the rate achieved in 2007 of €185.80. In budget 2008, the lowest rates of payment increased by 6.5% to €197.80 per week, more than twice the projected rate of inflation for 2008, not only maintaining the value of the payment in line with Government commitment, but enhancing it.

Since 2004, the lowest social welfare rates have risen by 58% compared to the period's cumulative price index increase of 15%. In 2004, the lowest social welfare rate payment equated to 24% of the gross average industrial earnings. As Deputy Morgan knows, that figure stands at 30% now. Therefore, I cannot accept his amendment.

Deputy Arthur Morgan: It is always good to have a debate with the Minister, especially when he gets into a fiery humour and there is a bit of a row to liven it up. It is always interesting. Perhaps I should try to provoke the Minister now to get the debate going.

Deputy Martin Cullen: I am always in a good humour.

Acting Chairman: Through the Chair.

Deputy Arthur Morgan: It would not work through the Chair. It is useful to debate these matters.

The Minister stated that a review is ongoing, but does he accept my point about how to achieve long-term benchmarking? I am not sure he is saying "No" because I did not hear him reject the amendment, despite that being what he will do. Does he reject the notion of the amendment, namely, a long-term review of the benchmarking process to make it more effective? I am not sure that he is rejecting that concept completely.

Acting Chairman: Will we hear from the Minister?

Deputy Arthur Morgan: Am I back in?

Acting Chairman: It is a matter for the Deputy. I am quite amenable.

Deputy Arthur Morgan: We will hear from the Minister.

Acting Chairman: Does the Minister wish to respond?

Deputy Martin Cullen: The principle of the Deputy's suggestion is at work. I have given clear indications of how it is occurring, namely, through social partnership, NAPS inclusion and the targets set. I have also given clear indications of the figures at the time of the discussions and the current figures.

The debate on the Green Paper on Pensions may provide the Deputy with clarity on the issue. The paper will involve a long examination of what we need to do, how we should do it, what should be the targets, how to make up pensions in future and what would be considered a reasonable, acceptable and good quality standard of living in old age. When the consideration is finished and we have plotted the path forward, there will be issues surrounding many of the matters discussed in the House. While there will not be direct linkages, obvious aspects will emerge after the completion of the Green Paper's review. I will leave the amendment in that arena for the moment.

Deputy Arthur Morgan: Many poverty groups state that the current rates are insufficient to meet living needs. I referred to this matter when I stated that the people affected should not ask, cap in hand, for what is a basic threshold to meet living needs. I do not doubt that the Minister knows this through his constituency office. Many of my colleagues on this side of the House and I know it because these are the representations we are regularly receiving at our doors. People are unable to meet their living needs on these rates.

The poverty groups state that there must be benchmarking. The Department's current activity is not sufficiently focused or timeframed to get us to the point of putting a new benchmarking process in place. This is the essence of my amendment. As other Deputies want to introduce further amendments, I will rest.

Amendment put and declared lost.

Acting Chairman: I am advised that amendments Nos. 2 and 16 in the names of Deputies Morgan and Enright, respectively, are related. Therefore, I propose to take amendments Nos. 2 and 16 together.

Deputy Arthur Morgan: I move amendment No. 2:

In page 3, before section 2, to insert the following new section:

2.—The Minister shall, within the next 12 months, review the Fuel Allowance payment

and report to Dáil Éireann on the implications of increasing it substantially.”.

The fuel allowance period was extended by one week in this budget but it was not extended by one cent. I would like to hear from the Minister on the way he intends to address that issue. We called for the fuel allowance period to be extended from 29 weeks to 34 weeks to bring it to the end of April, which would be a more realistic target given the Irish climate. We have also called for a €10 per week increase, which would reflect the true cost of fuel in this State. Fuel poverty remains with us and we see the effects of it on the most isolated groups in our society. Older people and lone parents in particular are unable to afford fuel and there are knock-on consequences on other parts of the system in terms of ill-health, additional doctor, hospital and accident and emergency visits, and so on. It also affects children's education because the lack of heating in their homes means they miss school due to colds, influenza and so on. It has a series of knock-on effects and I look forward to hearing the Minister's reply.

Deputy Olwyn Enright: I want to put one or two points to the Minister. My amendment seeks a report on the payment of the fuel allowance as a once-off bulk payment. I would like the Minister to at least consider that and engage in a discussion with some of the relevant groups in the sector. I am sure the Minister, no more than myself and other Deputies here, has come across pensioners in particular who borrow from their credit union to buy a full delivery of whatever type of fuel they use, be it briquettes, coal, turf, logs or whatever. They then use the fuel allowance to pay off the loan they get to provide them with fuel. It is slightly cheaper to buy fuel in bulk, although if they use oil they have no alternative but to buy in bulk and that is causing hardship. I accept some people are not as good as others at balancing their budgets and it may be more convenient for them to get the payment every week, but this aspect should be examined with a view to at least giving people the option.

In seeking a report, I ask that it would also consider the option of transferring the free electricity allowance to the natural gas allowance, which is only available to people who are on the town gas system. Unfortunately, only a limited number of towns are on that gas system. With more apartments being built, particularly in the main towns of each county, some of which are not on the natural gas system, and where the central heating system is separately metered and so on, people are unable to transfer the allowance because that is not an option. Obviously, as more social housing units are being provided by developers, more people will be put into those type of units not necessarily by choice, but because that is all that is available from the local authority. That has become more of a problem recently. In asking the

Minister to consider this issue, I ask him to examine that aspect also.

Deputy Martin Cullen: As I said in my opening remarks, and Deputy Enright may have been the only Member in the House at the time, I accept that people can highlight different aspects of the social welfare package and look for substantial increases. That is all very well if one did not have to do what I have to do, which is to balance the budget across the spectrum and ensure we use the resources available to us, which now total €17 billion. Over 30% of all Government expenditure goes through this Department and that is significant across the system.

I was conscious of the benefit of the fuel allowance and examined it to see if there was anything I could do. I decided what was achievable this year was to extend the fuel allowance to 30 weeks. That was a good move which cost €5.6 million just to move that one week into the mix. Deputy Morgan is talking about adding €10 a week but it would cost tens of millions of euro to do so. That is a significant cost and if we decided to do that, we would have to consider not being as generous in other areas. I am not sure that is what people want. From my perspective, the main concentration for people who benefit from the fuel allowance, and I am sure the same people are talking to all Deputies, has been the massive increases in the old age pension, which is more beneficial than simply concentrating on that area.

As the Deputy will be aware, budget 2006 provided for an increase in the rate of fuel allowance of from €9 to €14 and up to €18 in this year's budget. There have been significant increases in recent budgets, and rightly so because fuel costs have increased dramatically in that period. I would like to have had the resources this year to do more in that area, but I was faced with choices and I had to get the balance right. By and large, across the spectrum of the €900 million package available for the budget for my Department that I worked on at some length, I hope that we have used resources in the best and most fairest way across the system.

Deputy Enright raised the point about a review of the fuel allowance. She said some people would prefer to get the allowance in a lump sum while others would like to have it paid out over a specific period. For the benefit of Members, a detailed review of the fuel allowance was carried out in 1998 and the review examined alternatives to the weekly payment method, including a single lump payment. A survey of recipients of the allowance on a customer panel showed that a majority, 58%, preferred weekly payment; only 22% wanted the lump sum payment, 12% favoured direct debit to a supplier, while 8% would rather have two lump sum payments during the fuel season. The review recommended continuing with the current payment system.

The weekly payment appears to be the most favoured by recipients on the scheme. I have no particular view regarding changing to a lump sum payment. I cannot recall anybody coming into my clinic to tell me they would prefer to get the fuel allowance in a lump sum. The weekly payment helps people to budget. They like to get their resources on a weekly basis. They feel secure in the resources they are getting. They know what they are getting every week and can better budget as a result. It is an issue we keep under constant review. All Ministers are aware of its importance. As fuel costs continue to rise, it is an issue I will re-examine in next year's budget.

Deputy Arthur Morgan: I acknowledged at the opening of my Second Stage contribution that there will be a difficulty in managing a budget in the face of the current economic downturn we are experiencing, but will the House accept that a jackass could run the scheme if we are to simply let it run on and not be imaginative? What we should be trying to bring to this budgetary situation is a change in our thinking. Front loading can sometimes result in significant savings. If a group of accountants were running some of these Departments, would they be more effective? From an accounting perspective it would probably be more cost-effective and efficient to front-load some of these benefits, such as fuel allowance, to save on the other costs I described earlier, including hospital and other medical bills, and also the effect on education. I am acutely conscious that we do not want to burden the taxpayer unnecessarily by even a single cent. Obviously competitiveness and other factors are affected as a consequence. Those who qualify for fuel allowance are at the other end of the spectrum of poverty and deprivation. It is a missed opportunity.

The extra week per year will have an additional cost of €5.6 million to the Exchequer. I do not see any extra allocation. Where is the €5.6 million coming from? Is a saving made in the overall budget?

Deputy Martin Cullen: It is in the €900 million additional budget package to the Estimates. It is clearly identified in budget 2008 in the breakdown of the costs of each of the different categories.

Deputy Arthur Morgan: Perhaps I should have tabled an amendment to provide for the Minister for Social and Family Affairs to attend a training course in negotiations so he could be more effective in getting a better deal with the Department of Finance and various Ministers.

Deputy Martin Cullen: I thought I did very well in getting over half the budget package. I cannot be expected to do better than that.

Deputy Arthur Morgan: The Minister is a lonely figure in that line of thought. It is not shared on this side of the House.

Acting Chairman: We might stick to the amendment.

Deputy Arthur Morgan: It is relevant because I am trying to enhance the Department's social welfare budget. One way of achieving that is to upskill the Minister in negotiating.

Deputy Martin Cullen: The Deputy himself could get into government and become the Minister for Finance.

Deputy Arthur Morgan: We have made the important points on this amendment but the Minister is not listening.

Deputy Martin Cullen: It is easy to be imaginative if one has the money. An extra €10 per week payment is very laudable and with which no one will disagree. To implement such a provision would cost €118 million, a significant amount of money. It would have to be taken from another provision which would lead to a reduction in, say, the old age pension or other welfare payments. The balance we struck in distributing the extra €900 million has met with a positive reception.

As a Minister and parent, I am becoming increasingly frustrated with people claiming the economy is in downturn or meltdown. That is irresponsible talk. The economy is growing better than most other economies. An economy's success is based on confidence, such as confidence in markets or international investors having confidence in investing in Ireland.

It is correct that the exceptional growth rates of 8% and 9% in recent years are no longer in place. However, they were not sustainable. No economy could inexorably maintain such growth rates. The economy has slowed to a more manageable growth rate.

It is important the message from everyone is that this is a good country in which to do business. By European and international standards, the economy is still growing strongly and ahead of the best. To talk about the changing difference in economic growth from 9% to 4% is reasonable. However, some experts in the House and outside it have described the economy as being in meltdown. That is humbug and rubbish. It should be knocked by every Member because it is not true.

Deputy Arthur Morgan: What about the Exchequer returns?

Deputy Martin Cullen: "Downturn" and "meltdown" do not fairly describe the economy. It is extremely strong and we are able to reflect that strength with this year's social welfare package. I am not referring specifically to Deputy Morgan but to those outside the House who present them-

selves as experts every day of the week. Some day in their lives they may get it right.

Deputy Arthur Morgan: That was a lovely after-dinner speech to a chamber of commerce, well practised by the Minister and his colleagues in various parts of the State. To say there has been no change in Revenue receipts is more than ridiculous.

It is unfortunate the Government was over-reliant on the property and construction sector. If it had managed it more carefully, we would not be in this situation.

Deputy Martin Cullen: Does the Deputy believe all the properties built over the past ten years should not have been built?

Deputy Arthur Morgan: The Government should have been cleverer with the resources it had to end that overdependency.

Deputy Martin Cullen: If Sinn Féin did not object to everything at local government level, it would have worked out better.

Deputy Arthur Morgan: There was a gross overdependency on revenue from the construction sector while the Government sat on its hands, asleep at the wheel.

Deputy Martin Cullen: Typical.

Deputy Olwyn Enright: Can we stick to the amendment?

Deputy Arthur Morgan: Of course, the Government worked with the construction sector for whatever reason. However, it ignored all other opportunities and let the economy go on automatic pilot.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: This has no relevance to the Bill.

Acting Chairman: Colleagues are anxious that we return to the amendment.

Deputy Arthur Morgan: This is relevant because if proper economic management was in place for the past ten years, we would have enough money to extend the fuel allowance and many other welfare payments.

Deputy Olwyn Enright: Will the Minister consider my point on the switch over to the natural gas allowance? It is a cost-neutral measure and will allow people, such as those in apartment blocks whose gas supply may be stored centrally, to change from the electricity allowance to the gas allowance.

Deputy Martin Cullen: That has been introduced. I have included gas in bottled form in the fuel allowance payment.

Deputy Olwyn Enright: I appreciate there was a review of the fuel allowance payment method nine years ago. While I accept the Minister will not introduce a review, a close eye should be kept on the issue. I know of people borrowing from credit unions to make a bulk purchase of fuel and then paying interest. I appreciate the 1998 review found the majority favour the existing system and there would be a cost in changing the process. However, it must be ensured the payment is not used to pay off loans because fuel products have to be bought in bulk.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Acting Chairman: Amendment No. 3 has been ruled out of order.

Amendment No. 3 not moved.

Deputy Arthur Morgan: I move amendment No. 4:

In page 3, before section 2, to insert the following new section:

2.—The Minister shall, within the next three months, report on the direct provision scheme for asylum seekers; highlight the hardship it is causing that group, and report to Dáil Éireann on the implications of increasing it before the next budget.”.

This amendment seeks a review by the Minister within three months of the direct provision scheme for asylum seekers. Asylum seekers receive €19.10 per week and €9.60 per week for children. Most children of asylum seekers attend school. The added expense of this is enormous, of which the Minister must have some understanding. The asylum process is lengthy. People who have been here for between five and eight years have visited my constituency office. If there is no recognition that €19.10 is not sufficient we need to review the length of the process or allow asylum seekers to work so that they can at least have the dignity of earning an income and lifting themselves out of dire poverty.

No doubt every Member of the House has dealt with asylum seekers and knows that their depression and loneliness are profound. A compassionate and humanitarian approach is required, whether by speeding up the process to 12 or 18 months or by providing for them to get a job, even part time, to earn their income.

Deputy Martin Cullen: The reception and integration agency of the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform is responsible for direct provision. The payment rate of €19.10 for an adult and €9.60 for a child, coupled with direct provision, is acceptable under all the conventions, particularly the UN convention.

Asylum seekers and their families are not considered to be at a higher risk of poverty than per-

sons who depend on social welfare payments, given the standards of goods and services available to them through direct provision. There is no evidence to support the point underlining the remarks of several Deputies that children receiving direct provision are in great need or suffering in some particular way. We would examine any such evidence.

I do not propose to accept the amendment.

Deputy Olwyn Enright: I support Deputy Morgan's amendment and disagree with the Minister's point. I accept that accommodation and food are provided but the figures for the payment remain as they were when direct provision was introduced. It is treated as pocket money, a term I dislike. Every group involved in this area, and the budget submissions from Combat Poverty, state that it causes difficulty for children and adults. The Minister has told me there is a school meals programme but not every school offers it. Children are at a disadvantage in not being able to avail of all school activities requiring payment, such as tours, or food.

I acknowledge that the Minister's Department is not responsible for the location of the direct provision centres but this needs to be considered. One recently opened in Emo in County Laois, between a motorway and a former national primary road, approximately six miles from Portlaoise. The people have to cross a roundabout on a motorway to get to the nearest shop which is a fair distance up the road. The payment of €9.60 for a child and €19.10 for an adult does not allow those people travel into the nearest town or village to avail of any services they need there. A taxi costs more than their weekly payment. It is an entirely different matter if one has a car and chooses to live there but the location causes difficulty for those accommodated there under direct provision. If the Government is intent on continuing the abysmal rate of payment it must examine where people are accommodated to ensure they can avail of amenities. They do not even have the option of bringing their children to the cinema, or doing other small things that most families take for granted.

I urge the Minister to review these limits and the habitual residents condition. Legal organisations involved inform me that there are social welfare officers misapplying this or still using the two year rule. The Minister may contradict this but that is what I have been told — I can try to get examples for him. It is important the rules are accurately applied. Will the Minister address any problems in that area?

Deputy Arthur Morgan: I do not know whether asylum seekers are at greater risk of poverty than the rest of the population. I suspect that many of the groups involved would refute the Minister's point but I will ask them for reports to support their claims.

[Deputy Arthur Morgan.]

The direct provision concept is wrong. The Mosney camp in east Meath is the centre closest to me. I recall when it was Butlins which we visited on school trips when it was brilliant craic with roller skating, boating and so on. I visit asylum seekers there frequently to discuss their problems and by the time I get to the car park I am depressed because the place is so bleak. The accommodation appears as it did back in the late 1960s or early 1970s.

The residents must take a taxi to the nearest town, Drogheda, which is approximately four or five miles away. If they walk two miles they can get a bus. Those costs add up but the people receive less than €20 a week which is appalling in human terms.

The amendment asks the Minister to report on the direct provision scheme for asylum seekers, within the next three months, highlight the hardship it causes that group and report to the Dáil on the implications of increasing it before the next budget. That is a minimal request and I hope the Minister will listen to it.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: On what does the Minister base his assertion that there is no evidence of poverty among asylum seekers? Any of the groups working in this area can tell him about the severe difficulties they face.

Surely research is not necessary to convince the Minister that it is exceptionally difficult to live on €19.10 per week. I am not suggesting people will starve because food is provided, though that is not ideal. How can a person survive on €19 per week? That payment was introduced in 1999 and has not increased since then so its value has decreased by at least 40% in the intervening years. How can a payment regarded as adequate in 1999 still be regarded so now when it has lost much of its value? This defies logic and this is the only welfare payment that has not increased over those years.

The Minister knows there are endless demands on families in terms of expenditure aside from food. An adult is only allowed €19.10 per week and a child €9.60 and this will not cover bus fares to town, let alone clothes, even from secondhand shops. How can the Minister have the brass neck to suggest there is no evidence of poverty among asylum seekers? His attitude is exceptionally mean-spirited and I call on him to acquaint himself with the realities of life for people in these circumstances, speak to the groups involved and review the level at which this payment is set.

Deputy Martin Cullen: I would agree with the Deputy if people were being asked to live on €19.10 per week but that is not the case.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: There are a great many things a person needs besides food and accommodation. What else does the Minister spend money on beyond the basics?

Deputy Martin Cullen: I will respond to the Deputy's point if she allows me. People are not being asked to live on €19.10 and €9.60 for every child. They receive accommodation and food. I would not suggest we are an ungenerous people and the asylum system has improved with applications being processed faster. I do not have direct responsibility for this area and I am not responsible for the payment, though I am happy to address the matter.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: The Minister is defending the situation.

Deputy Martin Cullen: We are dealing with the issue of habitual residence in a very narrow context but other schemes affected by habitual residence include the jobseeker's allowance, the non-contributory State pension, the blind person's pension, widow's and widower's pensions, guardian's payment, one-parent family allowance, carer's allowance and supplementary welfare allowance.

There is an issue at the root of all this and we wish to be as generous as we can on behalf of taxpayers but we cannot simply have no rules and regulations on how people come to Ireland and gain residency.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: Nobody is suggesting that.

Deputy Arthur Morgan: Nobody is suggesting that.

Deputy Martin Cullen: There must be basic rules and without them we know what the consequences could be. The habitual residence clause is one of the issues that affects a range of areas. When I gave the figures in a Dáil parliamentary question recently they were insignificant in terms of people caught in this position. People are moving through the system more quickly.

Deputy Olwyn Enright: It is significant for the people involved.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: On a point of order, this amendment relates to direct provision and I ask the Minister to confine his remarks to that area.

Deputy Martin Cullen: I have been generous in trying to deal with the question as direct provision has nothing to do with my Department. If Deputies do not want to listen to me there is nothing I can do about it and, therefore, I cannot accept the amendment. I do not provide direct provision.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: The Minister is trying to defend the indefensible.

Deputy Olwyn Enright: This amendment is allowed and direct provision is made through the Minister.

Deputy Martin Cullen: Direct provision is made through community welfare officers in the Department of Health and Children.

Deputy Olwyn Enright: The Minister has answered questions on this matter and has taken responsibility for it in the House in recent weeks.

Deputy Martin Cullen: I have spent the past 15 minutes trying to deal with the issue.

Deputy Olwyn Enright: A point must be made on child benefit because any Member of this House with children under 18 years of age is entitled to the payment, regardless of his or her salary. Children do not receive this through the asylum process. The Minister says these children are adequately catered for but I disagree with him and think most right thinking people would also disagree with him. It is wrong that the only extra money they receive is €9.60 per week and I agree with Deputy Shortall that €9.60 will not cover basic things such as clothes, school uniforms and entrance to sports facilities.

It seems the Minister does not want responsibility for this matter but I know, from talking to some of the groups involved, that nobody in Government is willing to take responsibility. These groups have contacted several Government Departments seeking to discuss direct provision and have it increased but nobody has been willing to engage in meaningful discussions. I ask the Minister to raise this issue at Cabinet level and even if the only area he will deal with relates to children that would be a good start. I urge the Minister to rethink Government policy on this issue.

Deputy Arthur Morgan: I wish to correct the record on a point the Minister made; nobody on this side of the House advocates an open door policy on entry to this country. We all recognise that a responsible process is necessary but I suggested earlier that the process of examining those claiming asylum must be expedited. This would have a positive effect on the exchequer and in the absence of this asylum seekers should be allowed to work. Not only is this an issue of income but it is an issue of dignity also because many of those who come here have significant qualifications and do not want to be dependent on the State; they would rather independence for the short period while their asylum applications are processed.

The Minister is being ridiculous on the issue of the €9.60 payment for children. What child does not want an occasional toy or birthday or Christmas gift? What can one buy for them for €19.10? I hope that when Members are searching for Christmas presents this year for children, such as nephews, nieces and other family members,

they check the prices and think of the difficulties facing asylum seekers. Asylum seekers must face these difficulties all year long. It is unfortunate the Minister is not taking a humanitarian approach to this, rather than a solely budgetary view.

Deputy Martin Cullen: As a parent I reject the suggestion that I do not care about children and do not understand their needs. I do not disagree with the sentiments of the Deputies in that we all want to see people move through the system as quickly as possible. Huge resources and great effort went into transforming this area some years ago, led by the current Ceann Comhairle. These changes were needed and were a recognition of the demands made of this country. We are a generous, welcoming people and many people come here for better lives. They are welcome to this goal but there is a process they must go through to ensure they meet the reasonable requirements asked of them. Nobody wants to stop this process or punish anyone.

The process that we have has improved a great deal in recent years and, while I understand the Deputies' points, I am dealing with a process that is in place to ensure we manage this issue as a society. When people come through the system they may then receive good outcomes.

Amendment put and declared lost.

An Ceann Comhairle: Amendment No. 5 in the name of Deputy Enright is out of order as it involves a potential charge on Revenue.

Deputy Olwyn Enright: I do not understand how this amendment is adjudged to involve a charge on Revenue. The Estimates make provision for the numbers eligible and becoming eligible for a State pension. That is what determines the cost to the Exchequer—

An Ceann Comhairle: With all due respect, we cannot have a debate on the amendment. Standing Orders are explicit and the ruling has been made.

Amendment No. 5 not moved.

An Ceann Comhairle: Amendments Nos. 6, 7, 24 and 26 are related and may be discussed together.

Deputy Olwyn Enright: I move amendment No. 6:

In page 3, before section 2, to insert the following new section:

2.—The Minister shall, within 1 month of the commencement of this Act, lay before each House of the Oireachtas, a report on the progress of the National Carers Strategy.”.

[Deputy Olwyn Enright.]

This issue has already been thrashed out to some degree via Priority Questions earlier in the week and on Second Stage. The Minister is aware of my dissatisfaction with the failure to deliver the national carers strategy on schedule. Amendments Nos. 6 and 7 propose timeframes for the purpose of keeping the Minister on his toes and ensuring the strategy is in place by next summer, as he has promised it will be.

Amendment No. 6 proposes the publication of a progress report on the strategy within one month of the commencement of the Bill. I understand there have been brief discussions, as opposed to proper consultation, with some of the associations involved, with a view to implementing the strategy. The budget offers some improvements in terms of payments to carers. Like many of my colleagues, however, I have concerns. The allowance is increased for those who are eligible by €14 per week. However, many carers remain ineligible for payment. I am opposed to the stringent application of the means test to the income of the carer's spouse rather than basing it on the carer's own income. This is something that should be changed as part of the carers strategy. There must also be flexibility in regard to other allowances. The Minister must have discussions with his colleagues, particularly the Minister for Health and Children, to ensure respite care, for instance, is available for those who need it and that they can avail of the grant and use it for the purpose for which it is intended.

Amendment No. 7 proposes that the Minister should, within three months of the commencement of the Bill, produce a progress report on the levels of support available to young carers, of whom there are some 3,000. In an ideal world, no persons aged less than 18 years should be placed in the position of carer. The people concerned are to be commended on the responsibility they take upon themselves at such a tender age. Many of them are conscious of an obligation to the person for whom they care and are certain it is what they want to do. However, the State has a responsibility to lessen the burden that caring responsibilities place on young people. Will the Minister ensure this report is based on consultation with these 3,000 young people, many of whom combine their caring role with full-time education? They are likely to be the least vocal and engaged in terms of drawing attention to their position. When I attend meetings of the Carers Association and other groups, it is generally older carers in attendance and making their voices heard. It is important that young carers are engaged in the process.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: Amendments Nos. 24 and 26 in my name seek to address two anomalies in the operation of the carer's allowance system. The first relates to those carers who care for more than one person. The system as it operates is

unfair in respect of their position. If a person is providing full-time care for two or more people, thus enabling them to live independently and remain outside institutional care, he or she should be paid an allowance in respect of each of those persons. I do not understand the justification or rationalisation for not recognising this type of contribution and providing an appropriate allowance in each case. Will the Minister reconsider this rule or, at least, provide some justification for it?

Amendment No. 26 relates to the situation where people are not entitled to credits while in receipt of carer's allowance unless they were claiming for credits in the two years prior to being granted the allowance. Many carers previously worked in the home and did not sign on for credits and were not in receipt of any social welfare payment. There is no justification for denying such carers the right to be awarded credits for the period in which they provide care. The failure to award these persons credit for the duration of their caring duties has long-term implications in terms of their pensions. It is a mean-spirited rule and the cost implications of a change would not be significant. It is unfair to those who may have been full-time carers of their own children in the home and subsequently take on the care of an elderly parent or parent-in-law. They are denied credits simply because they were not in employment beforehand or claiming social welfare benefits. There is no justification for this and I ask the Minister to review it with a view to correcting it in next year's budget.

Deputy Martin Cullen: There seems to be little difference between us on this issue. We are *ad idem* in our desire to have the carers strategy in place. The relevant groups are interested in participating but it has taken more time than we wished to get the process going. Some of the reasons are outside our control. There are differing views and the emphasis placed by various groups is somewhat different. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that we will secure an outcome. I hope it is one that is driven by a broad consensus.

Deputy Shortall raises two valid points. I will consider the issues she has raised in the context of the strategy. I remind the Opposition spokespersons that if they wish to raise any specific issues as we move forward with implementing the strategy, I am open to discussions individually or by other means. I never pretended I was the font of all ideas on any subject. I am not sure we will secure all the outcomes we seek, but it is important to discuss any issues that arise to better shape a strategy that will best meet the needs of those concerned. Although I accept Deputy Shortall's points as valid, I will not accept the amendments because they are not suitable for inclusion in primary legislation. However, I have set out my position in principle.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: The programme for Government includes a commitment to produce a carers strategy before the end of this year. Why is this process delayed and what is the timescale now envisaged by the Minister? What opportunity will there be to avail of his invitation to spokespersons to contribute to the process?

Deputy Martin Cullen: Several matters of equal importance to this were being dealt with at the time I took up my Ministry. The timeframe I am working towards is to have this completed by next summer. I hope the various groups will adhere to that timetable.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: That is six months behind schedule. Why is it so late?

Deputy Martin Cullen: As I have often said, deadlines sometimes create a false sense of focus that is not always helpful. The focus should be to achieve a good outcome. So be it if that takes some additional months to achieve, as in this case.

I am open to having discussions with the spokespersons directly. If they prefer to feed into the process in some other way, I will structure it such that anybody who wishes to express his or her view can do so. As I said, however, I am pleased to meet directly with Deputy Shortall and others to discuss the matter. I do not have an issue with this.

Deputy Olwyn Enright: It is very important to have a focus and dates give us something to work with. This delay has not been caused by the strategy being very complicated but by the process not having even started. This must be recognised. Any of the carers to whom I have spoken is not happy with the delay which has not been caused by carers but by the Department.

Two issues immediately come to mind in bringing the strategy forward. The first is that if a carer is switched, meaning that person dies or leaves, the person being cared for must be re-examined, despite their care needs having already been established. That is a waste of resources within the Department which must be addressed.

Will the Minister deal with the delays in his own Department in processing carer's allowance applications? I accept that doctors' reports etc. are required and that the payment is backdated, but if a person really needs the money, it is of no use knowing it will be paid in six months. A person cannot borrow against it because receipt of the allowance is not guaranteed. The time lag is unacceptable. We are all involved in tabling questions to try to find out when people will receive their payments but the matter must be dealt within the Department. It does not relate, in particular, to the strategy.

Deputy Martin Cullen: That will wash out of the system quickly. It is a new programme with new processes in place and there have been

delays because of the sheer volume of applications. It is unfortunate but the officials in the Department are dealing with the matter as quickly as possible. The Deputy correctly indicated the allowance is backdated.

We need a focus but the timeframe is not the be all and end all of everything. The quality of the focus and what we achieve as we come out the other end is important. We should commence the process and, more importantly, complete it to see where we go from there.

Amendment put and declared lost.

Deputy Olwyn Enright: I move amendment No. 7:

In page 3, before section 2, to insert the following new section:

2.—The Minister shall, within 3 months of the commencement of this Act, lay before each House of the Oireachtas a report on the levels of support available to young carers.”.

Amendment put and declared lost.

Deputy Olwyn Enright: I move amendment No. 8:

In page 3, before section 2, to insert the following new section:

2.—The Minister shall, within 3 months of the commencement of this Act, lay before each House of the Oireachtas, a report on increasing the Living Alone Allowance.”.

The Minister dealt with some of my comments yesterday on Second Stage in his conclusion today. He indicated that priority had been given to personal rates rather than supplements and that the Government had improved the lot of pensioners. I wish to make the point again, as it is important to do so, that I have a difficulty in that the living alone allowance has not been increased since its introduction approximately nine years ago.

If the old age pension is increased, every person in receipt of it will benefit rather than a small group. The difficulty with a living alone allowance is that where a couple is living together and one passes away, whether the couple in question consists of a brother and sister, husband and wife or partners, the other will only have to buy food and clothes for one person but every other household bill will be as expensive as before, whether it is for light, heat, electricity or insurance. In that sense, the living alone allowance has helped such persons to cope with the change from a cost perspective when living on their own. It is more difficult for persons who had not been used to being on their own. It is an important allowance. Although I appreciate everything cannot be increased, this has merit. It may not change as a result of this amendment but I ask the Minister to consider the issue in order that people can be

[Deputy Olwyn Enright.]

helped, particularly those in the circumstances I have outlined.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: I support the amendment. I believe it is actually 14 years since the allowance was increased. Does the Minister accept the principle that it is more expensive for one person to live alone than what it costs two people to live together?

Deputy Martin Cullen: I do.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: Does he accept that many of the overheads are the same for one or two people? In recognition of this, surely there is a demand for the living alone allowance to keep pace with inflation?

Deputy Martin Cullen: Of course, I accept the principle and it would be a fool who would not. Clearly, it is more expensive for one person to live on his or her own as many of the overheads undoubtedly remain the same. My essential point on this matter is that it was in recognition of this fact that so much emphasis was put on increasing the rates of different pensions in recent years.

The rates have been increased much more than if the living alone allowance had been maintained at the proportion it was some years ago. Going back to 1996 and keeping pace, it would be worth about €17 at this stage. I am not saying this is unimportant but in the meantime the rate of comparability on the pension side has moved way beyond this. The decision taken was that it was far better to do more for everybody than to just have a narrow focus. That was the correct approach.

The rates of pension in place at the time had significance for persons living alone but given the transformation in the pension system in recent years, the right approach was to look at the overall pension position. I was going to say most of us would end up alone but that would not be true. It will be one or other of the partners.

Deputy Olwyn Enright: The Minister has a 50-50 chance.

Deputy Martin Cullen: The way we are going, the female side of the partnership is living longer; therefore, women will last longer than their male counterparts. The bad news for males in the House is that it will continue this way, according to all projections.

The bottom line is that I do not deny it is an issue which can be very difficult to deal with. I am not dismissive but the Government has tried to lift all boats dramatically. Considering the comparable figures of maintaining the rate and what has happened across all pension payments, the increases have been way ahead of what would have been needed in the living alone allowance. That was the right way to proceed rather than concentrating on one cohort in the spectrum.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: I do not accept what the Minister is saying as there is no logic to it. He has just stated he accepts the principle that it is more expensive for one person to live alone. If that is the case, irrespective of what is being done in general with pensions, by not increasing the living alone allowance those living on their own are being penalised.

Deputy Martin Cullen: No, that is not true.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: That is exactly what is being done. The people concerned are not keeping pace with pensioners who are living with somebody else or who have a bigger family. That is the reason I asked the Minister about the principle. If he accepts that it is more expensive for one person to live alone, he must recognise the fact this by making the living alone allowance keep pace with inflation. There is no justification for the failure to do so.

I do not know what the Government is at. Has this issue been overlooked by the Department and the Minister, as there is no justification for it? The Minister should leave aside the term "lifting all boats". Persons living alone are placed at a disadvantage by the policy which failed to increase the living alone allowance over those 14 years. This issue needs attention. There is no reason single pensioners should be placed at a disadvantage *vis à vis* persons living within a family. The Minister should consider the matter in the coming year.

Deputy Olwyn Enright: I agree with the points made by Deputy Shortall in this regard. A couple will get €424 and a person living alone will get €212. The single person's amount needs to pay all the same bills, with the exception of food and clothing. It is simply not possible for them to do it. The Minister needs to give considerably more attention to this area. It is wrong to refer to giving the increase across the board. It does not sort out the problem for the person who is living alone and needs to face those bills. The small amount they get from the allowance is almost an irrelevance in terms of the costs they are facing.

Owing to restrictions on costs to the Exchequer, we were constrained in the way we could word the amendment. We have asked the Minister to provide a report on the living alone allowance. I ask him to genuinely investigate the benefits of increasing it and get an accurate report from his departmental officials of the additional costs faced by a person living alone so we can have a fair discussion on the matter. While all areas of social welfare provision have justification, people in these circumstances are genuinely struggling to make ends meet. Not increasing the allowance has made their lives extremely difficult. Listening to people directly affected by the issue brings home very clearly the difficult conditions under which they are living.

Deputy Martin Cullen: Of course people will be worse off living alone than living with others. There is no disputing that — why would I say something different?

Deputy Róisín Shortall: The Government does not recognise it in the social welfare system.

Deputy Martin Cullen: It is a fact regardless of one's age. A person does not need to be old for the costs to be different. Throughout life the costs are greater for someone living alone than sharing with others.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: Why does the Government not recognise that in the payments?

Deputy Martin Cullen: The difference between us is either a policy difference or we are involved in semantics and optics. I will try to put it this way. Either the Opposition Deputies believe we should not have raised old age pensions to the level we have——

Deputy Róisín Shortall: That is a cheap shot.

Deputy Martin Cullen: It is not a cheap shot.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: It is entirely a cheap shot.

Deputy Martin Cullen: It is not. It is the opposite side——

Deputy Róisín Shortall: The Minister should stop playing those games.

Deputy Martin Cullen: The Deputy is the one playing the games, not me.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: The Minister was asked about a specific policy area and should answer.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy should allow the Minister to speak without interruption after which she will get another chance. That is the way it works, as the Deputy should know well.

Deputy Martin Cullen: I deal with pensioners at clinics, as does the Deputy. The general view among them is that the approach taken of substantially increasing pension rates across the system has been right. The Deputy is suggesting that for the optics we should not have increased them by as much.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: It is not for the optics. It is for pensioners paying bills.

Deputy Martin Cullen: I did not interrupt the Deputy.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Minister must be allowed to finish his contribution.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: The Minister should not be so disingenuous.

Deputy Martin Cullen: The Deputy is being disingenuous. The correct approach in this regard adopted by Fianna Fáil-led Governments since 1997 has been to look after all pensioners in a very substantive way, which has been of considerable benefit to people living alone. The increase has been far greater by addressing the overall pension position than simply concentrating on the living alone allowance. The benefit to the individual has been far higher than by maintaining the rate, as the Deputy has suggested, which would have seen the rate go up to approximately €17 when comparing the position in 1996 with today. Individual pensioners as well as couples have gained far more than they would have if we had simply inched along with the overall pension and inched along with the living alone allowance. That is the reality.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: It is not true.

Deputy Martin Cullen: The figures are blindingly obvious.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: The point is that single people have fared relatively poorly.

Deputy Martin Cullen: The Deputy's argument is that we should have kept the overall pension rates down and for optics' sake increased the living alone allowance. As a policy principle——

Deputy Róisín Shortall: The Minister needs to be honest in his line of argument.

Deputy Martin Cullen: I am being honest with the Deputy.

An Ceann Comhairle: We cannot have this crossfire. The Minister without interruption.

Deputy Martin Cullen: I am being perfectly straightforward and honest with the Deputy.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: The Minister is not. He is twisting the argument as usual.

Deputy Martin Cullen: The Deputy is arguing that to have increased the living alone allowance would have been far better than increasing the overall pension position. We took an approach of substantially increasing the overall pension position for both the couple and the individual. The benefit to the individual has been considerably greater than it would have been if we had simply moved the *pro rata* basis of the living alone allowance. That is simple and straightforward. All pensioners have said to me that the correct approach is the one we have pursued in Government of addressing the overall benefit of all pensioners by increasing substantially the pension for both couples and individuals in recent years.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: We should bring this discussion to a close because we are going around in circles. The Minister's failure to recognise the additional costs that a single pensioner has over and above a pensioner living with somebody else has meant that in recent years single pensioners have lost out relative to pensioners living as couples or in larger family situations. Single pensioners have lost out relative to couple pensioners. I do not understand the Minister's justification for that. He started by accepting that single pensioners have higher living costs than pensioners living in couples and yet he did not recognise it in the social welfare code. I do not know why he did not do so.

Deputy Martin Cullen: I disagree.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: It may have been an oversight by the Minister and his officials. Given that they have lost out relative to pensioners living as couples, we now need to pay attention to that area and ensure they do not fall further behind.

Deputy Olwyn Enright: The Minister's argument is flawed because he does not acknowledge that we all have welcomed the increases in the old age pension. He is deliberately ignoring the specific point we are making that it is more expensive for somebody living on his or her own. There is no point in spending any more of the House's time on the matter because the Minister is not genuinely trying to take on board the points we are making. However, I ask him to reconsider it. While we all welcome the increases in the old age pension, the Minister needs to take cognisance of the points we have raised. He needs to genuinely listen to the arguments being made rather than just trying to twist them in the manner he has done. What he claims we have said is not the point we have made, as the record will clearly show. While those 157,500 people in receipt of the living alone allowance will welcome the increase they have received in the old age pension, they would still make the very points we are making about the costs and difficulty that in relative terms they are far worse off when paying bills than others who have the advantage of being able to share.

Deputy Martin Cullen: I considered this issue and I had a choice. I could have increased the living alone allowance and kept the pension levels at a reduced figure. It was a simple choice in many respects. The Government took the view that overall benefit to all pensioners, including people living on their own, is the best way to achieve the best outcome, which is what we have done.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: We are talking about the relative position.

Deputy Martin Cullen: I know what the Deputy is talking about.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: I keep saying it is relative and the Minister is denying that.

Amendment put and declared lost.

Deputy Olwyn Enright: I move amendment No. 9:

In page 3, before section 2, to insert the following new section:

2.—The Minister shall, within 3 months of the commencement of this Act, lay before each House of the Oireachtas, a report on the reform of the Rent Supplement Scheme.”.

The points about the rent supplement have been made well in the past fortnight. The Minister carried out a review last year and is doing another one. Without needing to reiterate what I said yesterday in this regard, I ask that a report be published as soon as possible following the review, possibly within the three-month timeframe. There are two particular issues in this regard as the Minister is aware, the first of which relates to rent supplement caps. It is particularly difficult to find rental accommodation in some areas such as certain parts of Dublin and other cities where rents have increased substantially. As some tenants are unable to receive rent supplement, they are being forced to behave in an illegal manner. There is a significant number of homeless people on our streets — many homeless people have died in recent years — some of whom were unable to acquire accommodation in the first instance because of difficulties with the manner in which rent supplement was paid in arrears. Landlords tend to choose tenants who are able to pay in advance. I am not calling for an increase, as such. It is obvious that the cap issue necessitates an increase. Payment in arrears is a time-frame issue. It does not need to involve a charge on the Exchequer. I ask the Minister to give some attention to these two issues.

Deputy Martin Cullen: As Deputy Enright said, we have discussed this matter at some length in recent weeks. I do not think either of us has much more to add to it. I accept that some issues have arisen. We know this from our dealings with those who come to see us at our clinics. The review of the rent payment system, which runs from January 2007 to June 2008, is up and running. In the next few months we will see exactly what is required. We will take into account the points made in recent times by Deputies on all sides of the House, including Deputy Enright. I await the outcome of the review.

Deputy Olwyn Enright: Perhaps the Minister can tell the House roughly when the report on the review will be available.

Deputy Martin Cullen: It will kick in after June 2008. I think the new regime has to come into effect at that time. As the review finishes in June, it might be July by the time we receive the report. I do not want to mislead the House.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Deputy Olwyn Enright: I move amendment No. 10:

In page 3, before section 2, to insert the following new section:

2— “The Minister shall, within 3 months of the commencement of this Act, lay before each House of the Oireachtas, a report on the removal of the Habitual Residence Condition from the Child Benefit payment.”.

I made the case for this amendment when the House discussed amendment No. 2 in the name of Deputy Morgan. Some groups have suggested to me that 3,000 children will be affected by the removal of the habitual residence condition. When the Minister replied to a question I asked about the matter last week, he said approximately 390 children would be affected by it. I know he disagrees with the points I am making about this issue, as he has expressed his disagreement on several occasions. I ask him to try to keep an open mind when examining my proposal. He is directly responsible for the child benefit system. I ask him to re-examine the situation, particularly in the light of our commitments under Articles 2, 3 and 26 of the UN Convention on Rights of the Child, to which I referred yesterday. He should examine this matter and try to take on board the points we all made during the debate on Deputy Morgan’s amendment. I do not need to make any further points at this stage.

Deputy Martin Cullen: We have discussed this matter at some length. I understand Deputy Enright’s point. It is important that we understand the reason for the introduction of the habitual residence condition in May 2004. It was introduced to ensure people who had not worked in Ireland, or had not established habitual residence in Ireland, could not avail of assistance schemes across the system, including the child benefit scheme. That is the reality. The Deputy has suggested that we should remove the child benefit scheme from the list of schemes. I have not seen any specific evidence that the package provided through the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform is having an obviously negative effect on children in that system, as opposed to the direct payment system. We are where we are on this issue. If there is a change in the conditions of the children in question, we will be alert to it.

Deputy Olwyn Enright: We have worded the amendments in a certain manner because we are required to do so. It is important that a report on

this matter be published and examined. I ask the Minister to give some consideration to this.

Amendment put and declared lost.

An Ceann Comhairle: Amendment No. 11 in the name of Deputy Enright is out of order because it is outside the scope of the Bill.

Amendment No. 11 not moved.

Deputy Olwyn Enright: I move amendment No. 12:

In page 3, before section 2, to insert the following new section:

2.—“The Minister shall, within 3 months of the commencement of this Act, lay before each House of the Oireachtas, a report on the introduction of a second-tier, employment neutral, child income support payment to target child poverty levels.”.

This amendment relates to the qualified child allowance which is to be increased by €2. The Joint Committee on Social and Family Affairs discussed this matter yesterday with delegations from the Conference of Religious of Ireland and the Combat Poverty Agency. I am aware that the Minister and his predecessor have had discussions on this allowance which is linked to the allowance paid to lone parents in the last 18 months or so. The Department has not reached any real conclusions on how it will make progress with regard to these payments. I was disappointed with the increase in the qualified child allowance. As I said yesterday, it would not even meet the cost to a household of one slightly more nourishing meal per child each week. In the context of the Government’s examination of this issue, it is important to have a real and genuine discussion on how we should proceed. The two groups I have mentioned expressed various opinions yesterday about the best way to deal with child poverty. Some speakers argued that it should be dealt with through the child benefit system. Many others disagree with that view. I would be interested to hear the Minister’s views. This has been under discussion as a live issue for approximately 18 months, but we have not reached any conclusions. I understand the Minister is somewhat averse to deadlines——

Deputy Martin Cullen: No.

Deputy Olwyn Enright: ——but it is important that we try to reach some conclusions on these issues. It would be preferable to approach the debate in a consensus manner to try to reach agreement among as many people as possible. The argument made in the National Economic and Social Forum’s report on this issue is at odds with the views of the two organisations which attended yesterday’s meeting of the joint committee. I would be interested to hear the Minister’s

[Deputy Olwyn Enright.]

views on when we can expect changes to happen or progress to be made.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: We are all interested to hear the Minister's thinking on this matter. As Deputy Enright said, there is no consensus on what should happen. We all recognised the serious difficulties with poverty traps in the past. I refer to the disincentives encountered by persons who might have been thinking about moving from the welfare system to the workforce. There was an emphasis on child benefit for that reason. There remains a small core of persons who continue to depend on welfare. Does the Minister accept, like many do, that not everybody can go out to work? Some will need to remain on social welfare for various reasons, including child care reasons — children need their parents to look after them in their homes. There will always be people, particularly lone parents, in such circumstances. I am sure the Minister accepts that certain individuals have to stay on welfare because they cannot go out to work due to a disability or a long-term illness.

I am concerned about the children of persons who will depend on welfare indefinitely. The Minister has deemed it possible for such children to survive on €22 per week in the current year. That is the amount the State is giving them on which to live, over and above what every child receives as child benefit. A certain amount is given to my children, the Minister's children and the children of millionaires in the form of child benefit. I am talking about the amount given to parents to bring up their children in addition to this. The children of the poorest of the poor have been given €22 this year. It is obvious that the Minister or somebody in his Department decided that this was inadequate because it has been announced that the payment in question will be increased by €2 per week, a derisory figure. Somebody has deemed it possible for a child to be reared on €3.43 a day from next year on. Anybody with any experience of rearing children knows that is impossible, especially in the case of a 16 or 17 year old who eats like an adult and whose clothes cost the same as an adult's clothes. What is the rationale for keeping the children of social welfare recipients in such poor circumstances? Does the Minister have any evidence to support his policy, to suggest that it is working? Does he have any evidence to suggest that by increasing the qualifying child allowance he will actually discourage parents from entering the workforce? I do not think that is the case any longer. The research conducted in the past no longer applies because of the particular profile of the cohort of parents who remain dependent on social welfare. Is there any social benefit to be gained in keeping the payment so low? Is there any evidence that the payment is acting as a disincentive for parents going out to work? I do not think that is the case. If there is modern research to support this theory, I would very much like to

hear about it. In the case of children in families which are very poor, families entirely dependent on social welfare, there can be no justification whatsoever for keeping the payment at a level of a mere €3.43 per day. I ask the Minister to explain his thinking and say whether it is based on current research.

Deputy Arthur Morgan: I support the amendment. I support all the amendments tabled by Deputy Enright but chose not to use up the time available unnecessarily because other speakers had made all the necessary points. I concur with Deputy Shortall's point that there is a difference between the groups with respect to this issue. It would be very useful to have a committee examine the issue in a speedy manner to see if agreement and a conclusion could be reached. However, if that were to happen, given the Minister's attitude to the debate, he simply would not listen——

Deputy Martin Cullen: I have been very open and positive.

Deputy Arthur Morgan: ——because he has not been listening all evening to the points we have made. He has continued to repeat that the Minister for Finance has given him his budget, that he is working within it and that he is not prepared to be creative or handle the matter differently. He is going along merrily on his own way. This is most unfortunate because many of the points made by Deputies would have assisted him and helped his Department had he chosen to take them on board. I do not expect him to change much at this time of the evening.

Deputy Martin Cullen: The Deputies have made valid points all evening but I have to take responsibility for the choices I made. I do not have unlimited resources, nor would the Deputies if any of them was standing where I am; they would make choices and I would have to respect them, even if I disagreed with them. That is a reasonable attitude.

I do not accept what Deputy Shortall said, nor would I expect any child to live on €22 or €24 a week; this sum is part of a very important range of supplements paid directly in respect of children. I will give the House some examples. A family on social welfare with one child under six years receives more than €4,266, which equates to €87.77 per week for that child. This is a substantial amount. It is broken down into child benefit, child dependant allowance, the back to school clothing and footwear allowance and the early child care supplement.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: Not if the child is over six years.

Deputy Martin Cullen: This is for a child under six years of age.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: What about teenage children?

An Ceann Comhairle: Please allow the Minister to continue without interruption.

Deputy Martin Cullen: For a family with one child over six years, the figure is €3,266, or €66.62 per week. All these figures are available and demonstrate a fair commitment to children. For a family on social welfare with two children, one under six years and one over six and less than 12 years, the annual payment is €7,532. These are direct cash payments.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: Payments that everybody receives.

Deputy Martin Cullen: That is not what everybody receives. They are, correctly, specifically targeted payments.

In answer to a question the Deputy asked at the start of her contribution, my philosophy is to try to direct the resources available to where they are most needed. I am not wedded entirely to big universal payments, as valuable as they are, because it presumes in many respects that there are unlimited resources. No country and no Government have unlimited resources. While there must be some universal payments, it is very important to ensure one maximises the amount of resources going directly to those who need it most. That is my philosophy and I think it may well be Deputy's also. I am trying to give her some examples. That is the reason for the different rates of payment because it is not possible to keep everything in the child benefit genre, a monthly payment made to everybody. It is paid to multimillionaires and persons who do not really need it. We have broken out some payments because there are restrictions in respect of to whom they are made. The restrictions ensure they are made to the families in greatest need.

I will cite the example of a family with four children, which is not unusual in Ireland. The annual cash payment to a family with four children, with one under six years, two between the ages of six and 12 years and one over 12 years is €15,000, a significant commitment. I cannot think of any other government in Europe which is making such payments. It is right to do so but it is a huge amount of money. I remind the Deputy of the amount a working person needs to earn to have a net amount of €15,000. I am not including the family's social welfare payments in that figure; I am citing the specific, exclusive, direct support provided for children in a family with four children. This is a very significant sum paid by the taxpayer.

Deputy Olwyn Enright: How is the payment made up?

Deputy Martin Cullen: I will break it down for the Deputy. It is made up of child benefit, child

dependant allowance, the back to school clothing and footwear allowance and the early child care supplement. The total for a family with four children, one of whom is under six years, two over six and under 12 years and one over 12 years, is €15,009, to be accurate.

I have listed the payments to refute the point being made by Deputy Shortall. I do not expect anybody to survive on a payment of only €22. I have increased the figure to €24 a week, which is well ahead of cost of living allowances. I think the figure is around 9%, one of the biggest increases for which I provided. I admit I would love to give substantially more and do not argue that point but I did the right thing within the resources available to me. The payment is also targeted. If one considers all the rates payable, depending on the number of children in a family, the lowest weekly income payment per child works out at about €66.62, when across the board payments are taken into account. All families do not receive these payments but the bulk of the payments are made to the families most in need of them. This fact should be recognised in some way. Since 1994, when the policy of non-indexation of qualified child increase, QCI, was introduced, the combined child benefit-child benefit payment was increased by more than three times the rate of inflation.

This is the first year I have been responsible for the social welfare package in the Department of Social and Family Affairs. In the next 12 months my personal philosophy will be to try to target the resources at the less well-off. This is not necessarily the most popular policy either, as there are those who believe they should receive payments, irrespective of their means. However, while I agree there must be some universal payments, one must try to maximise the available resources by targeting them. One of the best ways of targeting resources is by benefiting children because they are the ones who are most vulnerable and need the great support of adults during childhood. People like ourselves who decide policy in these areas must do this. I have explained the figures as they relate to different numbers of children.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: One can use figures to defend anything or make any case one wants. Will the Minister imagine for one moment that he is a multimillionaire and I am a lone parent on social welfare.

Deputy Martin Cullen: I am not.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: I asked the Minister to imagine that he is. Let us imagine we both have 17 year old sons and receive child benefit. Apart from the grant in respect of clothing and footwear when the child goes back to school, the Minister can more than adequately provide for his child without difficulty. The only sum in recognition of the costs involved for me as a lone parent raising a 17 year old child is a payment of €24 per week.

Deputy Martin Cullen: It is not.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: The Minister should stop trying to distort the situation.

Deputy Martin Cullen: I was listening to every word the Deputy said.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: I am talking about a real life situation where there are two people in very different circumstances raising a 17 year old son. Leaving aside child benefit, which every child receives, the only welfare payment that will be made to me as a lone parent on social welfare for my 17 year old son is €24 per week. It is not possible to provide any quality of life for a teenager on a payment of €24 per week but that is what is being paid over and above what anybody working has received in being able to provide for his or her children. There is a need for joined-up thinking. Is it any wonder there is such a high drop-out rate among teenagers in low income families, given the pressures in trying to survive on €24 a week for young people and their parents? It is simply not on to survive on that level of income. The Minister should recognise the reality of what it costs to buy a pair of runners for a teenage child and to meet the costs involved in going to school for materials, outings and all the other demands made on families. It is simply not possible for families to survive on the current level of income being provided by the Minister. The sum of €24 per week for a teenage child is derisory. The Minister must pay attention to this issue urgently because there are too many families slipping through the net where teenage children cannot survive and continue in school on the current level of income support.

Deputy Olwyn Enright: The amendment calls for a report to be published on the introduction of the payments. It was my understanding from reading the brief the Minister received when he took office that a review was ongoing and that change was imminent in this area. What is the status of the report and when we are likely to see it? What is the Minister's view? We have heard him say he wants to ensure the least well-off can have the greater share of what is available to give to them. However, the €2 increase did not really achieve this. This will have major implications. We all want to form our view on where we stand on some of these issues. When is it likely that the report will be published and what is its current status? We need more information.

Deputy David Stanton: It was my understanding that there was a review of amalgamating in some shape or form family income supplement, FIS, child dependent allowance, CDA, and the back to school clothing and footwear allowance. Perhaps that might ensure clarity in respect of what is happening.

Deputy Martin Cullen: I am not leading that change, as it relates to another Department. I have given Deputies the answers. There is significant disagreement on this issue. There are strongly held views which have been directly expressed to me. I regret the great divergence in views because one would like to achieve consensus on some of these issues. Great fears have been legitimately expressed by both sides.

I disagree with Deputy Shortall. She has made the point that because somebody else receives a benefit, that the benefit paid to another is diminished. I do not accept that point. A benefit still has the same value to whoever receives it. Just because somebody else gains the same benefit does not make it of a lesser value, as the Deputy put it.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: Poverty is relative.

Deputy Martin Cullen: The Deputy used the example of a 17 year old. I would expect any family to send a 17 year old out to earn some money for himself or herself. That was the approach I took with my children. My 17 year old was working part-time to earn money. There is no shortage of work.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: The Minister should talk to teachers in schools in disadvantaged areas about that problem.

Deputy Martin Cullen: Hold on one minute.

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

Deputy Martin Cullen: I do not accept that 17 year olds should be sitting at home on their backsides. Irrespective of the income levels of their families, be they good, bad or indifferent, they should be making a contribution.

Deputy Olwyn Enright: What about their exams?

Deputy Róisín Shortall: When are they supposed to study for the leaving certificate?

Deputy Martin Cullen: I am sorry, a Cheann Comhairle. I did not interrupt.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Minister should be allowed to speak without interruption. We can ask others to contribute then.

Deputy Martin Cullen: I do not believe my children are different from the rest. They have the same problems and face the same issues as everybody else. They could have stayed at home because young people do not spend seven days a week studying for any exam. If they want pocket money, one has to teach them responsibility and values and allow them to earn some money. They do not have to work all the hours God sends but

some training at that age is good. Deputy Shortall may disagree with me but that is my view.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: A schoolchild should not have to work to survive.

Deputy Martin Cullen: Who said they were working to survive? The Deputy made the point that the only income a 17 year old had was €24. I disagree with her. She is wrong because the State contributes substantially more than that sum. It is perfectly reasonable for most, if not all, 17 year olds, barring a disability or other reason such as acting in the capacity of carer in a family, to go out at the weekend and mullock around with the rest of the young people in this country who are working to earn a few bob. There is nothing wrong with this. They should go out and do it. We should stop mollycoddling everyone of that generation and pretending that there are no worries about anything and that they should not have to go out and earn a living; they should, and they should learn at a young age, just as we did. When I was 15 years old I earned a few bob during the week.

Deputy Olwyn Enright: There were not the same pressures from the points race then.

Deputy Martin Cullen: What I have said in response to the Deputy is valid. It is about time people started to say it. It is about time parents started to say that, with all the rights young people have, they have responsibilities. I hear about rights every day of the week but nothing about responsibilities.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: Teenagers should not have responsibility to pay the ESB bill in their family home.

Deputy Martin Cullen: Who said they should?

Deputy Róisín Shortall: That is what it amounts to in many situations. That is what we are talking about.

Deputy Martin Cullen: I am not.

An Ceann Comhairle: We cannot have an argument.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: The Minister is talking about this as if going out to work is an optional extra for luxuries.

An Ceann Comhairle: All these remarks should be made through the Chair.

Deputy Martin Cullen: It is not an optional extra.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Minister should be allowed to finish. That is the first thing that should happen.

Deputy Martin Cullen: It is not a case of luxuries. I simply made a point, not necessarily as a Minister but as a parent.

Deputy Olwyn Enright: In this House Deputy Cullen is acting in his capacity as Minister.

Deputy Martin Cullen: I take a simple view which has nothing to do with parents' income. At 17 years they are not children and would give an answer if they were called a child. There is nothing wrong with going out and supplementing one's income by earning a few bob. That opportunity prevails right across the spectrum today.

I disagree with the basis of Deputy Shortall's point that we are expecting 17 years old to live on €24 a week. That is untrue because the allocation through the social welfare system is greater than that sum. It is well the Deputy knows this. The opportunity is available to top it up. If people want to do some part-time work, they can roll up their sleeves and do what we all did when we were young.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: It is important to view this in the context of what is happening in the world nowadays. The fact of the matter is that in many disadvantaged areas the educational outcomes for young people are abysmal. They remain abysmal in spite of economic growth in recent years. I refer to situations where children are not staying on in school for the leaving certificate. The figures are in double digits. For those who do stay on, the number who get the points to go on to third level is minuscule.

I suggest that the Minister speak to the principals in some of the schools in disadvantaged areas who will tell him about the pressures on young people who are forced into the workplace for economic reasons. Most of us would be of the view that certainly in leaving certificate year it is preferable that young people do not have a part-time job. That argument is borne out by teachers everywhere. Certainly, children should not be under pressure from their parents at home to go out to work to keep food on the table and pay the electricity bill.

Deputy Martin Cullen: I never suggested that.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: That is the reality for low-income families and families dependent on social welfare. We were speaking about how we might deal with this. It would be good to have a mature debate instead of hurling insults across the floor.

The proposals on support for lone parents have merit where it is suggested that there should be a special payment for children in low-income families that would be employment and family formation neutral. We should recognise the demands on children in such families by making a special payment in such cases.

There can be an argument about the cut-off point. Yesterday Fr. Seán Healy spoke about a

[Deputy Róisín Shortall.]

cut-off point of €20,000, for example, which would create a poverty trap for parents earning more than that amount. Why not make the threshold higher and then taper it in order that we recognise the significant problem of child poverty?

There are 96,000 children living in consistent poverty, a scandalous figure. We need measures to target the problem in order that we can tackle it in the next couple of years. We should have done this already; now the problem needs urgent attention. We need to look at the possibility of putting in place a payment to recognise the difficulties for children living in poor families and to enable their parents to avail of it, irrespective of whether they are lone parents, co-habiting, a one or two-parent family, married or in employment. All of the agencies stated they thought that getting people back to work would solve all the problems of poverty but the new poor are the working poor. We need to target the problem of children living in poor families and to give it all our attention in the coming year. For that reason, I suggest that the Minister look at the possibility of providing a payment, payable up to an income of €30,000 or €35,000, at which point it would taper off, or even a higher level could be set. We need to focus urgently on the 96,000 children living in consistent poverty.

Deputy Olwyn Enright: I seek clarity on this issue. Is the Minister suggesting that children should go out to work? That, effectively, is what has been said and I want to know whether it is Government policy.

Going through the Bill there seems to be a lack of coherence in the approach of the Government to many of the issues involved. We had the same problem with direct provision. Certainly, the Minister for Education and Science, Deputy Hanafin, has a very different view from the Minister on whether children should be out working or concentrating on being in school. If the Minister wants to proceed with a policy such as this, I urge him to seek the views of teachers. On many occasions it has been said children are asleep in school or are unable to concentrate because they work. I do not have a difficulty if they wish to work — I encourage it to a degree — but the notion that children should work to earn money to meet basic needs is wrong. Certainly, there is nothing wrong with anyone working a few hours' per week but we should be encouraging them to concentrate on being in school. The drop-out rate is already running at approximately 18%; in disadvantaged areas, where the people about whom we are speaking live, it is already far higher than this. Encouraging children, particularly those living in disadvantaged areas, to go out to work amounts, effectively, to discouraging them from staying in school. That is a policy fraught with difficulties and I ask the Minister to re-examine it.

On the amendment, Deputy Stanton made the point that there had been discussions with a view to bringing together the three payments. The Minister has stated clearly that there are difficulties in that regard. I understand and accept this. I have been teasing out the three payments — FIS, CDA and the back to school allowance — with some of the groups represented. Does the Minister intend to bring the discussions to a conclusion in the near future and make changes, or will we talk in perpetuity about the issue? It was one on which in the six months before the general election one could not have listened to “Morning Ireland” without hearing the former Minister, Deputy Brennan, discuss it. We still have not seen any conclusions and I wonder when we will.

Deputy Martin Cullen: The danger in trying to have an open debate is that one will end up being misquoted. I was not suggesting that all children in school must go out to work. I was speaking about a kid working for a few hours on a Saturday morning.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: It sounded very much like it.

Deputy Martin Cullen: One ends up in a position where, because one says something in respect of which one has experience as a parent, it will suddenly be portrayed as something else.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: With respect, Deputy Cullen is here in his capacity as Minister.

Deputy Martin Cullen: I have suggested that there is no reason a 16 or 17 year old cannot work for a few hours on a Saturday morning to earn a few bob for himself or herself. That is all I suggested. It was as simple as that.

Deputy Olwyn Enright: It depends on the way in which the Minister makes the suggestion.

Deputy Arthur Morgan: It is much broader.

Deputy Martin Cullen: It goes back to the point Deputy Shortall tried to make that we were expecting one child in a family to live on €24 a week. I explained why she was wrong and indicated that the supports payable by the State were more substantial. I went on to state there was nothing wrong with a 15, 16 or 17 year old working for a few hours, wherever it might be, on a Saturday morning. It might even be only in the home and involve cutting the grass in return for a few bob.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: Who pays then?

Deputy Olwyn Enright: The parents do not have the few bob to give them.

Deputy Martin Cullen: I was only making a point, which is a simple one. I would make it anywhere.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: The Minister is back-tracking.

Deputy Martin Cullen: That is all I said.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: The fact of the matter is that social welfare payments do not provide a living.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Shortall, the Minister is in possession.

Deputy Martin Cullen: The second point very much concerns the argument about family income supplement which is targeted at people on low incomes. It is to support people on low incomes to get them out of the poverty trap, in other words, the payment is only for parents who are working, not for those on social welfare. It is targeted at getting people back to work in order that there is an incentive to come out of the system. It is also clear that there are many who are entirely dependent on the social welfare system who could find work and should be encouraged to go back to work. That is one of the main programmes we are trying to manage across Departments to engage directly with the people concerned.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: What about the ones who cannot work?

Deputy Martin Cullen: The evidence is blindingly clear that where the main provider or both partners is or are working, there is a much better atmosphere in the family, a much better ethos and approach to issues. That is what we need to achieve. That is why I say to Deputy Shortall — others whom she has quoted can speak for themselves — that some are vehemently opposed to creating new poverty traps. That is why family income supplement was such an imaginative scheme. It was put in place to assist and encourage people to leave the social welfare system to go back to work but, equally, to ensure the State would support their children. That is the point I was making. That is the right approach. If we can do more in targeting resources at the families we all agree need State support, we will continue to give them such assistance and encouragement.

An Ceann Comhairle: As it is now 7 p.m., I am required to put the following question in accordance with the order of the Dáil of this day: “That in respect of each of the sections undisposed of, that the section is hereby agreed to in committee, that Schedules 1 and 2 and the Title are hereby agreed to in committee, that the Bill is accordingly reported to the House without amendment,

that Report Stage is hereby completed and that the Bill is hereby passed.”

Question put and agreed to.

Private Members' Business.

Road Safety: Motion (Resumed).

The following motion was moved by Deputy Fergus O'Dowd on Tuesday, 11 December 2007:

That Dáil Éireann,

- reiterates its concern on road safety and the continued loss of life on Irish roads;
- recognises the impact the penalty points system has had on road safety;
- notes with concern that the weaknesses in enforcing the penalty points system will reduce the impact of penalty points on driver behaviour;
- acknowledges the severe strain the District Court is under in hearing fixed charge penalty cases; and
- acknowledges the failure of the system when drivers on 12 points fail to voluntarily surrender their licence and continue to drive;

calls on the Government:

- to bring forward legislation as a matter of urgency to reform the penalty points system that will ensure all fixed charge penalties are collected and enforced; and
- to reform the system that requires legally disqualified drivers to surrender their licences and instead gives the Garda responsibility for collection of these licences.

Debate resumed on amendment No. 1:

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

- “— reiterates its concern on road safety and the continued loss of life on Irish roads;
- recognises the positive impact the penalty points system has had on road safety;
- notes that the downward trend in road deaths has continued in 2007 and recognises that in the first 12 months of the operation of mandatory alcohol testing (August 2006 to July 2007) there has been over a 20% reduction in road deaths compared to the previous corresponding 12 month period;

- supports the road safety strategy for the period 2007-2012 in order to further reduce road deaths and injuries;
 - commends the Government on the sustained implementation of road safety measures such as the establishment of the Road Safety Authority, the roll-out of the Garda Traffic Corps; the introduction of mandatory alcohol testing, the introduction of a graduated driving licence system for learner drivers, the doubling of penalties for drink driving offences, the extension of the penalty points system, including the introduction of penalty points for mobile phone offences;
 - notes that at the end of October 2007, over 480,000 drivers have received penalty points with 93 drivers currently on 12 points resulting in six months disqualification;
 - recognises the rights of a person alleged to have committed a road traffic offence, liable to a fixed charge payment, not to pay the amount specified and to opt to have the case heard by the courts;
 - recognises that the amount of the fine on conviction for a road traffic offence is a matter for the court (within the limits set out in the Road Traffic Acts), as is the collection of such fines;
 - notes that the Road Traffic Act 2002 provides for the requirement of persons who have accumulated 12 penalty points to submit their driving licences to the licensing authority that granted the licence not later than 14 days from the date of notification; and
 - notes that the Road Traffic Act 2002 also provides for the offence of not complying with such a direction.”
- (Minister for Transport)

Deputy Mary Upton: I welcome the opportunity to speak on this important matter. I congratulate my colleagues in Fine Gael on proposing this motion, which is particularly timely given the time of year and the tragedies people must live with as a result of accidents.

In 2005, the last year for which we have official statistics from the Road Safety Authority, there were 396 fatalities and 9,318 injuries as a result of road traffic accidents. In other words, a total of 9,714 people were either killed or injured on our roads in one year, an average of 809 people per month. The statistics do not give any indication of the nature or extent of injuries, but it is certain a high proportion of them would impact seriously and indefinitely on the lives of many people. The issue cannot receive enough publicity. The consequences of the deaths and severe injuries can

or should be preventable. The most recent figures from the Garda national bureau show the number of deaths on the roads so far this year is 316. It is appalling that the loss of life on our roads continues daily. Last weekend we had further carnage on our roads.

The leading causes of deaths on our roads are speed, alcohol, drugs and driver fatigue. These factors can be controlled and it should be possible to eliminate them, if the will exists to do it. Motorists carry the blame for their bad behaviour and must be held responsible for it. The tragedy is there are so many victims of the irresponsibility of some drivers. Breaking the speed limit is illegal, yet it is the most common reason for collisions. Why is it necessary for cars to be designed to travel at speeds way above the legal limit? One of the main purposes of the introduction of penalty points was to reduce speeding and, last night, many speakers highlighted how the initial introduction of penalty points had a positive effect on curbing excessive speed and on road safety. That was in the early days, but the benefit seems to be almost eroded and the rules are blatantly ignored by many drivers, as supported by documentary evidence.

The second main reason for collisions resulting in death or injuries is alcohol. While I appreciate the steps that have been taken to curb drinking and driving, much more could be done. Night after night, rows of cars are parked outside our pubs. Nobody believes the owners or drivers of these cars are all drinking lemonade. Why, therefore, are more gardaí not located outside these pubs to enforce the law? Now that it is possible to stop any driver anywhere and check for alcohol intake, there is nothing to stop gardaí from checking these people once they get into their cars and turn on the ignition. Again, the will must be there to do this and to be serious about putting a stop to driving under the influence of alcohol. The perception of enforcement is almost as important as the law itself. If motorists believe they will get away with breaking the rules, they will do so.

Failure to enforce the law results in people dying or being seriously injured on our roads every day of the week. The headlines tell us about the deaths, but we hear little about the many serious injuries or the subsequent suffering of those who are injured. People suffer serious disabilities, brain and spinal injuries, paralysis and other consequences, destroying their own lives and, often, the lives of their families and those who must care for them.

It is unacceptable that up to 50% of all motorists fail to pay fines for offences such as speeding or that many drivers who have accumulated 12 penalty points do not voluntarily hand up their driving licences as required. If the penalty points system is not reviewed, made effective and made a real deterrent to bad behaviour on our roads, the purpose of the system will be undermined.

The motion is timely and I fully support it. I call on the Minister to ensure that all the rules

and laws in place are workable and enforced. If they are not workable, it is time to revisit them and take action to make them workable. The time for wringing our hands about road deaths and injuries should be over. Enforcement of the law should replace it. When penalty points were first introduced, they had a positive impact, but now people are quite cavalier about them and it is not unusual to see people driving around with their mobile phones to their ears. The number of people pulled in, breathalysed and found to be over the limit is alarming and totally unacceptable. Much work remains to be done with regard to enforcement of the law.

Deputy M. J. Nolan: I wish to share time with Deputies Michael McGrath, Barry Andrews and Ciarán Cuffe.

Acting Chairman (Deputy John Cregan): Is that agreed? Agreed.

Deputy M. J. Nolan: This debate on the serious matter of road safety is timely, particularly in the run-up to Christmas, a period when in recent years serious road accidents claimed a number of lives. Last weekend, the number of people killed and seriously injured on our roads was over the average for the time of year.

It is important to recognise, however, that the number of fatalities on our roads this year to date is just above 300, which is an improvement on the carnage in recent years. It is also worth noting that the ratio of road fatalities compared to the number of vehicles using the roads has declined over the past ten years. This is due in no small way to the implementation of new road traffic Acts and the vigilance and co-operation of gardaí, the traffic corps in particular, in implementing the new laws.

The three main reasons for the reduction in deaths on our roads are the new drink driving laws, the implementation of speed limits and the vigilance of the Garda traffic corps. The Ministers for Transport and Justice, Equality and Law Reform are to be commended in this regard. A new attitude exists among young drivers who, if going out for a night, nominate a driver who will not drink. I commend the drinks industry in this regard also. On my way to Dublin yesterday I heard its advertisement advising sensible drinking by people going out for a night.

Another contributory factor to reduced accidents is the availability of taxis. The changes in the laws relating to taxi licences improved the situation. One of the big problems for individuals previously was the unavailability of taxis. At certain times during the Christmas season there are still problems with availability, but in general there has been an improvement in recent years, which should be commended.

It is important to acknowledge the strides made with regard to road safety, including the improvement in the quality of cars and roads and the investment made by various Governments over

the past 20 years in infrastructure. Improvements in public lighting in our towns and villages, the implementation of the road safety strategy and the establishment of the Road Safety Authority have also gone a long way to improving road safety. The introduction of penalty points improved the statistics for a short time and the recent extension of that system, to include 35 new areas, should improve statistics with regard to deaths and serious injury on the roads. In addition, the implementation of the law on speeding, drink-driving and seat belt wearing has gone a long way towards reducing the number of road deaths. I commend the Minister on the establishment of the Road Safety Authority, the roll-out of the Garda traffic corps, the introduction of mandatory alcohol testing and a graduated driving licence system for learner drivers. While there was much debate about the Minister's announcement on enforcement of the law regarding second provisional licence holders, it is gratifying to note that there is now a commitment that 120,000 individuals who have applied for their driving tests will be given the opportunity to take these tests by late next year. That is to be welcomed.

Last year I heard a complaint from a person who turned up for his driving test at 9.30 a.m. on a frosty morning, only to be told by the tester that he would not do the test as the weather was too poor. I could not understand why a person would not be allowed to do the test under any weather conditions, including normal winter conditions. However, I understand that this is the case, and I did not get much satisfaction when I checked with the Department.

I support the strategic approach covering the period 2007-12. Based on the success of the last two safety policy strategic approaches which were introduced in the 1990s, we will see even greater improvements due to this. The primary target is to reduce road deaths and injuries by achieving substantial progress in the areas of speeding, drink-driving and seat belt wearing. The extension in April of the 35 penalty point offences will go some way towards achieving improvements in this area.

Driver behaviour should be highlighted. The more effective enforcement by the Garda that we see, the better. One of the issues that needs to be considered is in the area of penalty points. They are effective, but I know of people who received penalty points who have claimed that after the three-year period for the points had expired they were not made aware of this. Having made inquiries, I understand they should be informed. Perhaps the Minister will consider this.

I commend the Minister on his efforts to improve safety on our roads. Great strides have been made, but there is a long way still to go.

Deputy Michael McGrath: I welcome the opportunity to speak in support of the amended motion. Too many families have had the dreaded knock on the door by a member of An Garda Síochána coming to tell them that a loved one has

[Deputy Michael McGrath.]

been killed in a road accident. The loss of a friend or family member in such a sudden and inexplicable manner haunts thousands of families. As Members of Dáil Éireann we have an onerous duty to do everything possible to minimise loss of life on our roads. I commend the Minister for Transport, Deputy Noel Dempsey, for the high priority he has personally attached to road safety since entering office. The policies he and his predecessor have pursued require our continued unconditional support if they are to achieve their full potential.

I wish to use my limited time to highlight a few issues in this debate. A number of my colleagues have already mentioned the role of alcohol in road accidents. According to a HSE study, alcohol was a factor in 36.5% of all fatal road crashes in 2003 and in 62% of single-vehicle, single-occupant fatal crashes in that year. These are the facts. It is staggering that alcohol has played such a significant role in fatal road crashes in Ireland over the past number of years. The Government recently responded with the introduction of mandatory alcohol testing. This has already had a staggering impact. Road deaths are down 20% in the 12-month period since mandatory alcohol testing was introduced compared to the previous 12 months. A total of 24,255 people were arrested between August 2006 and October 2007 on suspicion of driving while intoxicated. The message is finally getting through and we are witnessing a change, slowly but surely, in personal behaviour, not least because of the highly visible enforcement regime of An Garda Síochána.

Although some people regard the enforcement of drink-driving laws as an attack on our culture or on the rural way of life, we must continue to do what is right to give us the best possible chance of saving lives throughout the country. Embracing these measures does require people to plan and make arrangements if they are socialising. An element of sacrifice is involved, but it cannot be compared to the sacrifice of a lost life. We have recently seen a number of transport initiatives in rural areas which facilitate people who want to socialise. I encourage this and hope to see more such schemes. I am pleased to see that the Department of Transport is in discussions with the Attorney General about the possibility of testing all drivers involved in serious accidents for alcohol. That is a positive measure which should be introduced as soon as possible.

This brings me to the issue of people driving under the influence of drugs. In future we must accord this an importance equal to that of drink-driving. In 2001 the Medical Bureau of Road Safety at UCD carried out a study in which 2,000 blood and urine specimens of people who were arrested on suspicion of drink-driving were reviewed. The figures obtained were quite astounding. Of the 2,000 specimens tested, one in seven contained illegal drugs. It is interesting that the figure was much higher among drivers who

were found not to be above the blood alcohol limit. Of these samples, one in three contained drugs. We all know how Ireland has changed even since 2001. If it was a problem then it is certainly an even more serious problem now. Recent publicity provides sufficient evidence that this issue needs to be dealt with.

I wish to address the issue of personal behaviour. All of us who drive must understand that when we get behind the wheel of a car we are in control of a weapon which has the potential to kill ourselves and others. While legislation and enforcement are important, they can only achieve so much. According to the Road Safety Authority, nine out of ten fatal collisions are caused primarily by the behaviour of road users. This is a sobering statistic that all of us must bear in mind when we take control of a vehicle. We must accept that we will never change the behaviour of some people when it comes to drink-driving, speeding or downright reckless driving. Some people simply will not change despite publicity and extra enforcement and no matter how draconian the legislation. Thus, we should start by educating young people. I am pleased to see that under the new strategy all primary school children will have completed a basic road safety programme by 2012. At second level, the safety authority will work with the Department of Education and Science and the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment to develop a road safety programme for transition year students. It is important that they have a basic level of training before they commence their driving careers. I welcome this development.

One in three of those killed on the roads over the past six years were not wearing a seat belt or child restraint. The compliance rate for front-seat drivers and passengers is 86% and for back-seat passengers it is just 63%. These are the basics that we must insist on getting right. Wearing a seat belt does save lives. We must get those percentages as close to 100 as we possibly can. I encourage people, particularly in the run up to Christmas when there will be much socialising at parties and so forth, to take responsibility for their actions on our roads. Drivers have an impact not only on themselves but on their loved ones and everyone around them. I emphasise this point.

We must acknowledge the progress made in recent years, underlined by the number of measures introduced. Despite the 51% increase in the number of vehicles on the roads since 1998, road deaths have decreased by approximately 20%. I am glad the Road Safety Authority has been put on a statutory footing as it is important that we continue to invest in roads. Statistics show that motorways are up to nine times safer than single carriageway roads, for which reason the National Roads Authority continues to emphasise the importance of the inter-urban routes.

The new learner permit system, enhanced enforcement and increased penalties for drink driving offences are having an impact and the Road Safety Strategy 2007-12, the most ambitious of the three strategies to date, has been adopted. I look forward to seeing its full implementation. We must continue to focus on outstanding issues such as attaching penalty points to licences of foreign registered drivers and examining new technologies for testing drug driving. I am glad the Minister intends to introduce further road safety legislation in 2008.

We should follow the example of the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Sweden and Norway, which are leading the way in Europe in terms of road safety. With the full co-operation and support of the general public, there is no reason Ireland cannot become a leader in road safety. It would be a fitting monument to those who have tragically lost their lives on our roads in recent years. During the next two weeks, we must do everything possible to ensure that 2007 records the lowest number of fatalities in 40 years.

Deputy Barry Andrews: The Fine Gael proposal is not legislative, despite that being the normal procedure during Private Members' time. Fine Gael asked the Government to produce legislation, which it has indicated it will do. I am not sure why this motion was taken during Private Members' Time——

Deputy Fergus O'Dowd: Some 40,000 people escape paying fines.

Deputy Terence Flanagan: It is a major issue.

Deputy Barry Andrews: ——given that a reply to a parliamentary question, by way of written answer, would have been satisfactory. Nevertheless, the issue is before the House. There is broad agreement on it and we are all delighted by the decrease in the number of road deaths, which is attributable to several factors, in particular the significant impact of television advertising.

Fine Gael's proposal is genuine and is not meant to trip the Government, so I want to try to deal with it. It proposes a second yellow card whereby once the fixed charge penalty has not been paid within 56 days, there would be a further period to prevent the matter getting stuck in the court system. It would be a second yellow card, requiring a further level of administration.

Deputy Fergus O'Dowd: On a point of information——

Deputy Barry Andrews: I will not concede because I am under pressure to make several points. The Deputy will have time to make contributions in the normal way.

Deputy Fergus O'Dowd: Some 40,000 summonses were not served.

Deputy Barry Andrews: Some 70% of fixed charge penalties are paid on time. We are dealing with a cohort within the remaining 30%.

Deputy Fergus O'Dowd: Some 100,000 uninsured drivers and 125,000 without licences.

Deputy Barry Andrews: Certain people have legitimate defences for their alleged offences under the penalty point system. Let us not over estimate the scale.

Last night, Deputies stated that there is a trend in people taking a gamble on court, but that is not the case. Most people pay on time and, of those who do not, a large portion simply neglect to do so. It is not a deliberate thumbs down to the courts. Let us not over react. The issuing of summonses is an operational matter for the Garda Commissioner. Our good and well considered policy has been effective, part of the dividend of which is the additional 100 people alive today.

Gay Byrne is highly regarded, as is right. However, the young drivers who cause the difficulties and who do not understand the danger do not know who Gay Byrne is. We have an opportunity to consider an issue I have raised previously, namely, road safety ambassadors. The people who young people look up to are not politicians in all cases. They look up to sports stars.

There has been much debate about whether Gaelic footballers and hurlers should be paid. For example, Dan Shanahan, hurler of the year, could supplement his income with a few quid by going to Waterford's schools to talk to young people about road safety. This suggestion should be considered. I cannot remember the names of any Gaelic footballers from Louth, but I am sure there are one or two people can look up to.

Deputy Fergus O'Dowd: What about my brother, Neil O'Dowd, who played for Louth or my son who plays rugby?

Acting Chairman: The Deputy has one minute remaining. Allow Deputy Barry Andrews.

Deputy Barry Andrews: It is a good idea and I thank Deputy O'Dowd for his support.

Recently, I was in Waterford and saw that Dan Shanahan is the face of waste in Dungarvan. He would be better served being paid a few quid by the RSA to visit schools. Equally, Seán Óg Ó hAilpín or another character who is well thought of. With respect to Gay Byrne, he would concede that he does not have the same cachet among the younger people causing the problems.

If Deputy Michael McGrath does not mind me mentioning it, I disagree with the suggestion of teaching road safety in transition year. If the message comes from school teachers — there is a natural disconnect between transition year students and their teachers — there will be a problem. Those students are not allowed to drive. As there are many problems in respect of this

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suggestion, I would prefer bringing in outside people.

Deputy Ciarán Cuffe: Enforcing the law, ensuring it is applied and knowing that people cannot escape its long arm are at the heart of the motion. It makes a mockery of our system if we do not catch up with those breaking the law. I acknowledge the sentiment behind the motion because we have work to do in this regard.

We must acknowledge that road safety has improved, but we have set the bar on what can be done far too low. We have nearly become accustomed to hundreds of people dying on the roads every year. Only when it strikes among our friends or families is the harsh reality brought home. We must have a harsher regime for those who break the law.

I agree with Deputy Barry Andrews in that, while Gay Byrne is an iconic figure to anyone over the age of the Deputy or me, he does not represent anything to many others, particularly recent immigrants to our island. We must focus on immigrants from Lithuania, Latvia and Poland. They are used to a driving regime in which road accidents occur at double if not treble our rate. In Lithuania, there are nearly 250 road deaths per million population compared to under 100 road deaths per million here. The culture of complacency is alive and well in many of the countries that joined the European Union recently. We must get through to them in terms of their culture in whatever way is possible and I suspect Gay Byrne is not the appropriate role model in this case. We need a rethink in that regard.

I am not convinced that the rather harsh road safety campaigns are getting through to the boy racer. People tend to ignore that message in the same way they ignored the "Smoking Kills" message on cigarette packets. Perhaps there are better ways of doing that.

Proper enforcement of speed limits is vitally important in the fight to improve road safety. We should consider the propensity in recent years towards driving ever larger cars, and particularly the rise of the SUV which is more susceptible to roll-over but also has a much higher axle weight. If we consider that momentum is the mass of a vehicle multiplied by the square of the speed, these larger vehicles are inherently more dangerous. We should consider carefully whether applying the same speed limits to SUVs as we would to smaller road vehicles is entirely appropriate. We have lower speed limits for heavy goods vehicles, for instance, because they have a larger weight and are more difficult to slow down in an emergency. My colleague, the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government, Deputy Gormley, along with the Minister for Finance, Deputy Cowen, is bringing in a system of carrots and sticks, so to speak, to encourage lower carbon emissions but I suspect this will not have an impact on the mindset of the typical SUV pur-

chaser who will perhaps wear it as a badge of pride that they have a G carbon rating on the equivalent of the Exxon Valdez that they drive. One way of getting through to those drivers would be to impose a slightly lower speed limit to curb their excesses and remind them that these very large vehicles are potentially more dangerous on the road not just because of the momentum, but also their height off the ground. Having two young children, I am acutely aware of the visibility of small children on the road and the fact that children who are, for example, a metre tall often are much less visible behind the hood of one of those large vehicles at a crossing point. We should figure that into our calculation of the dangers of SUVs.

I spoke about the need to emphasise the importance of road safety to our recent immigration population and the need to consider SUVs and the possibility of introducing lower speed limits for some of the more outrageous models of that particular species. I will conclude by referring briefly to the problem of drink driving. There has been a strong media concentration on the need to sustain a rural way of life, which I fully endorse, but I suspect we have put far more emphasis on the needs of older male drinkers who drive to the pub for one or two drinks. We appear to be pulling out our hair over that when we should concentrate more on the needs of women who are more likely to drive to bingo or to do the shopping and who have very different needs. If we spent a small fraction of the attention we focus on the older rural male driver on the needs of women and, particularly, mothers in rural areas, I suspect we would find better solutions more appropriate to the needs of rural Ireland and could draw attention to the solutions that are required.

I welcome the Fine Gael motion. It is vitally important to bring attention to road safety and the need to have proper implementation of the law. We should examine innovative solutions to try to reduce the ongoing tragedy of deaths on our roads.

Deputy James Bannon: I wish to share time with Deputies Flanagan, Crawford, Carey, Burke and Durkan.

Acting Chairman: Is that agreed? Agreed.

Deputy James Bannon: Listening to Fianna Fáil speakers this evening one would think that the party was in office for only 11 weeks, let alone 11 years. It has an appalling record in terms of the carnage on our roads.

Deputy Batt O'Keefe: So we are responsible for that too.

Deputy James Bannon: This motion is a genuine attempt to highlight a problem that is leading to unnecessary deaths on our roads. Such appalling fatalities could be prevented if

measures were put in place to counteract problems with the penalty points system which promised much but, unfortunately, after a good start, has failed to deliver safety for our road users.

I am shocked that the Government could not see this motion for what it is and support it rather than rushing to justify its position, which is not defensible but rectifiable with concerted effort. Its self-congratulation fails to convince.

The issue of penalty points has been a “give on the one hand and take away with the other” response to road carnage by the Government. Having started as a positive response to the need to reduce road fatalities, the system has been allowed to fail due to Government inaction, ineptitude and failure to provide necessary resources to the Garda.

While the introduction of penalty points has had a positive effect on road safety, and I welcome any reduction in fatalities, the inability of the Government to ensure the enforcement of the measures has lessened the initiative’s impact. Those who have lost family members and friends due to the lack of effort by the Government to halt the appalling level of deaths on our roads will take little consolation from the Government’s extraordinarily negative response to this motion, which they countered with a self-congratulatory amendment.

The Courts Service claims that the system of issuing fixed penalty notices to motorists, designed to keep such cases out of court, is not working. It indicates that a total of 88,000 summonses in respect of fixed charge offences came before the courts in the first six months of 2007 and fears that the country’s District Courts will be swamped. The number of motorists who end up being prosecuted for non-payment of fines has prompted the Courts Service to call for a number of measures such as outstanding fines being collected with annual motor tax renewals and the introduction of an increase of penalty points for those who fail to pay fines.

When it comes to court proceedings, the onus is on the Garda to prove that the person involved received the fixed penalty notice but if that person claims they never got it, what can the judge do but dismiss the case? The Road Safety Authority, whose mandate is to campaign on road safety, refuses to comment on the matter while stating that it does not comment on issues relating to enforcement or court cases.

Launched in a blaze of publicity and expense, the penalty points system had the desired effect initially and an impact on speeding and drink driving, with approximately 100 lives being saved on our roads in the first year. It is recognised by everybody that the system is now in chaos. An analysis carried out by the Committee of Public Accounts found that nearly all the photographs taken by Garda speed cameras in 2005 and 2006 were useless and unless the equipment is updated that situation will continue. That issue has been highlighted time and again.

In a disturbing development, the Road Safety Authority has become aware of a website which offers to sell EU driving licences to those who are convicted of driving offences. These licences, from an address in Spain, are offered to anyone who has been convicted of a traffic offence or who has failed their driving test. This is another direct threat to the enforcement of penalty points and another danger on our roads.

Some 18,000 drivers who hold non-Irish licences are able to treat the current system with disdain and get away scot free regarding the attachment of penalty points. Some satellite navigation devices have built in illegal devices and a certain website is promoting a speeding alert for young drivers as an ideal Christmas gift to avoid penalty points. It is a shame this is advertised on a website and that the Government does not take any action against it.

Until the system is fully functioning, with all legal and technical loopholes closed, Garda time will continue to be wasted and drivers will literally get away with murder as road deaths continue to rise. Speed limits are breached with impunity on dual carriageways and motorways. The lack of police presence gives a strong message to drivers that they can break the law and get away with it.

Up to two thirds of drivers — a shocking figure — who should be off the roads due to having the maximum penalty points, have failed to surrender their licences. Last month the Department confirmed that of the 121 drivers on 12 penalty points, only 40 had handed in their licences.

They cannot be forced to surrender their licences until the law is changed, as is the case in the UK where police can remove a licence from a driver on the spot. Such a provision makes much sense and the necessary legislative provision for enforcement should be put in place urgently.

Deputy Terence Flanagan: I commend my colleague Deputy O’Dowd for bringing this motion before the House. I strongly agree with the need for legislation and urgent reform of the penalty points system.

All Members are aware of the positive effect the introduction of penalty points had on road safety when introduced several years ago. It led to a 20% reduction in road deaths by December 2002. Unfortunately, since then all progress made has been lost with road fatalities rising again each year.

Why have people who initially slowed down and drove responsibly reverted to speeding? They have done so because there are too many loopholes in the implementation of the penalty points system. Careless and speeding drivers have a 50% chance, even if caught for speeding, of not having to pay a fine or of points going on their driving licences. Half of all speeding summonses have not been served while of those served many have been thrown out of court. Only one in three

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drivers surrenders his or her driving licence voluntarily.

The current system is also inefficient in the collection of penalty point data. Defendants are requested to bring their driving licences to court so the driving licence numbers can be recorded and the penalty points allocated to the correct driving record. If a defendant does not hand up his or her licence, the licence number may not be captured. Only one in three drivers on 12 points surrenders his or her licence voluntarily as they are supposed to do. Out of the 121 drivers currently on 12 penalty points, only 40 have handed their licences into their local tax offices as of 1 November 2007. A statement from the Courts Service on the system states:

There is an urgent need for reform of the current legislation which is failing to keep "fixed penalty" offences out of court. As these offences are considered suitable for fixed penalties without the intervention of the court, the logical position is that such cases should only be before a court if the alleged offender wishes to have the case adjudicated by a court. The present system results in cases being dealt with in court although there is no intention on the part of the defendant to defend it. It should be a matter for the defendant to indicate that a court hearing is required. A change such as this would have the effect of considerably reducing the number of cases going to court while at the same time increasing the effectiveness of the system.

While I understand there is a legislation issue, penalty points are not imposed on cars from Northern Ireland and other countries. Some work on rectifying this is underway in Europe which I hope will be completed soon.

The Road Safety Authority expects the long-awaited and long-promised national speed camera network to be operational by the second quarter of 2008. These cameras are expected to operate on enforcement in the region of 6,000 hours a month. This will dramatically increase the number of motorists caught speeding and their follow-up fixed penalty notices.

If current payment rates continue, hundreds of thousands of summonses will enter the District Courts. It is quite possible the system will collapse due to the enormous volume of cases. This was highlighted by Fine Gael's then spokesperson on transport, Deputy Olivia Mitchell, when the proposed roll-out of the safety camera network was announced. Motorists must be educated in reducing speed.

Safety cameras need to be placed on dangerous areas of the road network where a maximum number of lives can be saved rather than the soft targets of, say, 50 km zones and where they are used more as cash cows. A proper advertising campaign needs to be established for the introduction of these cameras to avoid a debacle like that of the recent driving test announcement.

If the Government fails to take action on this issue by ignoring the motion then it is failing in its commitment to road safety and on saving lives on the roads.

Deputy Seymour Crawford: The issue of road safety comes close to one when someone near and dear is involved. Only last week, a man whom I knew well was killed on a national primary road outside Monaghan.

The north east was unique in that it was the only area which had permanent safety camera boxes. However, only three cameras were circulated among them. It is high time this was rolled out nationally. It is also important that people are not aware of where the cameras are positioned or that they are permanent or otherwise.

Operation of the safety cameras will be given over to a private company. I am concerned it will position the cameras on easy touches rather than in dangerous spots. It should be seen as a programme to prevent accidents, not as a cash cow.

Fine Gael supports the penalty points system and the push for a downward trend in road fatalities. We urge the law be changed as it contains fundamental errors. Many offending drivers are not being dealt with and the courts have been clogged up. The problem is exemplified by those with non-Irish driving licences not being dealt with by the courts. A better system must be put in place to ensure all drivers who break the law are dealt with.

Frequent users of the M1 often witness drivers from Northern Ireland and others with foreign-registered cars flout the law. Garda figures show even those drivers caught offending by speed cameras will not be affected. While through my involvement with the British-Irish Inter-parliamentary Body, I appreciate that progress is being made towards an all-Ireland approach, the obstacles to achieving this are significant but must be overcome if lives are to be saved. No one, no matter where he or she is from, or who he or she is, should be above the law. I recently saw a Government car exceeding the speed limit outside a national school by over 30 km/h. This is not a good example for the public.

The state of our national and regional roads contributes to some serious accidents. Seldom a day goes by without one or more of these roads being closed because of such accidents.

Those who make long journeys should be provided with rest areas. I have tried to raise questions about this but no one in the House seems to take responsibility for this problem. The Government and the European Commission should insist on maximum driving times. The Government, through local authorities, should take responsibility for the serious lack of rest areas and rectify this situation. Tiredness causes accidents. There is nowhere for a tourist or lorry driver, driving from Belfast, through Monaghan and the midlands to Kerry, to rest. We are told rest areas cannot be provided along a national primary road.

Deputy Joe Carey: I welcome the opportunity to speak on this Private Member's motion and I commend Deputy O'Dowd on proposing it. Everybody can recall the dramatic changes in driver behaviour when penalty points were first introduced. Motorists drove more attentively and reached their destinations safely because they feared being caught by the penalty points system. The introduction of the system reduced road deaths by 20% in 2000. Within six to eight months, however, driver attitudes changed and motorists reverted to their old habits, resulting in a rise in road deaths because they realised they had a slim chance of being caught.

It is a challenge for the Government to change this and to make people realise that penalty points exist and we need to implement them and revive the original respect for them, not just out of fear of being caught and penalised. We need to use the system to place road safety at the forefront of motorists' minds. I urge the Minister of State at the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government, Deputy Batt O'Keeffe, to take the Fine Gael motion on board.

The motion recognises the positive aspects of the penalty point system and the leading role it can play in reducing road deaths. It illustrates a real problem which causes difficulty for the Garda, the courts system and for law-abiding citizens. If the problem is not addressed now there will be chaos when hundreds of speed cameras are put in place as this Government intends. The court system is not able to cope with the workload and will come to a complete halt if the extra offences picked up by the proposed new cameras come into play. The Government must get its house in order before this change is put in place.

It is not right that the Government should preside over a penalty points system whereby those who commit an offence and pay the fine accrue penalty points on their licences while those who commit the same offence and let it go to court get away with it. This must not be allowed to continue.

The Minister has an opportunity to change this situation. If he will not listen to us he should at least listen to the Courts Service which has proposed good and practical ways of solving this problem. The Minister needs to act urgently on this matter of life and death and instil in every motorist the respect that penalty points commanded when they were first introduced. This can be achieved only by reform of the system. The Minister must show leadership and solve these problems to make our roads safer for all users in a real attempt to reduce the number of road deaths. I strongly support the Fine Gael motion and commend it to the House.

Deputy Ulick Burke: I compliment Deputy O'Dowd on introducing this timely motion. Every year for the past few years there have been many fatalities on our roads in the festive season. I agree wholeheartedly with the contents of the motion.

I cannot understand why there is so little co-operation between the agencies charged with responsibility for road maintenance and safety. That was highlighted by the recent statement from the National Roads Authority, NRA, that it has decided unilaterally to eliminate the provision of 11 strategically placed rest areas from its roads programme. This is being done, despite the fact that it has been highlighted many times that at least 200 deaths over the past five years have been attributed to driver fatigue. How can the NRA reconcile that decision with its commitment to road safety? Is this another instance of the NRA being out of the Minister's control?

Local authorities must play a greater role in ensuring road safety, for example, the markings on many roads, particularly minor ones where many fatalities have occurred, are either inadequate or absent. This would not require high expenditure or a blaze of headlines in the media but could dramatically reduce fatalities.

As we approach the deadline by which drivers must have full licences, we must consider elderly people who, through no fault of their own, are under stress because they must undergo a driving test. Will the Minister afford some degree of leniency or an exemption to those people? In a rural area when the driver spouse of an elderly couple dies, the remaining spouse is left without transport to the shop or the town. The prospect for that person of doing the driving test causes unnecessary anxiety. One way or another we should consider this. The motion is timely, by and large, and I hope it helps in some way to alert drivers over the coming festive season and reduce traffic deaths.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: I am glad to have the opportunity to speak on this motion and I compliment my colleague Deputy Fergus O'Dowd on bringing it before the House. I am in a unique position to speak on this subject as I had an out of body experience related to a motor accident in the past week. This motion serves to focus attention on the contributory factors leading to road deaths.

I believe that enough signs around the country indicating the presence of speed cameras will slow people down except those who always disregard the rules of the road. It is not always necessary to drive at the highest permissible speed. On some roads the highest permissible speed is far below the national speed limit but the national speed limit on secondary roads is far greater than the speed motorists should drive.

Many Members of this House have been members of local authorities and will know that planning permission for access to a main road can only be granted if at that spot there are 119 metres of clear vision in both directions. I went back to the scene of my recent brush with the next world to measure the road and found that the line of vision to the right at the T-junction was only 28 metres. Once a person has committed

8 o'clock

[Deputy Bernard J. Durkan.]

to turn on to that main road, he or she has no option but take the impact of the oncoming vehicle, as I did. Countless similar accidents have occurred through the years and at one location in my constituency 19 people were killed in 20 years. How long must this go on before we deal with the causes of these accidents?

I was glad to see the Minister performed a hand brake turn on the issue of the unfortunate provisional driving licence holders after the self-righteousness and political correctness of the preceding days that suggested everyone would be tested over a single weekend. I believe provisional licence holders are not the worst offenders and the statistics support this. It was very difficult for me to extract this information because the Minister only gave the answer to my question on this today and I have not yet received it.

I am informed that people who contest penalty points in court have a good rate of success and this might be noted by those who pay their fines on the spot. Ministers have refused to answer my questions in this regard but the evidence available to me suggests this is the case. We should have this information and if it is so, we should examine the situation to find out what is going wrong.

I assure the House that in the coming years each of its Members will receive penalty points as they will be unavoidable if cameras are to be spread throughout the country as has been suggested. I will be delighted if anyone can prove me wrong in four or five years but I believe this is how penalty points will be distributed. Road conditions and drivers not having due regard for them are the main cause of accidents.

Minister of State at the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government (Deputy Batt O’Keeffe): On behalf of the Minister for Transport, I thank Deputies for their constructive contributions to an interesting debate concerning the important subject of road safety and, in particular, the operation of the penalty points and fixed charge systems. The Minister for Transport, Deputy Dempsey, has asked that I take this opportunity to respond briefly on his behalf to some of those issues.

It is appropriate to take this opportunity to outline some of the fundamentals of the penalty points and fixed charge systems. The primary purpose of the penalty points system is to track breaches of driving regulations with a view to improving the driving behaviour of those who repeatedly commit these breaches. The design of the system required careful consideration of Irish circumstances, including the role of the courts in the administration of justice. In designing the penalty points system, the Department of Transport examined such systems operating in other jurisdictions and, where possible, adopted elements of them. However, the Irish system was tailored specifically to suit our laws.

Regarding the majority of penalty point offences, the option of paying a fixed charge is available and therefore penalty points are, in most cases, incurred when a motorist pays a fixed charge notice issued by the Garda for infringements of road traffic law. When the motorist pays the fixed charge, he or she is accepting the consequence that the prescribed number of penalty points will be endorsed on his or her driving licence record. As the Minister indicated last night, it is a matter for the motorist to decide whether to pay the fixed charge in lieu of going to court. It is a person’s right to go to court and to contest the nature of the alleged offence.

Any suggestions that affect the basic rationale I have outlined for the penalty points and fixed charge system, such as the suggestions which we heard last night relating to a debt collection firm pursuing the payment of fixed charges or attaching an unpaid fixed charge to a renewal of motor tax can only be considered against the fundamental right of the motorist to reject the fixed charge option and to contest his or her case in court.

If the motorist opts for a court hearing, he or she avoids the automatic consequence of the application of penalty points on his or her licence record arising from payment of a fixed charge but runs the risk of being endorsed with a higher number of penalty points, which will automatically follow a court conviction, and is liable for a higher financial penalty by way of a court fine. The intended effect of these systems is to instil greater caution and responsibility in motorists and to transfer most of the enforcement of the system from the courts to an administrative process.

The Minister, Deputy Dempsey, outlined in detail last night how administrative systems operate between the various agencies involved, including the fact that reports are given to the Garda outlining the status of disqualified drivers and whether they have surrendered their licences to the licensing authority. It is an offence not to surrender one’s licence and the Garda can pursue through the courts those drivers who fail to do so.

The Road Safety Authority, RSA, was responsible for developing the new road safety strategy for the period 2007 to 2012. It sought public consultation in October last year and received a substantial number of suggestions and proposals as a result of that process. It also engaged in a process of direct consultation with key stakeholders in December 2006. The level of consultation with stakeholders was very detailed and resulted in the development of a programme of actions which will be implemented by a range of Departments and agencies over the next six years.

As the Minister, Deputy Dempsey, outlined last night, a number of legislative proposals emanate from the strategy and he has indicated that he will consider any other issues raised by the Garda or the Courts Service in the development of legislative proposals in this regard.

Deputies O'Dowd, O'Mahony, Mitchell and Deenihan inquired as to the position on speed cameras. Speed continues to be a major contributory factor in causing deaths and injuries on our roads. The best way to ensure greater levels of compliance with speed limits is a wider deployment of cameras, which is planned. Speed enforcement is suited to the use of cameras and other facilities that do not depend on the immediate presence of gardaí. For this reason, the road safety strategy provides for the engagement of private sector interests in the operation of cameras. Decisions on the locations where cameras will be provided will be taken by the Garda in co-operation with the relevant authorities and will reflect both the experience of speed related collisions and evidence of a history of speeding.

In order to permit what has heretofore been a Garda activity, the Road Traffic Act 2006 contains provisions to support the operation of privately operated cameras. The operative date for the roll-out of the cameras, according to the road safety strategy, is the second quarter of 2008. The Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform is the lead agency responsible for this project and is currently engaged in a procurement process.

Deputies Ó Snodaigh and Ring raised the issue of drug testing of drivers in the light of recent deaths related to drugs generally. The Road Traffic Acts provide that a member of the Garda Síochána, 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, may require that person to go to a Garda station and further require that he or she submit to a blood test or provide a urine sample.

The Medical Bureau of Road Safety analyses blood and urine specimens received under the Road Traffic Acts for the presence of a drug or drugs. Enforcement of the law on drug driving is a matter for the Garda Síochána. The Department of Transport will keep under review the development of technology internationally for roadside testing for drugs. There is no reliable equipment available for that purpose. When suitable technology becomes available, any measures applied to the roadside testing of drivers for alcohol will also be applied to drugs.

Deputies O'Mahony, Broughan and Ó Snodaigh referred to driving test waiting times. Since its establishment in September 2006, the Road Safety Authority has introduced several measures to reduce driving test waiting times. These include contracting SGS Limited to provide additional driving tests on its behalf. In the last year or so the average waiting time for a test has come down by approximately one third and the RSA continues to drive that waiting time down.

Following the recent changes to driver licensing provisions, the RSA has confirmed that all 122,000 applicants on the waiting list at the end

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

In addition to these two commitments, the Minister for Transport has also requested the RSA to ensure all 120,000 people who were holders of second provisional licences at the time the changes were introduced in October will be offered a test before the end of June 2008. From that date, these drivers will be required to be accompanied by a qualified driver, a requirement which applied to all other learner drivers even before the changes.

Deputies O'Dowd, Broughan, Ó Snodaigh and Ring referred to the problems associated with endorsing penalty points on the driving licence records of non-national drivers. The Minister is conscious that enforcing penalties for road traffic offences by foreign registered drivers raises many legal, organisational and procedural issues that make it difficult for any state to enforce those penalties. For this reason, the Department of Transport is pursuing this question at the European, British-Irish and North-South levels, where mutual recognition and cross-border enforcement possibilities are under consideration. This matter was discussed today at the North-South Ministerial Council.

I thank Deputies for their contributions to the debate.

Deputy Frank Feighan: I thank the Minister of State for his statement. I also thank Deputy O'Dowd for bringing this important motion before the House. It recognises that the impact of the penalty points system has been extremely welcome but notes with concern the weaknesses in enforcing the system that have led to a reduction in its impact on driver behaviour.

Any Government in Ireland faces a tough task in tackling road deaths and introducing road safety measures. We have a chequered past in terms of our efforts to recognise and solve this problem. Drink driving and speeding were almost a way of life. Most no longer drive after drinking but, for many, the disincentive is less the fear of killing an innocent bystander, passenger or themselves and more the prospect of losing their licence or being subject to higher insurance premia. Our ambivalent attitude towards road safety has in recent years been replaced by generally more careful and concerned driver behaviour.

We all recall the dramatic positive effect of the introduction of penalty points on driver behaviour, with a 20% reduction in road deaths by December 2002. However, we seem to have lost the plot since. The question we must consider is why motorists began to speed again. Perhaps it is because they learned that enforcement of the system was not effective. There is no doubt that changes are required in the operation of the system.

[Deputy Frank Feighan.]

Businesses throughout the State are concerned with offering a consumer-friendly and, in many cases, 24-hour service. Banks, for example, offer customers direct debit facilities and so on to make banking easier and more convenient. The penalty points system, on the other hand, is inconvenient and ineffective. There are inefficiencies in collecting data such that defendants are requested to bring their driving licences to court. As a publican, I appeared in court to answer charges of facilitating after-hours drinking and found it to be a harrowing experience. Court should always be the last resort. We must look more carefully at keeping people out of the courts system in the matter of penalty point fines. Everything should be done to ensure the system is consumer-friendly and efficient. I have no difficulties with fines being increased but court should be the last resort.

Up to 80,000 people have not paid their fines on time. This suggests there is something fundamentally wrong with the system. Deputy O'Dowd's motion seeks to address this imbalance and ensure the system is more user-friendly. The speed camera network has been promised for a long time and its inception, by late 2008, will be welcome. However, the increased provision of cameras will lead to the imposition of many more fines. This, in turn, will lead to an increased number of defaults that will clog up the courts system. This represents a waste of Garda resources and time. An independent entity should run the system on behalf of the Garda.

On the journey from the west to Dublin one encounters a motorway at Mullingar. It is nice to drive at 100 km/h and overtake as required. On a single lane carriageway, however, one may encounter lorries, drivers of which will not pull in to allow other motorists to overtake. I think it is against the law for them not to drive in the slow lane. People trying to overtake these are taking their lives in their hands because the vehicles are travelling at 30 mph. It can take nearly twice as long to get from my town to Mullingar, which is halfway to Dublin, than it takes to get from Mullingar to here.

It would be like shooting ducks in a barrel to put a speed camera in such a location and capture a car passing out a lorry. To overtake, a car might have to go to 60 mph or 70 mph and would effectively be breaking the law. There are many anomalies and until we upgrade the road network, it will be unfair on people without access to a better road transport system.

Outstanding fines could be collected through the car tax renewal process. We all have bank accounts or credit cards and perhaps fines should be added to the car tax renewal cost, even with a late penalty added. Fines can be increased but people should be kept out of court.

We fundamentally support the penalty points system and the downward trend in road deaths. The law should be amended and I commend my

colleague, Deputy Fergus O'Dowd, for bringing this very important motion before the House.

Deputy Joe McHugh: I will focus only on the preventative educational aspects of the issue. I have a few questions in that regard.

Before I ask them I acknowledge some locally-based and locally-designed intervention models. In particular, I put on record the efforts of a partnership approach in County Donegal which had a successful road show recently. There were participants from the ambulance service and the Garda, as well as families who lost loved ones and other people involved in car accidents. It was a very dramatic and hard-hitting road show. It should certainly be emulated in other parts of the country.

I have questions on the Road Safety Authority's role in working with the Department of Education and Science. How does the Road Safety Authority intend to work the mechanics of its proposals on education and awareness through the school system if there is no effort on the part of the Department of Education and Science to change the curriculum, redesign courses or introduce lessons into the school system?

Perhaps there is action behind the scenes of which I am not aware. It is required and must be done through a radical overhaul of the education system. We should bring driving instructors into classrooms to talk to 13 and 14 year olds and get such pupils started on the theory aspect of learning to drive. Instructors should also speak to them about the practical sides of learning to drive.

I visited Crana College in Buncrana in the last month and asked both male and female students what subject area they wished to discuss with me. They wanted to discuss cars, driving and test waiting times. These were 14 and 15 years olds. We have an opportunity to harness that energy in a positive way but the only way we can do so is by creating new modules, changing the curriculum and radically overhauling the system. Pupils would then be learning about a topic they are interested in rather than continuously being force-fed different aspects of the curriculum.

The curriculum has not evolved in the past 20 years. I was a teacher in 1993 and pupils are currently learning the same core subject topics which I taught then. They are still learning the same core subject topics that I learned when I took my intermediate certificate, as it was then known, in 1986. It is time we use education as a mechanism to overhaul the curriculum in a positive way.

We should start teaching the basics of driving skills at a practical and theoretical level by bringing the people who know how to do it into the system. We should not necessarily delegate such a task to teachers, as they are in schools to teach the sciences and arts to pupils rather than teach them how to drive. We should be radical and use this opportunity to overhaul the system.

At some stage, perhaps next week or in a fortnight or a month's time, we will be faced with another big issue of carnage on the roads, like the five young people unfortunately killed in Inishowen approximately two years ago. We will be faced with another sensational topic and everyone in the House will say how terrible it is. This week the issue was cocaine and a few weeks ago it was gangland murder.

We are becoming a reactionary House that acts on every issue sensationalised in the media. It is time to intervene and be positive and creative. We should be proactive in creating the society we want rather than reacting to every issue that is being sensationalised. We should be clear, constructive and radical in overhauling our education system.

Deputy Fergus O'Dowd: I thank everybody who contributed to the debate as there were many constructive comments from all sides. I welcome all of them.

The key point in this Fine Gael motion, which the Government does not appear to accept and has failed to acknowledge, is our call on the Government to bring forward legislation as a matter of urgency to reform the penalty points system to ensure all fixed charge penalties are collected and enforced, and to reform the system that requires legally-disqualified drivers to surrender their licences by giving the Garda responsibility for collection of them.

In the first six months of the year, 88,371 summonses were issued after the 56-day period had expired for people who incurred penalty points and did not pay the fine. Some 43,700 of those summonses were not served, meaning those people who incurred penalty points, did not pay the fine, did not get the summons and did not go to court. The system is in serious disrepute. Of the total number of cases issued, only 14,000, about 16%, ended up getting a fine. That is not acceptable.

There are other figures which should be brought to the Government's attention. There are 100,000 uninsured drivers on our roads, as estimated by the Motor Insurers Bureau of Ireland. It is acknowledged by that body that such drivers cause over 2,000 injuries per annum and at least 20 deaths. They are responsible for approximately €45 on every car insurance policy per annum, so it is a very serious issue.

Another important figure should be raised. There are 126,000 people who have been given penalty points but they cannot be applied because these people have no licence. It is estimated that a significant number of them, some 108,000, are from out of State but the balance are here in Ireland.

It is often the same people who have no licence and no insurance. A significant number of people caught driving while talking on mobile phones are in the same category. There is a job to be done that has not been delivered by this Government, which has instead put its head in the sand. As others have stated, it is loading praise on itself rather than facing the truth.

Gay Byrne has served this country well in the past and is serving it well as chairman of the Road Safety Authority. That body is doing its job very well but there are critical issues ahead.

A significant point came out in a committee meeting today. Of all the carriers, such as buses, in this country, some 20% are not licensed, which is a serious matter. The Government should attack such issues. We will give credit for what has been done but the Government should not indicate it cannot accept our legislative proposals. We will put the matter to a vote because the Government does not acknowledge the reality. The Courts Service has stated the District Court system is grinding to a halt because it cannot deal with the summonses for penalty points coming before it. It needs urgent reform. If the Government keeps its head in the sand, the problem will get much worse.

Amendment put.

The Dáil divided: Tá, 74; Níl, 59.

Tá

Ahern, Dermot.
Andrews, Barry.
Andrews, Chris.
Ardagh, Seán.
Aylward, Bobby.
Behan, Joe.
Blaney, Niall.
Brady, Áine.
Brady, Cyprian.
Brady, Johnny.
Browne, John.
Byrne, Thomas.
Calleary, Dara.
Carey, Pat.
Collins, Niall.
Conlon, Margaret.

Connick, Seán.
Coughlan, Mary.
Cregan, John.
Cuffe, Ciarán.
Cullen, Martin.
Curran, John.
Devins, Jimmy.
Dooley, Timmy.
Fahey, Frank.
Finneran, Michael.
Fitzpatrick, Michael.
Fleming, Seán.
Flynn, Beverley.
Gallagher, Pat The Cope.
Gogarty, Paul.
Grealish, Noel.

Tá—continued

Haughey, Seán.
 Healy-Rae, Jackie.
 Hoctor, Máire.
 Kelleher, Billy.
 Kelly, Peter.
 Kenneally, Brendan.
 Kennedy, Michael.
 Killeen, Tony.
 Kirk, Seamus.
 Kitt, Michael P.
 Kitt, Tom.
 Lenihan, Conor.
 Lowry, Michael.
 Mansergh, Martin.
 McEllistrim, Thomas.
 McGrath, Finian.
 McGrath, Mattie.
 McGrath, Michael.
 McGuinness, John.
 Moloney, John.
 Moynihan, Michael.

Mulcahy, Michael.
 Nolan, M. J.
 Ó Fearghaíl, Seán.
 Ó'Brien, Darragh.
 Ó'Connor, Charlie.
 Ó'Dea, Willie.
 Ó'Flynn, Noel.
 Ó'Hanlon, Rory.
 Ó'Keeffe, Batt.
 Ó'Keeffe, Edward.
 Ó'Rourke, Mary.
 Ó'Sullivan, Christy.
 Power, Peter.
 Roche, Dick.
 Ryan, Eamon.
 Sargent, Trevor.
 Scanlon, Eamon.
 Smith, Brendan.
 Treacy, Noel.
 White, Mary Alexandra.
 Woods, Michael.

Níl

Allen, Bernard.
 Bannon, James.
 Broughan, Thomas P.
 Bruton, Richard.
 Burke, Ulick.
 Burton, Joan.
 Byrne, Catherine.
 Carey, Joe.
 Clune, Deirdre.
 Connaughton, Paul.
 Coonan, Noel J.
 Costello, Joe.
 Crawford, Seymour.
 Creed, Michael.
 Creighton, Lucinda.
 D'Arcy, Michael.
 Deasy, John.
 Deenihan, Jimmy.
 Doyle, Andrew.
 Durkan, Bernard J.
 Enright, Olwyn.
 Feighan, Frank.
 Ferris, Martin.
 Flanagan, Charles.
 Flanagan, Terence.
 Gilmore, Eamon.
 Hayes, Tom.
 Higgins, Michael D.
 Hogan, Phil.
 Howlin, Brendan.

Kehoe, Paul.
 Lynch, Ciarán.
 Lynch, Kathleen.
 McCormack, Pádraic.
 McGinley, Dinny.
 McHugh, Joe.
 McManus, Liz.
 Mitchell, Olivia.
 Morgan, Arthur.
 Neville, Dan.
 Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.
 O'Donnell, Kieran.
 O'Dowd, Fergus.
 O'Keeffe, Jim.
 O'Mahony, John.
 O'Shea, Brian.
 O'Sullivan, Jan.
 Penrose, Willie.
 Perry, John.
 Rabbitte, Pat.
 Reilly, James.
 Shatter, Alan.
 Sheahan, Tom.
 Sheehan, P. J.
 Shortall, Róisín.
 Stagg, Emmet.
 Stanton, David.
 Tuffy, Joanna.
 Upton, Mary.

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Tom Kitt and John Curran; Níl, Deputies Paul Kehoe and Emmet Stagg.

Amendment declared carried.

Motion, as amended, put and declared carried.

Adjournment Debate.

Industrial Development.

Deputy Kieran O'Donnell: I have raised this issue for two reasons. First, I submitted a parliamentary question to the Minister for

Enterprise, Trade and Employment on 29 November last. The figures outlined in the Minister's response were disappointing. I learned that just five IDA-backed companies have opened in County Limerick since 2002. There have been seven start-ups in the mid-west region as a whole during that time. No new IDA-supported projects opened in County Limerick in 2002, 2003 or 2004. There was one start-up in each of 2005 and 2006 and there have been three start-ups to date in 2007. While the people of Limerick welcome such developments, we do not think they make a sig-

nificant difference to the county's employment figures.

Recent IDA reports indicate that the number of IDA-backed jobs in Limerick increased by just 139 between 2002 and 2006. Our counterparts in Dublin enjoyed an increase of 3,373 in the number of IDA-supported jobs over the same period. The increase was 1,812 in Cork and 1,567 in Galway. Some counties with smaller populations than Limerick enjoyed larger increases in IDA-backed employment — there were increases of 742 in Kildare, 529 in Waterford and 407 in Leitrim. Jobs have been lost from two Limerick companies over the past year. The loss of over 100 jobs at Fulflex and a similar number of jobs at Atlas Aluminium was hugely significant for the region.

Second, Limerick will have to deal within a month with the closure of the Aer Lingus service between Shannon and Heathrow. The people of the mid-west will be at a major disadvantage when they are no longer able to access 40 cities throughout the world. The Government gave Aer Lingus permission to discontinue the service, in effect, when it failed to use its 25% stake to ensure that the Aer Lingus decision was reversed. The loss of the Heathrow service will do major damage to Limerick and the rest of the mid-west region. Furthermore, Aer Lingus has not committed to providing transatlantic flights from Shannon after the summer of 2008. Many people in the mid-west are worried that Aer Lingus will stop its transatlantic flights after it has ended its Heathrow service, especially now that we have entered the open skies era.

I note with interest the recent suggestion on the part of the Minister for Transport, Deputy Dempsey, that the Government might renege on the mid-west's €53 million tourism and economic development plan, comprising €44 million for tourism development and €9 million for route support. This cannot be allowed to happen. The plan was produced in June 2006 by the Mid-West Regional Authority in association with all the stakeholders in this sector. It was launched amid great fanfare in July 2006 by the then Minister for Transport, Deputy Cullen. Two other Ministers — the then Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism, Deputy O'Donoghue, and the Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment, Deputy Martin — were involved in the production of the report at that time. I note that the Minister, Deputy Martin, who is the only one of the three to remain in the position he held at that time, is not present for tonight's debate. The €53 million plan must be retained to allow the mid-west region to market itself in the new environment that is developing as a result of the introduction of the open skies agreement.

I welcome the arrival of any IDA-backed company in the mid-west. State-supported companies account for more than 17% of total employment in the region, whereas nationally the figure is as

low as 14.8%. I want the Minister of State to make absolutely certain that Limerick will be given priority by the IDA for the introduction of new large-scale companies.

Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Billy Kelleher): I thank the Deputy for raising this matter. I refer to competitiveness in the global market place. IDA Ireland is actively pursuing all opportunities to promote Ireland as a whole but it also takes regional development into account in order to achieve a balance across the country.

I note projects such as the Atlantic rail corridor, the tunnel under the Shannon, the University of Limerick and other infrastructural developments in County Limerick. The region is a key area and the IDA is at the forefront in promoting research and development, linking up high value-added and knowledge-based companies with universities. These are the types of projects being promoted by the IDA in its travels throughout the world.

I acknowledge the great work being undertaken by the IDA in promoting Ireland as a whole. The Deputy is correct in that some areas benefit more than others in the context of embryonic spin-offs from large companies already situated in a place. The IDA cannot direct where a company wants to set up but we can encourage and direct it into certain areas and this is being done. The mid-west has a very strong IDA-supported employment base which it is hoped will continue.

Reference has been made to access to the mid-west. The Government is actively pursuing airlines and encouraging them to consider Shannon Airport. The open skies policy is in place but I am confident that Shannon Airport will continue to prosper in the context of the transatlantic routes as it is the nearest link to the east coast of the United States. I do not share a pessimistic view of what is happening in the mid-west in which there are great opportunities as a result of large capital infrastructural developments. The IDA must take note of balanced regional development but the Deputy will understand that it cannot direct a company to locate in a particular area, as this decision is based on other considerations such as sister companies and others engaged in similar activity.

I will endeavour to obtain a more detailed reply for the Deputy, as I know he has strong opinions on the subject. I will highlight his concerns and convey them to the Minister, Deputy Martin, and the IDA.

Deputy Kieran O'Donnell: May I ask a supplementary question?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I am afraid not, as there is no provision for supplementary questions.

Community Employment Schemes.

Deputy Paul Connaughton: I am grateful for the opportunity of raising this matter. While I am delighted to see the Minister of State, I am somewhat sorry that the Minister, Deputy Martin, is not present to hear what I have to say. It concerns a matter, the community employment scheme, which forms now part and parcel of community life in every parish.

My constituency of Galway East is no different from any other. In January and February well over 100 community employment workers will be told to go home, in other words, they will be finished with CE and FÁS schemes. Some might say FÁS is just a training agency and the people concerned should be trained to do something else afterwards. However, there is a cohort who work for community groups which are sponsors. Most of the people concerned are in the age range of 57 to 62 years. Because of their lack of skills for the outside world, they will have no place to go and they are the first to admit this but they are outstanding workers at what they do. They build walls, look after grounds and take great pride in what they do. In 2008 most of them will be back on the dole, a place in which they do not want to be. The only thing staring them in the face is that for the next five or six years until they reach contributory old-age pension age they will be on the dole. They are needed not only in rural parishes but also by organisations in towns such as tidy towns committees, wheelchair associations and others involved in community work. What is even worse is that if they could be easily replaced, one could see another tranche coming to take their places but that is not the case.

About five years ago the Minister made a minor change which allowed CE participants to work an extra four or five years. Therefore, a precedent has been established. There is no reason this group could not be allowed to continue to work with dignity. Any doctor will say many are given a new lease of life by working on CE schemes because they meet their neighbours. For obvious reasons I cannot name any the people concerned but I wish to give an impression of the type of person involved.

The participants in one CE scheme who will be getting their walking papers in the middle of January include a man aged 59 years who is separated and living alone; a man aged 58 years who has a young child; another man also aged 58 years; a widow aged 57 years with no support in the world; two more aged 61 and 63 years, respectively; a person with a mental illness and a widower aged 61 years. They have no other place in the wide earthly world to get a job other than on a CE scheme. This situation is replicated all over the country. In the week or two before Christmas, if the Minister has any feelings at all — I do not care what the bosses in FÁS say about the training philosophy and all that jazz — he will need fix it only once because this tranche of people will

not be there again and the matter will resolve itself in four or five years.

Deputy Billy Kelleher: I thank the Deputy for raising this matter.

The FÁS community employment programme is an active labour market programme designed to provide eligible long-term unemployed people and other disadvantaged persons with an opportunity to engage in useful work within their communities on a fixed-term basis. Community employment helps unemployed people to re-enter the open labour market by breaking their experience of unemployment through a return to a work routine and assisting them to enhance their technical and personal skills.

I am informed that the rural social scheme is under the aegis of the Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs. I understand its main purpose is to provide income support for low-income farmers and fishermen and to provide certain services of benefit to local communities. The operation of the scheme is, in the first instance, a matter for the Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs.

Deputy Paul Connaughton: There is a cap on that scheme also.

Deputy Billy Kelleher: I understand what the Deputy is saying.

As regards the community employment programme, in 1999 the programme was restructured to limit participation by new participants to three years, with effect from April 2000. This change was introduced to encourage unemployed persons to progress to training or education and employment options, where possible. However, this three-year cap was amended in August 2001 to allow particularly disadvantaged persons to remain on the programme for a further period. In general, approximately 20% of participants, including persons under 55 years of age, have benefited from an additional year on the programme under the flexibility guidelines introduced in August 2001. In November 2004, to cater for older workers, the three-year CE cap was revised to allow those of 55 years of age and over to avail of a six-year period on CE, based on participation since 3 April 2000. This was introduced in recognition of the fact that older participants may find it more difficult to progress into the open labour market.

In July 2006 my Department published its sectoral plan under the Disability Act 2005. One of the key highlights of the plan is to increase participation rates of people with disabilities in community employment over the period of the plan. In order to provide additional training to assist progression to employment for people with disabilities under 55 years of age, the participation limit has been raised by one year from three to four years and for people with disabilities over 55

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years of age, the participation limit has also been raised by one year from six to seven years. The upper age limit for CE participants is 65 years.

FÁS is continuing to develop the content of the community employment programme. The new approach involves the introduction of an individual learner planning process which is focusing on meeting the learning needs of participants. The individual learner plan is providing for the planning, organising and recording of the work experience, training and development of each participant while working on the community employment programme. It also includes further training and development for supervisors, a new application process and quality assurance procedures. Under this individualised approach, FÁS has proposed four new FETAC awards relevant to both community employment and job initiative learners, including certificate in personal and social employment skills level 3; certificate in vocational employment skills level 3; certificate of applied employment skills level 4; and certificate in specific employment skills level 5. These new awards will facilitate all of the planned learning completed on community employment or job initiative schemes by each participant being rolled up into the achievement of a FETAC award. This will provide added value to the learner and will support their progression to further training or employment.

Funding for community employment in 2007 has been provided with a view to maintaining overall numbers on FÁS schemes. That is an important fact. Currently, more than 22,000 people are employed on community employment schemes nationally. In delivering these places, FÁS operates flexibly in the management of this allocation in order to maximise progression to the labour market while at the same time facilitating the support of community services. This provision of places is managed through a standardised application process between regional FÁS offices and local sponsor and community organisations and any issues regarding the allocation of places are dealt with in this context. However, it should be remembered that, in so far as participants remain on community employment, they are precluding someone else from benefiting from the programme.

Deputy Paul Connaughton: Not the people I am talking about.

Deputy Billy Kelleher: FÁS makes every effort to ensure that differing levels of demand between neighbouring schemes are equalised. FÁS also operates the programme flexibly as far as possible to ensure the continuation of community projects.

This Government will continue to support the positive role of community employment schemes in meeting the needs of long-term unemployed persons, while at the same time providing essential services to communities. In this regard, we

are keeping the operation of the scheme under constant review.

Human Rights Issues.

Deputy Joe Costello: The Government cannot refuse for ever to put an adequate inspection regime in place to prevent the possibility of extraordinary rendition of prisoners transiting through Irish airspace and territory. The Government must fulfil its international obligations in regard to human rights. The Minister cannot say “No” forever.

The Human Rights Commission report entitled, *Extraordinary Rendition: A Review of Ireland's Human Rights Obligations*, was published yesterday. The commission concluded that diplomatic assurances received from the United States Government with regard to the issue of extraordinary rendition flights passing through Irish territory were not sufficient for Ireland to satisfy its human rights obligation. This is a body that was set up by statute to vindicate human rights and the Government is expected to take its recommendations seriously. An equivalent body operates in Northern Ireland and we expect that recommendations made on both sides of the Border should be taken equally seriously.

The report from the Irish Human Rights Commission also stated that it had obtained evidence that as far back as 2003 the Government had raised concerns with the United States about extraordinary rendition flights suspected of transporting prisoners through Shannon to Guantanamo Bay, but beyond raising the issue with the US Government it had been decided to take no other action. To date, the Government has refused to take action.

Two Council of Europe reports were critical of Ireland's position, as was a European Parliament report, and now the report of the Irish Human Rights Commission, which is a statutory body. All these bodies have expressed grave concern about the use of Irish airspace in regard to the CIA practice of extraordinary rendition. The only response from the Government has been to stubbornly refuse to put in place any inspection regime and stubbornly persist in accepting assurance from the United States Government which are not founded on any evidence the Government has been given.

The only people in this country who believe the Government's position is the Minister for Foreign Affairs and the other members of Government. The ordinary people in the street do not believe there has not been some invasion of Irish airspace in respect of extraordinary rendition. The simplest things to do is to dispel the view that is abroad and acknowledge the circumstantial evidence that those four reports to which I referred have produced to date.

The Labour Party rejects the Government's stance on this issue. Human rights are sacrosanct

[Deputy Joe Costello.]

and, given Ireland's reputation on the espousal and implementation of human rights, the Government should respond positively and quickly to the concerns expressed by domestic and international statutory bodies on human rights.

Deputy Billy Kelleher: The Minister apologises for his absence and hopes the Deputy will understand why he is not here this evening. I wish to state unequivocally that we owe a debt of thanks to the Human Rights Commission for reviewing a matter which has rightly caused much concern across Europe and further afield. So-called extraordinary rendition is a seemingly innocuous term for an horrific and illegal practice often leading to secret detention and torture and to which the Government is completed and implacably opposed. Quite simply, extraordinary rendition has no place in any democratic society which respects, or purports to respect, the rule of law and human rights. In this, the Government, the Human Rights Commission and, I am sure, this House, are at one.

Unfortunately, while we all recognise the evil of extraordinary rendition, I regret to say it would appear that the Human Rights Commission, in its recommendations, has failed to do adequate justice to the seriousness of the issue, the complexity of the necessary responses and the comprehensive actions already taken by the State.

Deputy Costello is correct to draw attention to one of the core recommendations of the commission's report, namely, that the State should introduce an inspection regime as a matter of urgency; that this regime should apply to aircraft from any State in regard to which suspicion exists; and that it should be properly resourced and overseen by an independent body.

These interlinked proposals are made against the following backdrop of established, indisputable facts: that extraordinary rendition has been a most regrettable reality; that international bodies, including the Council of Europe and the European Parliament, suggest that where extraordinary rendition has occurred, it has occurred very far from Irish shores; that at no stage has any evidence emerged, or even a specific allegation been made, that any person has ever been subject to extraordinary rendition through Ireland, a fact acknowledged by the President of the Human Rights Commission; that in arguing that the assurances received from the United States at the highest level are inadequate that extraordinary rendition has never and would never be practised in Ireland, the Human Rights Commission has sought to rely on international jurisprudence relating to a very different type of assurance; and that no other European country has an inspection

regime as proposed by the Human Rights Commission.

The practice of extraordinary rendition has been memorably described as a spider's web. To help sweep away such a web, any actions which we take must be based on the rule of law, have a realistic chance of success and deal with established realities rather than unproven assertions. It is precisely for these reasons that the Government, in its programme for Government, has sought to make a meaningful contribution to this issue by making two clear, explicit and unambiguous commitments.

It has committed itself to seeking EU and international support to address deficiencies in elements of the regulation of civil aviation under the Chicago Convention. As Deputies may be aware, this 60-year-old convention provides no requirement whatsoever for the supply of information on passenger, crew or cargo of a transit flight; and the Government has also committed itself to prioritising enforcement of relevant legislation, including the Criminal Justice (United Nations Convention against Torture) Act 2000. In particular, Garda investigation and enforcement efforts are being supported by making all necessary resources available for specialised training in the provisions of relevant statutes.

Members of the Garda Síochána already have full power to search civil aircraft in any circumstances where they have reasonable grounds for suspecting illegal activity, such as extraordinary rendition, and to carry out any necessary investigations. To suggest that the Garda Síochána should conduct searches where there are no reasonable grounds for suspicion, which itself amounts to unreasonable grounds in law, is fantastical. In particular, the mere assertion of wrongdoing is clearly and obviously insufficient grounds to merit inspection.

To date, where complaints of alleged unlawful activity concerning the use of Irish airports have been made to the Garda Síochána, Garda investigations have been pursued and, where appropriate, files have been submitted to the Director of Public Prosecutions. In all these cases, no evidence emerged justifying any subsequent legal action.

The Government will continue its longstanding and strongly held opposition to extraordinary rendition. It will do so diligently, with meaningful initiatives and with a view to playing its full part in ensuring the end to this barbaric practice in whatever dark corner of the world it is practised. The issue is too important for ill-conceived measures for which no real justification has been put forward.

The Dáil adjourned at 9.10 p.m. until 10.30 a.m. on Thursday, 13 December 2007.

Written Answers.

The following are questions tabled by Members for written response and the ministerial replies as received on the day from the Departments [unrevised].

Questions Nos. 1 to 4, inclusive, answered orally.

Questions Nos. 5 to 43, inclusive, resubmitted.

Questions Nos. 44 to 53, inclusive, answered orally.

Defence Forces Operations.

54. **Deputy Ciarán Lynch** asked the Minister for Defence the further exercises of the Nordic battlegroup to which Ireland contributes personnel that are planned; when they will be held and the planned location; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34158/07]

81. **Deputy Eamon Gilmore** asked the Minister for Defence if he will make a statement on his recent visit to Sweden to attend the final ground exercise for the Nordic battlegroup. [34155/07]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Willie O’Dea): I propose to take Questions Nos. 54 and 81 together.

On 7 November 2007, I visited Sweden to attend the Final Exercise (FINEX), carried out by the Nordic Battlegroup (NBG). The exercise, which commenced on 21 October 2007 continued until 12 November 2007. The total number of Irish Defence Force personnel who participated in the exercise was 93 and included the Improvised Explosive Device Disposal (IEDD), HQ staff and exercise assessor personnel. The exercise was designed to test the interoperability and strategic movement of the Nordic Battlegroup (NBG).

The first phase of the exercise was conducted in the South of Sweden and included combined tactical operations based on EU approved scenarios. The second part of the exercise involved a deployment by rail, sea and air to the North of

Sweden and the subsequent conduct of tactical operations. The deployment exercise was designed to practice the NBG in the procedures and skills that are required for a real life deployment.

The Nordic Battlegroup consists of a combined total of approximately 2,610 personnel, depending on the components required. The contributing nations in this Battlegroup are Sweden, Finland, Norway, Ireland and Estonia. Sweden as the Framework Nation takes the lead role in the NBG formation and will contribute approximately 2,200 personnel. This includes the core of the unit, which consists of a light mechanised infantry battalion of some 1,500 soldiers. The infantry battalion can be reinforced with support resources such as engineering, logistics, anti-aircraft, intelligence, transport helicopter, medical or mine clearance units. Should the need arise, combat aircraft with an air base unit or special forces can also be deployed.

The approximate contribution of personnel from the other nations to the Battlegroup are — Finland 150, Norway 100, Ireland 100 and Estonia 60. During the visit I took the opportunity to meet with the Defence Ministers of the other four contribution nations in the Battlegroup. I also had the opportunity to meet with and receive separate briefings on the exercise from the representatives of the Irish contingent and Force Commander Brigadier General Karl Engelbrektsson (Sweden).

At present there are no further exercises of this nature planned for the Nordic Battlegroup (NBG). Other exercises may be planned. However, present indications are that these will be focussed on the staff based in the Force and Operation Headquarters.

Question No. 55 answered with Question No. 49.

Overseas Missions.

56. **Deputy Joe Carey** asked the Minister for Defence the percentage of the normal annual leave allowance for each category lost by senior officers, junior officers and enlisted personnel respectively on foot of serving overseas for a six month tour of duty; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34434/07]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Willie O’Dea): The annual leave entitlements for members of the Defence Forces are as follows:

- a. Senior Officers 43 days
- b. Junior Officers 31 days
- c. Enlisted Personnel 29 days.

These annual leave entitlements are reduced by a set amount while the member of the Defence Forces is on an overseas tour of duty. The reduction is 3.5 days per month for senior officers, 2.5 days per month for junior officers and 1 day per month for enlisted personnel. However, it should be noted that entitlement to overseas leave is accrued while on a six-month overseas tour. The actual leave entitlement depends on the mission and such overseas leave must be taken during the period of the mission. In addition, Defence Forces personnel serving overseas on a six-month tour of duty may avail of annual leave during their deployment overseas, subject to the operational requirements of the mission.

It is standard policy to fully support our troops who give such valuable service on overseas tours of duty. In this regard, leave with pay and allowances is normally granted to all ranks on return from service outside the State with an International United Nations Force. This is granted on the basis of 6 days in respect of each calendar month of external service from the first day of the month in which the period of external service commenced to the first day of the month on which the period of external service ceased. This is subject to a maximum of 30 days in respect of the period of external service involved.

A claim has been received from the Representative Association of Commissioned Officers (RACO) that no officer should be at a loss of annual leave as a result of overseas service. This claim will be processed through the Conciliation and Arbitration Scheme for the Permanent Defence Force. By agreement with the Association, discussions under the Scheme are confidential to the parties involved. Accordingly, the Deputy will appreciate that it would not be appropriate for me to comment further on this issue at this time.

57. **Deputy Richard Bruton** asked the Minister for Defence the projected cost of transporting all Irish troops and their equipment, personal and otherwise, to and from Chad over the duration

of the participation of the Defence Forces in the forthcoming EU mission there; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34429/07]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Willie O’Dea): I would refer the Deputy to my reply to Priority Question No. 46.

Defence Forces Retirement Scheme.

58. **Deputy Catherine Byrne** asked the Minister for Defence the progress that has been made in discussions on the claim made by RACO to extend the retirement age for certain officers; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34433/07]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Willie O’Dea): A claim to increase the mandatory retirement age to 60 years for officers serving in ranks up to and including Lieutenant Colonel was received from the Representative Association of Commissioned Officers under the Conciliation and Arbitration Scheme for members of the Permanent Defence Force. The claim has been the subject of correspondence between the Department and the Representative Association. The Deputy will appreciate that as discussions under the C&A scheme are confidential to the parties involved it would not be appropriate for me to comment further on the matter at this time.

Bullying in the Workplace.

59. **Deputy Jimmy Deenihan** asked the Minister for Defence if he has met PDFORRA representatives on their concerns regarding the victimisation of elected representatives which was raised at their recent annual conference; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34422/07]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Willie O’Dea): I would like to assure the House that any allegations of victimisation in the Defence Forces are treated with the utmost seriousness and there are extensive and robust complaints and grievance procedure processes in place to protect the rights of all Defence Forces personnel, including PDFORRA officials. In addition, on interpersonal relationships, the Defence Forces and the Department have taken a wide variety of initiatives and have devoted extensive resources to this issue, since Dr. Eileen Doyle and the External Advisory Committee presented their original report “The Challenge of a Workplace” in March 2002.

The ongoing implementation of the recommendations of the Doyle report has been one of the highest priorities for the Defence Forces and the Department since its publication. I am satisfied that the military authorities are alert and vigilant to this issue and are committed to addressing the matter in a continuing and proactive manner

through educational modules on interpersonal relationships which are now embedded in career courses for all ranks. As I have stated previously my commitment and that of the Chief of Staff to addressing issues around interpersonal contact is well known.

I have asked my Departmental Officials to engage with PDFORRA to review the application of existing procedures to ensure that they can be used to the fullest extent to address any issues that may arise.

Defence Forces Recruitment.

60. **Deputy Jimmy Deenihan** asked the Minister for Defence his views on the statement by the secretary of PDFORRA at its recent annual conference, that in order to maintain full strength Defence Forces of 10,500 personnel and to provide for an additional 300 troops who will be in training at all times, that the Government should also look at the recruitment of non-Irish nationals, perhaps with some Irish citizenship rights for those recruited; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [29857/07]

80. **Deputy Michael D. Higgins** asked the Minister for Defence the progress that has been made by the Chief of Staff in regard to his previous review of recruitment into the Defence Forces at all levels and implementing changes that will facilitate recruitment from among cultural and ethnic minorities; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34160/07]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Willie O’Dea): I propose to take Questions Nos. 60 and 80 together.

The White Paper on Defence of February 2000 set out a figure of 10,500 personnel for the Permanent Defence Force as the strength sufficient to meet all foreseeable military requirements for the period comprehended by the White Paper (i.e. up to 2010). This remains the position. It is my intention to maintain the established Government policy of ongoing recruitment to the Defence Forces. This recruitment will continue to maintain the strength at the level set out in the White Paper.

To facilitate the Defence Forces in maintaining a strength of 10,500 the agreed Programme for Government provides for an additional provision of up to 350 troops to be in training at any given time. However, due to the requirement to prioritise funding for the Chad mission, it has not been possible to provide funding in 2008 to increase the approved strength of the Permanent Defence Force to the level provided for in the Programme for Government. This matter will be further considered in the context of the 2009 Estimates.

The question of the recruitment of foreign-nationals to the Defence Forces is not a new one.

Defence Force Regulations have always allowed for the recruitment of foreign-nationals to the Defence Forces. I know that people from diverse backgrounds have already been employed in the Defence Forces, but this has mainly been in certain specialised areas. This has worked well — albeit on a limited scale. Currently my emphasis is on ensuring that there are no barriers to ethnic minorities or foreign nationals joining the Defence Forces.

Entry to the Permanent Defence Force is either through the Cadetship Competition, Apprenticeship Competition, General Service Enlistment or Direct Entry Competitions which are held to fill vacancies in specialist appointments. All applicants for each of these entry streams are required to meet qualifying criteria. The Cadet Competition is the entry level for recruitment as an Officer of the Defence Forces. As you are aware, I have made changes to the Cadet competition to broaden the entry criteria thereby making it easier for qualifying foreign nationals to apply for cadetships.

I asked the Chief of Staff to review recruitment into the Defence Forces at all levels and to implement changes that would facilitate recruitment from among cultural and ethnic minorities. I am of the view that this can only enhance our Defence Forces. The Military Authorities are equally committed to increasing the participation of people from ethnic and cultural communities in the Defence Forces. To achieve this, the Defence Forces are:

- Developing a strategy for Cultural Diversity Management. A new Defence Forces advertising campaign will be launched to reflect its strategy for cultural diversity.
- Establishing links with all ethical and cultural community groups based in Ireland, in order to brief the groups on the Defence Forces and its current entry requirements. The groups will be invited to forward submissions to the Defence Forces on their views of service in the Defence Forces and to highlight any barriers they deem unfavourable to recruitment that may exist.

On the 30 November 2007, the Defence Forces issued their Equality, Diversity and Equal Status Policies. This document includes the Defence Forces:

- Gender Equality Policy,
- Anti Racism Equality Policy,
- Discrimination and Promotion Policy,
- Equality of Opportunity in Recruitment and Advertising of Jobs,
- Equal Opportunities in the Interview Process,

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- Equality of Opportunity in Job Orientation and Job Induction,
- Equality of Opportunity in Overseas Service, Career Promotion and Progression.

In relation to recruitment there are generally more applicants for positions in the Defence Forces than places available. My Department and the Defence Forces are fully committed to ensuring that all suitably qualified candidates who wish to do so are given the opportunity to join the Defence Forces. The primary focus in recruitment is to attract people with the core competencies required by the Defence Forces.

The appropriateness of foreign nationals being allowed to join the Defence Forces and through membership of the Defence Forces earn citizenship has not been considered. The granting of citizenship in any circumstances is primarily a matter for my colleague the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform in the first instance.

Defence Forces Equipment.

61. **Deputy Catherine Byrne** asked the Minister for Defence the arrangements that have been made to finance the purchase of the new ships to be provided for the Naval Service over the next five years; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34432/07]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Willie O’Dea): Following Government approval to go to tender, notice of a competition for the purchase of replacement vessels for the Naval Service was sent to the Official Journal of the European Union on 24 August 2007. The competition for the purchase of two Offshore Patrol Vessels, with an option on a third and one Extended Patrol Vessel, with an option on a second, uses a Restricted Procurement Procedure in accordance with EU Procurement Directives. The process comprises two stages — Stage 1, a Request for Proposals and Stage 2, an Invitation to Tender.

The closing date for Stage 1- Request for Proposals was 26 October 2007. Stage 1 Proposals are being evaluated at present in my Department and following the evaluation a detailed specification will issue to those invited to participate in Stage 2 — Invitation to Tender. The “Invitation to Tender” is expected to issue in May 2008, with tenders due for return in July/August of that year. Following detailed tender evaluation it is expected that a contract will be awarded in late 2008/early 2009.

The decision to proceed to purchase the vessels will be subject to further Government approval and agreement on funding, the full requirement for which will not be known until the tender competition has concluded. Once details of costs are

known, funding arrangements will be a matter for further consideration in consultation with the Minister for Finance in the context of the Estimates process. It is expected that the cost of the three new ships will be of the order of some €180m excluding VAT. There has been an increase of €1million (10%) in Subhead J — Naval Service Equipment for 2008 to facilitate on-going project development. It is expected that the vessels will be delivered on a phased basis between 2010 and 2012.

62. **Deputy Peter Kelly** asked the Minister for Defence if the military authorities have reported to him on their examination of the military police investigation into the road accident at Granard, County Longford; when he expects to receive the recommendations of the study group established to examine the introduction of roll over protection systems in troop carrying vehicles; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [33988/07]

94. **Deputy Kathleen Lynch** asked the Minister for Defence if he has received the report of the study group to examine the possible introduction of the use of roll over protection systems in Irish troop carrying vehicles, which he was due to receive in early December 2007; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34162/07]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Willie O’Dea): I propose to take Questions Nos. 62 and 94 together.

Following a Road Traffic Accident involving a military vehicle near Granard in June of this year, the Defence Forces established a Study Group to examine the possible introduction of Roll Over Protection Systems in Troop Carrying Vehicles. The Group was asked to consider the implications of a number of matters that could arise from the introduction of the Roll Over Protection System. These include:

- Health and safety,
- Driver and passenger training,
- Regulation and instructions,
- Fleet composition and strength,
- Financial costs.

The Board was expected to have completed their deliberations by December 2007. However, they are still awaiting information from some suppliers in relation to the costs and types of Roll Over Protection Systems. This information is necessary for the Group to form their conclusions and provide their recommendations. Due to the unanticipated delay in the receipt of responses from potential suppliers, the Board will not be in a position to submit its final report and recommendations until mid to late January 2008.

Question No. 63 answered with Question No. 53.

Defence Forces Appointments.

64. **Deputy Ulick Burke** asked the Minister for Defence the criteria and methodology used by the Government in selecting officers to fill the appointments of chief of staff, deputy chief of staff operations and deputy chief of staff support; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34430/07]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Willie O’Dea): The appointments of Chief of Staff, Deputy Chief of Staff (Operations), and Deputy Chief of Staff (Support) are governed by the provisions of Section 12 of the Defence Act 1954 as amended by the Defence (Amendment) Act 1998. The Chief of Staff is appointed by the President. My Department prepares a Memorandum for Government whereby I recommend that the Government advise the President as to the Officer to be appointed to the office of Chief of Staff, and the term for which such appointment should be held. The Memorandum explains the reasons for the vacancy and the relevant legislative provisions under which the appointment is sought. A draft Press Release is also included.

On foot of the Government making its recommendation, the Government Secretariat arranges for the President to make the appointment and for publication of the appointment in the *Iris Oifigiúil*. I also sign a Promotion Instrument as necessary in respect of the individual officer appointed in due course.

The Deputy Chiefs of Staff are appointed by the Government. The process is essentially the same as for the Chief of Staff, other than the recommendation to the President. Details of the Government deliberations are confidential. I can however confirm that all relevant factors are considered in arriving at the Government’s final decision or recommendation as the case may be.

Defence Forces Equipment.

65. **Deputy Joe Carey** asked the Minister for Defence his plans for the replacement of the Air Corps’ Cessna fleet, which is 34 years old; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34435/07]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Willie O’Dea): As Minister for Defence I am delighted with the level of investment in new equipment for the Air Corps in recent years. The comprehensive investment programme included:

- the delivery of eight Pilatus training aircraft at a total cost of €60m, inclusive of VAT.

- two light utility EC 135 helicopters acquired from Eurocopter S.A.S. at a cost of €12.8m, inclusive of VAT.
- six utility AW 139 helicopters acquired from the AgustaWestland at a cost of €75m inclusive of VAT, the final two of which are scheduled for delivery in 2008.

In addition, a major mid life upgrade on the two Casa maritime patrol aircraft, at a cost of €16.5m, is underway — work on the first aircraft is now complete, work on the second aircraft will be completed in 2008. The question of replacement of the Air Corps Cessna Fleet is under active consideration at present. The question of funding the replacement programme has to be considered in tandem with the overall equipment requirements of the Defence Forces generally and the funding available for same.

Military Medals.

66. **Deputy Chris Andrews** asked the Minister for Defence the number of applications received to date for official replacement certificates for 1916 and War of Independence medals lost, stolen or destroyed; the number of certificates issued; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34029/07]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Willie O’Dea): Of some 670 enquiries made to date, my Department has received 512 completed application forms for Medal certificates in respect of Veterans of the 1916 Rising and the War of Independence. Following examination, entitlement to certificates has been established in 374 cases, resulting in the issue of a total of 1,156 certificates in both official languages. Certificates are being issued on an ongoing basis where entitlement is confirmed by my Department.

Irish Language.

67. **Deputy Michael D. Higgins** asked the Minister for Defence the proposals he has to continue to develop the use of the Irish language in the Defence Forces in line with Objective 12 of the Government Statement on the Irish Language, 2006; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34159/07]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Willie O’Dea): The Defence Forces is proactive in the development and promotion of the Irish language. The following measures have been taken in this regard:

- An Chomhairle Gaeilge (Irish Language Council) was established in 2003;
- The Defence Forces Official Languages Policy in the form of an Administrative Instruction was launched in 2004;

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- Scéim Óglaigh na hÉireann (Defence Forces Scheme) under the Official Languages Act was approved by the Minister for Community Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs in Sep 2006. The scheme covers the period 2006-2009.

The development of the Irish language in the Defence Forces is led by An Chomhairle Gaeilge, which is responsible for implementing the provisions of the Scheme. These provisions aim to provide a service through Irish to all external and internal customers of the Defence Forces and provide for the promotion and use of the language in the organisation.

The following are some of the initiatives taken to date:

- All major reports and strategy statements are published in Irish and English;
- A number of commonly used Army forms have been translated into Irish. The full range of forms will be translated over the life of the current Scheme and future schemes;
- The Defence Forces website is available in bilingual form;
- All advertisements for careers in the Defence Forces are published bilingually;
- A database of competent Irish speakers in the organisation has been established;
- In 2007 Irish language classes have been conducted in seven different barracks;
- An annual Irish Language Camp has been held in Dún Úi Mhaoilfosa in Galway for the past 15 years;
- At present 5 Defence Forces personnel are under going third level study in Irish;
- All signage in Defence Forces locations is being incrementally changed from English to Irish;
- The promotion of Irish in the Defence Forces is fully supported by the Chief of Staff to whom An Chomhairle reports.

Defence Forces Promotions.

68. **Deputy Kathleen Lynch** asked the Minister for Defence if the revised arrangements for enlisted personnel in the Defence Forces will be agreed by the target date of December 2007; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34163/07]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Willie O'Dea): Discussions between my Department and the Permanent Defence Force Other Ranks Representative Association (PDFORRA) commenced in April 2006, on revised promotion

arrangements for Non-commissioned Officers have been ongoing for some time. The Deputy will appreciate that as discussions are confidential to the parties involved it would not be appropriate for me to comment further on the matter at this time.

Official Engagements.

69. **Deputy Eamon Gilmore** asked the Minister for Defence if he will make a statement on his address to the RACO biennial delegate conference in Kilkenny on 27 November, 2007. [34156/07]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Willie O'Dea): On 27 November 2007, I addressed the Biennial Delegate Conference of the Representative Association of Commissioned Officers (RACO). I sought to make my address relevant, positive and informative and I discussed topics of interest to the military delegates, their colleagues and to the wider community. The topics included amongst other things the Government's commitment to the continued development and modernisation of the Defence Forces as set out in the agreed Programme for Government, the Defence Forces continued participation in international peacekeeping and the continued investment in infrastructure and equipment. The Deputy's interest in my speech is appreciated and it can be accessed from the Department of Defence website — www.defence.ie.

Bullying in the Workplace.

70. **Deputy Michael Mulcahy** asked the Minister for Defence if he plans to conduct further reviews of the implementation in the Defence Forces of the 2002 The Challenge of a Workplace report chaired by Dr. Eileen Doyle; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34146/07]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Willie O'Dea): The Defence Forces and the Department have taken a wide variety of initiatives and have devoted extensive resources to this issue, since Dr Eileen Doyle and the External Advisory Committee presented their original report "The Challenge of a Workplace" in March 2002. This independent report addressed the entire range of interpersonal issues within the Defence Forces. Its contents and recommendations were accepted in full.

An Independent Monitoring Group was established in May 2002 to oversee the implementation of the recommendations of the original Doyle Report. The Independent Monitoring Group's own progress report, "Response to the Challenge of a Workplace", which was launched by my predecessor on 24 September, 2004, is available on the Defence Forces website and describes in detail the very significant progress achieved since

the publication of the original Doyle Report in 2002.

An internal military steering group, chaired by the Assistant Chief of Staff and comprising of Director Administration, Director Human Resources Management and Director Defence Forces Training, oversees the implementation of all the recommendations of the Response to the Challenge of a Workplace 2004.

The Independent Monitoring Group recommended that a review of progress within the Defence Forces should take place in 2007 and that it should be published. The report also suggested that a group representative of military management, PDFORRA, RACO, Department of Defence and external expertise should conduct such a review. I agree that there should be a review of progress. I can confirm that my Department is currently concentrating on the terms of reference for such a review. The next phase, involving the key players will be launched shortly.

The ongoing implementation of the recommendations of the Doyle report has been one of the highest priorities for the Defence Forces and the Department since its publication. Policies on equality, dignity and bullying are being constantly communicated to all ranks. I am satisfied that the military authorities are alert and vigilant to this issue and are committed to addressing the matter in a continuing and proactive manner through educational modules on interpersonal relationships which are now embedded in career courses for all ranks.

Question No. 71 answered with Question No. 53.

Defence Forces Personnel.

72. **Deputy Leo Varadkar** asked the Minister for Defence the ratio of officer to non-officers in the Defence Forces over the past ten years and

in comparison to other countries; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [33035/07]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Willie O’Dea): I am advised by the military authorities that the ratio of commissioned officers to non-officers in the Defence Forces over the past ten years is as shown in the table.

Year	Ratio
1996	1 : 7.33
1997	1 : 7.45
1998	1 : 7.64
1999	1 : 7.74
2000	1 : 7.49
2001	1 : 7.47
2002	1 : 7.31
2003	1 : 7.06
2004	1 : 6.90
2005	1 : 6.75
2006	1 : 6.43
Nov 2007	1 : 6.64

My Department does not maintain comparative figures in respect of other countries. In any event, comparisons would be complicated by the significant variations in military organisation from country to country.

73. **Deputy Barry Andrews** asked the Minister for Defence if the average age of members of the Defence Forces across each rank has fallen or risen over the past ten years; if the trend is the same for commissioned officers, non-commissioned officers and private soldiers; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34031/07]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Willie O’Dea): Details on the average ages, by rank, have been maintained on an annualised basis since 2001. The table provides the details for Officers and Enlisted Personnel.

Average Age by Rank in the PDF as at 31 December 2001 and 6 December 2007

Officers			
Rank	2001	2007	Increase/ Decrease (years)
Lieutenant General	60.88	60.62	-0.24
Major General	58.66	60.11	1.45
Brigadier General	58.20	57.49	-0.71
Colonel	55.82	56.55	0.73
Lieutenant Colonel	51.78	53.28	1.50
Commandant	45.19	45.85	0.66
Captain	33.32	32.33	-0.99
Lieutenant	24.85	24.89	0.04

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Enlisted Personnel

Rank	2001	2007	Increase/Decrease (years)
Sergeant Major	52.30	52.74	0.44
Brigade Quartermaster Sergeant	52.18	52.81	0.63
Company Sergeant	46.70	48.90	2.20
Company Quartermaster Sergeant	48.09	49.39	1.30
Sergeant	42.44	43.01	0.57
Cpl	36.22	36.81	0.59
Pte	31.04	32.07	1.03
Cadet	19.82	22.80	2.98

It can be seen from these figures, that since 2001 there has been a small decrease in the average age of Captains and a similar scale increase in the average age of Privates. These ranks together represent approximately 52% of the overall strength of the PDF.

A key element in military life is the need for personnel to maintain a level of fitness for combat readiness. This requirement must be balanced with the need to retain experience and expertise, particularly at managerial level in the Defence Forces.

Question No. 74 answered with Question No. 53.

Child Care Services.

75. **Deputy Pat Breen** asked the Minister for Defence if he has received the report from the sub-committee on the feasibility of providing child care facilities for members of the Defence Forces; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34427/07]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Willie O’Dea): A request to provide crèche facilities for members of the Defence Forces has been made by the Defence Forces Representative Associations. The Defence Forces Partnership Steering Group, which was established following on from Partnership 2000, has tasked a Partnership Sub-Committee with examining the issue of the provision of childcare facilities under a number of headings, including demand for places, location and cost. I am awaiting a report from the Sub-Committee on the feasibility of the project.

Question No. 76 answered with Question No. 53.

Defence Forces Strength.

77. **Deputy Bernard Allen** asked the Minister for Defence if he has provided the necessary financial resources in budget 2008 to provide for an additional provision of up to 350 troops to be in training at any given time for the Permanent

Defence Forces; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34425/07]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Willie O’Dea):

The Defence Estimate for 2008 provides for an average of 10,500 Permanent Defence Force personnel. In practice this means that the actual strength at any particular time may vary above or below that figure, depending on the rate of wastage and the timing of recruit intakes. The Estimate for 2008 provide for an increase of around 7%, one of the largest year on year increases for a number of years. This major commitment is being made against a particularly difficult background where Government has had to make tough decisions about priorities.

Due to the requirement to prioritise funding for the Chad mission, it has not been possible to provide funding in 2008 to increase the approved strength of the Permanent Defence Force. However, the matter will be further considered in the context of the 2009 Estimates.

National Memorials.

78. **Deputy Michael Mulcahy** asked the Minister for Defence when the national memorial to commemorate deceased members of the Defence Forces who have died in service will be unveiled; the concept behind the design, the estimated cost; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34145/07]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Willie O’Dea):

The Memorial designed by Mr. Brian King is a pyramid shape made primarily of granite slabs resting on a steel frame interspaced with toughened glass panels. I understand that Mr. King chose the pyramid shape because of its historical references to burial and because he sees the shape as reflecting that of an “army tent”. While its external symmetry is simple in form, on closer inspection the observer becomes aware that in the tent structure there are figures representing members of the Defence Forces. Four Defence Force personnel in relief are cast in bronze, representing the Air Corps, Army, and Naval

Service. Both permanent and reserve, will be included. The four sentries stand to attention guarding an eternal flame that emanates from the Defence Forces Badge. The dimensions of the memorial will be 4 metres by 4 metres to a height of 4.8 metres.

It is not possible to give an exact cost of the project at this point but it is estimated at €260,000. It is expected that the project will be completed by the end of March 2008.

Substance Misuse.

79. **Deputy Peter Kelly** asked the Minister for Defence the number of Defence Forces personnel tested under the drug testing programme in 2006 and to date in 2007; the number and rank of those tested positive; the type and class of drugs detected; the action taken when a member tests positive; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [33989/07]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Willie O’Dea): Defence Force Policy on Drug/Substance Abuse or Misuse is centred on the premise that the unlawful possession, supply or use of a controlled drug is incompatible with membership of the Defence Forces. In October 2002 the Defence Forces introduced a Compulsory Random Drug Testing (CRDT) programme. Since 2002 6,455 tests have been conducted with 0.4% of tests yielding a positive result.

In 2006 a total of 1,213 tests were conducted of which seven proved positive. The positive tests included four where cannabis was detected, one where cocaine was detected and two where amphetamine was detected. Of the seven personnel who tested positive one held the rank of sergeant and the other six held the rank of private or equivalent. In 2007, to date, a total of 1,808 tests were conducted of which six proved positive. The positive tests included two where cannabis was detected and four where amphetamine was detected. Of the six personnel who tested positive, one held the rank of corporal and the other five held the rank of private or equivalent.

The substantial increase in the number of tests conducted in 2007 follows the full roll-out of the CRDT programme. This now incorporates Reserve Defence Forces personnel. Personnel serving overseas are also liable for testing. Personnel who test positive for a controlled substance are liable for Administrative Discharge from the Defence Forces. The procedure that follows such a positive test includes the offer of B-sample testing. It also provides for representations to be made prior to a final decision regarding discharge.

Question No. 80 answered with Question No. 60.

Question No. 81 answered with Question No. 54.

Commemorative Events.

82. **Deputy John Curran** asked the Minister for Defence if his Department and the Defence Forces intend to commemorate and celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of Ireland’s first participation in 1958 on a UN peacekeeping mission; if he will ensure that both veteran organisations are fully involved in these commemorations; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [33993/07]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Willie O’Dea): The planning for the commemoration of Ireland’s first peacekeeping mission is well under way. A Board was convened in September this year by order of the Chief of Staff to make recommendations on the best means to mark the anniversary. The Board is due to report to the Chief of Staff before the end of December with firm proposals. It is anticipated these will include a commemorative ceremony in addition to other appropriate elements. The commemorative stamp programme for 2008 which is pending government approval includes the issue in June 2008 of a stamp which is based on a photograph of the initial contingent of five officers despatched as military observers with the United Nations Observer Group in Lebanon (UNOGIL). The veteran associations will be consulted and will be invited to participate in the commemoration.

Defence Forces Equipment.

83. **Deputy Niall Collins** asked the Minister for Defence the procedures for the disposal of the Air Corps Alouette helicopters recently withdrawn from regular use; if it is proposed to retain or preserve any of them for display; the number and type of other former aircraft retained by the Air Corps; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34020/07]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Willie O’Dea): The Alouette helicopters, originally delivered over forty years ago, were taken out of service in the Air Corps in September of this year. I am advised that six of these helicopters, with a stock of spare parts, will be disposed of by my Department in the New Year. The sale will be by open tender competition. At least one helicopter will be retained for display in the Air Corps Museum at Casement Aerodrome, Baldonnel.

The Air Corps retain a number of fixed-wing and rotary-wing aircraft, complete and incomplete, for historical purposes in the Museum in Baldonnel. These aircraft include an Avro Anson, Chipmunks, Fouga Magisters, D. H. Vampires, a D. H. Dove, a Miles Magister, a Percival Provost, a Siai Marchetti Warrior and a Wright Flyer Replica.

Earlier this year I approved the purchase of an AVRO 631 Cadet, a former Air Corps trainer aircraft, from its owner in New Zealand. This is, also, housed in the Air Corps Museum in Baldonnel. The Air Corps Museum receives visiting

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groups on tours subject to written application and approval by my Department, which is normally forthcoming.

Overseas Missions.

84. **Deputy Chris Andrews** asked the Minister for Defence if he will ask Irish Aid to strengthen its relationship with the Defence Forces on its UN peace building missions, increasing the money available to assist the beleaguered communities in Kosovo, Chad and other places where the Defence Forces serve; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34030/07]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Willie O'Dea):

As part of their participation in peace support operations, the Defence Forces have traditionally adopted a number of small-scale humanitarian operations in support of the local communities where they are deployed. Recent examples of this are in Liberia and Kosovo. The main source of funding towards this humanitarian work comes in the form of a financial subvention from the Irish Aid Programme, which is administered by the Department of Foreign Affairs, supplemented by voluntary contributions of contingent members.

This has proved to be a very effective means of supporting the communities and integrating our forces into the local community and I expect this arrangement with Irish Aid to continue. However, it must be remembered that the primary role of the Defence Forces, when deployed overseas, is to undertake essential peacekeeping and peacemaking operations. In the case of Chad, since 2006 Irish Aid has provided humanitarian funding of €6.15 million to United Nations agencies working in Chad such as UNHCR, OCHA, UNDP and UNICEF and to the French NGO Medicines Sans Frontieres and Concern Worldwide.

Question No. 85 answered with Question No. 53.

86. **Deputy Noel J. Coonan** asked the Minister for Defence his views on the shortage of fitters for service with overseas units; the steps he proposes to take to alleviate these shortages; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34436/07]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Willie O'Dea):

I am advised by the military authorities that the current establishment for fitters, known in military terms as technicians, is 255. At present, there are 165 trained technicians in the Defence Forces and 86 technicians undergoing training. Currently, there are 7 technicians deployed on overseas missions. There is no shortage of technicians at present for overseas units.

Defence Forces Reserve.

87. **Deputy David Stanton** asked the Minister for Defence, further to Parliamentary Question No. 27 of 4 October 2007, if he has held discussions with the appropriate authorities regarding the possibility of the Reserve Defence Forces acting as a coastal watch to assist An Garda Síochána in combating drug smuggling; if so the persons with whom and when these discussions took place; the outcome of same; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34401/07]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Willie O'Dea):

Responsibility for the prevention of drug trafficking rests primarily with the Garda Síochána and the Revenue Commissioners. However, the White Paper on Defence provides for a security role for the Naval Service and the Air Corps to assist and support the civil authorities in this important work.

The Reserve Defence Force Review Implementation Plan is being implemented over the period to end 2009. As part of this process, consideration is being given to the possible roles of the Reserve Defence Force. I will ensure that the possibility of the Reserve being requested to perform coast-watching duties for the prevention of drug smuggling, is considered by the military authorities as part of this process.

Question No. 88 answered with Question No. 53.

Defence Forces Strength.

89. **Deputy John Curran** asked the Minister for Defence the number of existing members of the Defence Forces who have been commissioned as officers both through the cadet school and through commission from the ranks competitions; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [33994/07]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Willie O'Dea):

The current strength of officers in the Permanent Defence Force is 1,359. Of these, 1,155 were commissioned through the Cadet School, 67 were commissioned from the Ranks (Potential Officer Course), and 137 were commissioned by Direct Entry Competition. Significant progress has been made recently in implementing schemes to enable more commissioning from the ranks.

The revised cadetship competition is now seen as the primary means of commissioning from the ranks. The cadetship competition has been revised to increase the maximum entry age to 28 and to award bonus marks to candidates with previous experience in the Permanent Defence Force (PDF) or Reserve Defence Force (RDF).

Results for the 2006 and 2007 cadetship competitions were encouraging with a total of 23 applicants with military service in the Defence Forces being successful in the 2006 cadetship competition and a further 18 applicants with military

service being successful in the 2007 cadetship competition.

In addition, in the past two years, 3 members of the Defence Forces were commissioned as officers from Direct Entry Competitions for appointments as Engineer Officers in the Corps of Engineers and Conductors in the Army School of Music. A further two Enlisted Personnel have been successful in the recent Direct Entry Competition to fill Aeronautical Engineer Officers vacancies in the Air Corps.

An internal Commissioning From the Ranks competition was held in June 2007. This competition provided an opportunity for enlisted personnel who have passed the cadet entry age to compete for entry on a Potential Officers Course and ultimately, a commission. As a result of the competition a total of 24 applicants (23 males and 1 female) have been selected from the ranks of Junior and Senior Non-commissioned Officers and have been in training in the Cadet School in the Curragh since 30 July 2007.

Question No. 90 answered with Question No. 53.

Commemorative Events.

91. **Deputy Ciarán Lynch** asked the Minister for Defence when he will be writing to party leaders asking them to nominate representatives to the All Party Oireachtas consultation group on the commemoration of the 1916 Rising; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34161/07]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Willie O’Dea): It is proposed to re-inaugurate the Oireachtas Consultation Group shortly. I will be writing to Party Leaders inviting them to nominate representatives to the Group. I hope to arrange a meeting of the new group towards the end of January 2008.

Questions Nos. 92 and 93 answered with Question No. 53.

Question No. 94 answered with Question No. 62.

Departmental Offices.

95. **Deputy Leo Varadkar** asked the Minister for Defence the days on which he attended his Department’s head offices on Infirmary Road, Dublin 7 since his re-appointment in June 2007; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [33036/07]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Willie O’Dea): I have a Ministerial Office in Leinster House, as well as an office at the Department of Defence Headquarters at Parkgate, Infirmary Road. As Minister for Defence, I also attend at the various Defence locations around the country on a regular basis. Whilst I do not keep a log of attend-

ance at my various Offices, I meet with my officials and military personnel on a regular basis in all of these locations.

Defence Forces Recruitment.

96. **Deputy Charlie O’Connor** asked the Minister for Defence the number of personnel recruited into the Permanent Defence Forces in 2006 and to date in 2007; the number of applications received in each of those years; the procedures involved in processing these applications; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34022/07]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Willie O’Dea): Entry to the Permanent Defence Force is either through the Cadetship Competition, General Service Enlistment, Apprenticeship Competition or Direct Entry Competitions which are held to fill vacancies in specialist appointments. The number of applications received for the Cadetship Competition in 2006 and 2007 was 1,085 and 1,231 respectively. 55 Cadets were enlisted in 2006 and 48 were enlisted from the 2007 Cadetship Competition.

The number of applications received for General Service Enlistment to the Permanent Defence Force in 2006 and to date in 2007 was 2,495 and 2,221 respectively. 559 general service recruits enlisted in the Permanent Defence Force in 2006 and 525 have been recruited to date in 2007. There were 427 applications for the Apprenticeships Competitions held in 2006 and a total of 20 Apprentices were enlisted. In 2007 there were 454 applications and a total of 29 Apprentices were enlisted.

Direct Entry Competitions were held in 2006 from which 2 Medical Officers were appointed to the Medical Corps, 2 Engineers were appointed to the Corps of Engineers and 2 Instrumentalists were appointed to the Army School of Music. A total of 128 applications were received for these competitions. To date in 2007 a total of 52 applications have been received for all Direct Entry Competitions. From these competitions, 4 Medical Officers have been appointed to the Medical Corps (including 2 Doctors, 1 Psychologist and 1 Dentist). In addition, 2 Aeronautical Engineer Officers will be commissioned into the Air Corps in the near future.

The processing of applications comprises a number of different components, including, in some instances psychometric tests, interviews, medical examination, physical fitness tests and security clearance. The Defence Forces periodically review the processes to ensure that technology and work practices are kept up to date thereby ensuring that the processing of applications is done as efficiently as possible.

Court Proceedings.

97. **Deputy Joe Costello** asked the Minister for

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Defence the estimated cost to the Defence Forces of payments and legal costs arising from a decision of the Circuit Court to dismiss a case taken by his Department against a retired officer (details supplied) over alleged over-claiming of overseas expenses; if other similar cases being taken by his Department have been settled; the estimated costs involved in these cases; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34153/07]

99. **Deputy Joe Costello** asked the Minister for Defence if his Department will offer an apology to a former army officer (details supplied) whom it falsely accused of unjust enrichment, in view of the decision of the Circuit Court to dismiss the case taken against him and the description of him by the judge as an honest man; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34154/07]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Willie O’Dea): I propose to take Questions Nos. 97 and 99 together.

As this matter is still within the Judicial process the Deputy will appreciate that it would be wholly inappropriate for me to comment on the matter.

Defence Forces Reserve.

98. **Deputy David Stanton** asked the Minister for Defence the organisational structure of the Reserve Defence Forces; the establishment and

vacancies in each unit by rank respectively; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34400/07]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Willie O’Dea):

The Reserve Defence Force (RDF) is divided into the First Line Reserve, the Army Reserve and the Naval Service Reserve. The First Line Reserve is comprised of former members of the Permanent Defence Force and there is no set establishment. The Army Reserve is organised along similar lines to the PDF, in three brigades and a Reserve Defence Force Training Authority. There is also a dedicated Naval Service Reserve.

In addition the Reserve Defence Force Review Implementation plan provides for the establishment of an Integrated Army Reserve. Integration commenced in May 2007, on a pilot basis in each Brigade. This is in line with the recommendations of the Implementation Board Report. 180 personnel have completed the required training. There was no expectation that the numbers participating would reach the planned strength (2,656) in the first year. Indeed, the Implementation Board Report makes it very clear that there would be a pilot exercise and while numbers are low, very valuable lessons will have been learned. The military authorities are currently carrying out a review of Integration with a view to identifying changes that may be required in the future.

The military authorities have advised me of the establishment and vacancies in each unit by rank and these are provided in the tabular statement .

RDF Establishment V Strength 2 E Bde

	Lt Col	Comdt	Capt	Lt/2lt	Total Offr	SM	BQMS	CS	CQMS	Sgt	Cpl	Total NCO	Pte	Total RDF
<i>62 Res Inf Bn</i> Establishment Vacancies		7	14 5	20	41 5	1	1	6	7	52 19	129 81	196 102	498 80	735 181
<i>65 Res Inf Bn</i> Establishment Vacancies		6 1	13 7	16	35 8	1	1	5	6	45 10	104 29	162 39	405 55	602 102
<i>67 Res Inf Bn</i> Establishment Vacancies		5	12 7	12	29 7	1	1	4	5	38 18	79 44	128 64	312 152	469 223
<i>62 Res Army Reg</i> Establishment Vacancies		4	12 4	13	29 4	1	1	4	4	32	31	73	189 62	291 66
<i>62 Res Cav Sqn</i> Establishment Vacancies		1	3	6 1	10 1			1	1	19 6	23 12	44 18	90	144 19
<i>62 Res Eng Coy</i> Establishment Vacancies		1	3 2	3	7 2			1	1	8	23 14	33 13	77 49	117 65
<i>62 Res CIS Coy</i> Establishment Vacancies		1	3	2	6			1	1	7 1	17 8	26 9	39 24	71 33
<i>62 Res MP Coy</i> Establishment Vacancies		1	2	2	5			2	1	11 1	50 24	64 25	69 25	255 92
<i>62 Res Logs BN</i> Establishment Vacancies		8 5	12 6	6	26 11	1 1	1	5 1	10 8	28 11	57 28	102 50	127 31	255 92
<i>2 AD Bty</i> Establishment Vacancies		1	2 1	1	4 1			1	1	14 4	9 3	25 7	54 18	83 26
<i>HQ 2 E Bde RDF</i> Establishment Vacancies	1	7 1	14 13	6 1	28 15	1	1	4 4	6 5	16 8	19 14	47 27	9 6	84 48

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RDF Establishment V Strength 1 S Bde RDF

	Lt Col	Comdt	Capt	Lt/2lt	Total Offr	SM	BQMS	CS	CQMS	Sgt	Cpl	Total NCO	Pte	Total RDF
32 Res Inf Bn Establishment Vacancies		7	14 5	20	41 5	1	1	6	7 1	52	129 28	196 29	498	735 34
33 Res Inf Bn Establishment Vacancies		7 2	14	20	41 2	1	1	6	7	52	129 4	196 4	498	735 6
34 Res Inf Bn Establishment Vacancies		6	13 4	16	35 4	1	1	5	6	45	104 10	162 10	405	602 14
31 Res Arty Reg Establishment Vacancies		4	12 1	13	29 1	1	1	4	4	32	31	73	189	291 1
31 Res Cav Sqn Establishment Vacancies		1	3	6 1	10 1			1	1	19 1	23 8	44 9	90 19	144 29
31 Res Eng Coy Establishment Vacancies		1	3 2	3 1	7 3			1	1	8	23 9	33 9	77	117 12
31 Res CIS Coy Establishment Vacancies		1	3 1	2	6 1			1	1	7	17 10	26 10	39 21	71 32
31 Res MP Coy Establishment Vacancies		1	2	2	5			2	1	11	50	64		69
31 Res Logs BN Establishment Vacancies		8 4	12 5	6	26 9	1	1	5	10 5	28 9	57 24	102 38	127	255 47
3 AD Bty Establishment Vacancies		1	2	1	4			1	1	14 1	9 1	25 2	54 14	83 16
4 AD BTY Establishment Vacancies		1	2	1	4			1	1	14 1	9 4	25 5	54	83 5
HQ 1 S Bde RDF Establishment Vacancies	1	7 1	14 8	6 1	28 10	1	1	4	6 3	16 14	19 19	47 36	9 9	84 55

RDF Establishment V Strength 4 W Bde RDF

	Lt Col	Comdt	Capt	Lt/2lt	Total Offir	SM	BQMS	CS	COMS	Sgt	Cpl	Total NCO	Pte	Total RDF
<i>51 Res Inf Bn</i> Establishment Vacancies		7 1	14 9	20	41 10	1	1 1	6 1	7 2	52	129 39	196 43	498 148	735 201
<i>56 Res Inf Bn</i> Establishment Vacancies		6	13 5	16	35 5	1	1	5	6	45 1	104 23	162 24	405 8	602 37
<i>58 Res Inf Bn</i> Establishment Vacancies		7	14 6	20	41 6	1	1	6	7 1	52	129 4	196 5	498 66	735 77
<i>54 Res Army Reg</i> Establishment Vacancies		4	12 1	13 1	29 2	1	1	4	4 1	32	31	73 1	189 64	291 67
<i>54 Res Cav Sqn</i> Establishment Vacancies		1	3 1	6	10 1			1	1	19	23	44	90	144 1
<i>54 Res Eng Coy</i> Establishment Vacancies		1 1	3 1	3 1	7 3			1	1	8	23 7	33 7	77	117 10
<i>54 Res CIS Coy</i> Establishment Vacancies		1	3 2	2	6 2			1	1	7 2	17 3	26 5	39	71 7
<i>54 Res MP Coy</i> Establishment Vacancies		1	2	2 1	5 1			2	1	11	50 19	64 19	20	69 20
<i>54 Res Logs BN</i> Establishment Vacancies		8 4	12 10	6	26 14	1	1	5 1	10 8	28 3	57 25	102 37	127 43	255 94
<i>HQ 4 W Bde RDF</i> Establishment Vacancies	1	7 1	14 6	6	28 7	1	1 1	4 1	6	16	19 15	47 17	9	84 24

[Deputy Willie O’Dea.]

RDF Establishment V Strength NSR

	Cdr	Lt Cdr	Lt	S/Lt	Ensign	Total Offr	WO	SCPO	CPO	PO	LS	Total NCO	Seaman	Total NSR
<i>Dublin Unit</i>														
Establishment		1	4			5		1	3	6	12	22	70	97
Vacancies			1			1					7	7	36	44
<i>Waterford Unit</i>														
Establishment		1	4			5		1	3	6	12	22	70	97
Vacancies			3			3			2	2	6	8	17	28
<i>Cork Unit</i>														
Establishment		1	4			5		1	3	6	12	22	70	97
Vacancies			2			2			4	4	6	10	8	20
<i>Limerick Unit</i>														
Establishment		1	4			5		1	3	6	12	22	70	97
Vacancies			1			1			2	2	1	3	18	22

RDF Establishment V Strength RDF TA

	Lt Col	Comdt	Capt	Lt/2Lt	TotalOftr	SM	BQMS	CS	CQMS	Sgt	Cpt	Total Nco	Pte	Total RDF
RDF TA Establishment Vacancies	1	4	17 12	1	23 12	1		3 2	2 1	15 7	11 11	32 21		55 33

Question No. 99 answered with Question No. 97.

Defence Forces Strength.

100. **Deputy Brian O'Shea** asked the Minister for Defence the recommendations that have been made by the Naval Service/PDFORRA working group in regard to solutions to shortages of skilled personnel in critical areas of the Naval Service; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34148/07]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Willie O'Dea): I can report that progress has been made in addressing skill shortages in the Naval Service. Eleven (11) Junior Operations Branch Officers have recently qualified and there are a further twenty six (26) junior officers and cadets in training. There are currently 30 General Service Recruits in training and another class is being enlisted on the 18 December.

Progress has also been made to address shortages in the Engine-room Artificers (ERA) and Electrical Artificers (EA) technical grades. The strength against establishment figure is currently 99% and 77% respectively with a further eleven (11) ERA and thirteen (13) EA at various stages of training. Recruitment and training is ongoing in the Naval Service to ensure that it is fully resourced to meet its operational requirements.

Planning Issues.

101. **Deputy Joanna Tuffy** asked the Minister for Defence the measures that are in place in the County Dublin development plan at the request of his Department or the Air Corps in regard to housing development in the lands surrounding Casement Aerodrome; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34157/07]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Willie O'Dea): Casement Aerodrome, Baldonnell is the only military aerodrome in the State. It provides facili-

ties for military aircraft training and operations. The latter include Fishery Protection Patrols, Ministerial Air Transport, Garda Air Support, Air Ambulance Missions etc. Following a review of the Department's Safety Policy regarding Casement Aerodrome in 1999 a revised policy statement was forwarded to South Dublin County Council for incorporation into their Development Plan. This policy statement was based on the recommendations of the Consultants who conducted the review and took account of the security requirements for the military installations.

The South Dublin County Council Development Plan 2004-10 states that the "Council will use its development control powers to prevent the encroachment of development around the aerodrome which would interfere in its safe operation." It further states that the Department of Defence requires that no new buildings or developments be permitted on lands lying under the runway approach surfaces at Casement Aerodrome, for a distance of 1,350 metres outwards from the future thresholds of the runways.

The policy of the Department is that no developments are allowed in the Security area. In the Approach Areas to the runways only minor domestic extensions to existing dwellings are permitted. In the Inner Zone, i. e. within a circle of two kilometre radius from the Aerodrome, only developments of less than twenty metres above ground level are permitted.

Question No. 102 answered with Question No. 53.

National Statistics.

103. **Deputy Brian Hayes** asked the Taoiseach the number of vacant houses here on a county basis in terms of the recent data from the 2006 census; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34458/07]

Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach (Deputy Tom Kitt): The information requested by the Deputy is contained in the table.

Occupancy Status	Vacant house	Vacant flat	Holiday home	Total
Geographic Area				
Leinster	70,437	25,697	10,781	106,915
Carlow	1,857	310	308	2,475
Dublin City and County	27,122	18,765	418	46,305
Dublin City	12,557	13,424	111	26,092
Dun Laoghaire-Rathdown	4,661	2,207	60	6,928
Fingal	5,841	1,804	233	7,878
South Dublin	4,063	1,330	14	5,407
Kildare	5,363	1,359	116	6,838
Kilkenny	3,393	309	406	4,108
Laois	3,673	464	103	4,240
Longford	2,931	331	261	3,523
Louth	4,692	840	575	6,107

Occupancy Status	Vacant house	Vacant flat	Holiday home	Total
Meath	5,414	725	346	6,485
Offaly	3,023	307	220	3,550
Westmeath	3,894	850	271	5,015
Wexford	5,236	855	6,601	12,692
Wicklow	3,839	582	1,156	5,577
Munster	54,490	9,519	18,721	82,730
Clare	5,534	653	3,624	9,811
Cork City and County	20,200	4,228	6,561	30,989
Cork City	4,017	2,150	28	6,195
Cork County	16,183	2,078	6,533	24,794
Kerry	9,379	997	5,990	16,366
Limerick City and County	7,457	1,757	346	9,560
Limerick City	1,703	1,210	8	2,921
Limerick County	5,754	547	338	6,639
North Tipperary	2,796	311	557	3,664
South Tipperary	3,575	449	317	4,341
Waterford City and County	5,549	1,124	1,326	7,999
Waterford City	2,088	837	11	2,936
Waterford County	3,461	287	1,315	5,063
Connacht	33,068	4,745	11,062	48,875
Galway City and County	11,967	2,428	3,172	17,567
Galway City	2,430	1,349	205	3,984
Galway County	9,537	1,079	2,967	13,583
Leitrim	2,942	339	1,192	4,473
Mayo	9,136	946	4,216	14,298
Roscommon	4,564	383	942	5,889
Sligo	4,459	649	1,540	6,648
Ulster (part of)	16,940	1,637	9,225	27,802
Cavan	4,806	412	779	5,997
Donegal	9,725	1,043	8,275	19,043
Monaghan	2,409	182	171	2,762
State	174,935	41,598	49,789	266,322

Tax Collection.

104. **Deputy Bobby Aylward** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Finance if he will make contact with the Chief State Solicitor's Office to process an application to waive the State's claim under section 73 of the Succession Act 1965 for a person (details supplied) in County Mayo, where the applicant has been informed by the Property Registration Authority that their application will be abandoned within 21 days if the application for waiver is not processed. [34485/07]

Tánaiste and Minister for Finance (Deputy Brian Cowen): I understand from the Chief State Solicitor's Office that it has been in correspondence with the applicant's solicitor and expects to submit the matter to my Department very shortly. I can assure the Deputy that this matter will be dealt with as soon as possible.

Garda Stations.

105. **Deputy Jimmy Deenihan** asked the

Tánaiste and Minister for Finance the position regarding the provision of a new Garda station at Castleisland, County Kerry; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34561/07]

Minister of State at the Department of Finance (Deputy Noel Ahern): The planning process under Part 9 of the Planning and Development Regulations 2001 (as amended) has been completed in respect of the provision of a new Garda Station at Castleisland, Co. Kerry. It is hoped to invite tenders in early 2008.

Tax Code.

106. **Deputy Dinny McGinley** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Finance if the planned amendment to the tax code, as announced in budget 2008, to assist in maximising the take up of the decommissioning payments for the white fishing fleet will be extended to drift and draft net salmon fishermen where traditional fishing rights were terminated in 2007. [34482/07]

Tánaiste and Minister for Finance (Deputy Brian Cowen): I indicated in my Budget Statement that the tax code will be amended to assist in maximising the take up of decommissioning payments and full details will be provided in the Finance Bill. There are no plans to extend these provisions to other sectors.

The Minister for Communication, Marine and Natural Resources established a Hardship Fund of up to €25 million to address the hardship likely to be experienced by commercial salmon fishermen affected by the Government decision to align the wild salmon fishery with the scientific advice from the Standing Scientific Committee of the National Salmon Commission for 2007 and beyond.

In relation to the drift and drift net salmon fishermen, payments from the 'Hardship Fund' are taxable on recipients as income in the year of receipt. Commercial fishermen have to include any payment received from the Fund as a receipt in their accounts. However, part of the payment, which is calculated at six times the value of the 2006 licence fee, is not liable to tax. The balance is taxable at marginal income tax rates subject to the normal tax credits.

To facilitate recipients wishing to spread the taxable amount over three years, eligible applicants can opt under the Scheme to receive their payment in one sum or alternatively in three equal amounts over a three-year period.

Flood Relief.

107. **Deputy Michael Creed** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Finance the funding provided and projects undertaken by the Office of Public Works to provide flood relief based on a statement (details supplied) by the Minister for State in January 2007; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34517/07]

Minister of State at the Department of Finance (Deputy Noel Ahern): The initiative referred to by the Deputy provided that the Office of Public Works would work with Local Authorities to address localised flooding problems raised by the Authorities. The cost of any works would have to be commensurate with the expected benefit and the environmental impact would have to be acceptable. The OPW would either provide funding for works undertaken by the Authorities or would carry out relief works on their behalf.

A number of cases raised with OPW have required the commissioning of surveys or environmental studies and the seeking of consents or licences, especially where environmentally sensitive areas were involved. Because of this, the full scope and cost of works at a number of locations is not yet known. Information in relation to all projects on hand could not be compiled in the time available but I will have it sent to the Deputy this week.

Tax Code.

108. **Deputy Richard Bruton** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Finance his views on backdating the latest stamp duty concessions to the June start date for the concession for first time buyers in view of his indication at that time that no further changes would be made. [34608/07]

Tánaiste and Minister for Finance (Deputy Brian Cowen): The reform of stamp duty on residential property has been introduced with immediate effect from Budget day, 5th December. However, and as with the abolition of stamp duty for first-time buyers which I introduced earlier this year, the benefit of the changes will cover some conveyances executed prior to that date. Conveyances executed on or after 5 November 2007 had a statutory 30 day period to be presented to the Revenue Commissioners for stamping and payment; this period finished on 5 December 2007.

As usual when changes such as this are introduced from a certain date such as Budget day, there are some people who do not benefit and are naturally disappointed.

Decentralisation Programme.

109. **Deputy Billy Timmins** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Finance the position in relation to decentralising the Wicklow district of the Revenue Commissioners to Wicklow in view of the fact that according to the CAF website the Wicklow Revenue district is being relocated to Athy, County Kildare; if it is correct that the Wicklow district is relocating to Athy; the reason the Wicklow district is not relocating to Wicklow; if this will be examined and the Wicklow district relocated to Wicklow. [34640/07]

Tánaiste and Minister for Finance (Deputy Brian Cowen): I am advised by the Revenue Commissioners that they have no plans at this stage to move the location of the Wicklow Revenue District. The information on the CAF website relating to the relocation of the Wicklow Revenue District to Athy is incorrect and will be removed as quickly as possible.

Water Fluoridation.

110. **Deputy Richard Bruton** asked the Minister for Health and Children if she has assessed the scientific evidence on the merit of fluoridation of water supplies for general distribution; if she is satisfied that the existing levels of fluoridation in water supplies here are appropriate; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [34483/07]

Minister for Health and Children (Deputy Mary Harney): The effectiveness of water fluoridation in preventing dental decay continues to be endorsed by a comprehensive range of inter-

national bodies including the World Health Organization, the Centre for Disease Control and Prevention, the United States Public Health Service and the United States Surgeon General, the FDI World Dental Federation and the International Association for Dental Research. In addition, these bodies are also satisfied that ingestion of fluoride at optimal levels does not pose a threat to human health.

Following publication of the report of the Forum on Fluoridation in 2002 and on the advice of the Irish Expert Body on Fluorides and Health (Expert Body) on the findings of the report, revised Regulations were introduced, earlier this year, reducing the level of fluoride in piped public water supplies to between 0.6 parts per million (ppm) and 0.8 ppm.

I am satisfied, therefore, that fluoride in the concentrations used in our public water supplies poses no known medical problem for children or adults and should continue as an effective public health measure.

Child Care Services.

111. **Deputy Enda Kenny** asked the Minister for Health and Children the process by which applications for child care community playgroups receive funding; the stages necessary to complete prior to final decision being made by her office; the criteria and conditions that apply; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [34549/07]

Minister of State at the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform (Deputy Brendan Smith): As the Deputy will be aware, I have responsibility for the Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme 2000-2006 (EOCP) and the National Childcare Investment Programme 2006-2010 (NCIP), both of which are administered by the Childcare Directorate of the Office of the Minister for Children (OMC), assisted by Pobal which manages the day to day operation of the grant programmes.

Under the Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme 2000-2006 (EOCP), which is co-funded under the EU Social Fund (ESF), targeted support was provided through the staffing support grant scheme whereby community based not-for-profit childcare providers with a strong focus on disadvantage could apply for grant aid towards their staffing costs to allow them to operate reduced fees to disadvantaged parents. Applications were assessed by Pobal before being submitted to the Project Appraisal Committee (PAC) of the OMC for consideration and submission to the Secretary General of the Department of Health and Children. Since early 2005 services in receipt of the staffing support grant have been required to implement a tiered fee structure, as a condition of funding.

With the closure of the EOCP in December 2007, to continue to support community childcare services to provide affordable childcare to disadvantaged parents, the Community Childcare

Subvention Scheme (CCSS) is being introduced from January 2008 under the Exchequer funded National Childcare Investment Programme 2006-2010 (NCIP), the successor programme to the EOCP. The CCSS has been allocated €153 million over the next 3 years, representing a 16% increase in funding over the EOCP staffing scheme, and will continue to support community childcare services to provide reduced childcare fees for disadvantaged parents, complementing the universal supports in place for all parents.

Under the new scheme, it will be possible to ensure that the level of grant aid which individual services qualify for will reflect the actual level of service they provide and the profile of the parents benefiting from their service. As part of their application for funding under the new scheme, existing grant recipients have been invited to apply for the CCSS by making a return to my Office accompanied by completed parent declaration forms, together with a summary sheet and a summary fees sheet outlining the cost base and fees charged. The level of subvention for each service will be determined on the basis of these returns and will be subject to completion of the necessary contractual arrangements with Pobal. The subvention received by services will, in turn, be reflected in the reduced fees for parents who qualify as disadvantaged under the scheme.

In practice, this will mean that parents with children in such services and in receipt of most social welfare payments (or participating in a scheme such as Community Employment which demonstrates an underlying entitlement to same) or parents in receipt of Family Income Supplement (FIS), will have a weekly subvention paid to the service in respect of their child. A higher subvention will be paid where the subvented child is a baby, in recognition of the higher costs associated with the care of children aged under 1 year. Parents who do not qualify for subvention will be charged the cost price for their childcare service. However, as community not-for-profit services will, generally, have availed of capital grant aid under the EOCP or NCIP removing the requirement to cover rent or a mortgage, and as the services are run on a not-for-profit basis, this should still be significantly below the market price.

Existing EOCP staffing grant recipients who enter the new scheme will continue to be funded at their current levels until July 2008. Community childcare services with a focus on disadvantage who wish to apply for the CCSS and are not existing grant recipients, should do so through their City and County Childcare Committee (CCC). The CCC will carry out a quality assessment of the service and submit their recommendation, through Pobal, for appraisal by the PAC and approval by the Secretary General. On approval, in principle, for funding, these services will then be invited to make a return to my Office, based on parent declaration forms and complete the necessary contractual arrangements with Pobal.

112. **Deputy Enda Kenny** asked the Minister for Health and Children the number of applications for assistance for community playgroups she has received by county; the overall allocation for 2008; when she expects to make a decision and public announcement regarding approval for such playgroups; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [34550/07]

Minister of State at the Department of Health and Children (Deputy Brendan Smith): As the Deputy will be aware, I have responsibility for the Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme 2000-2006 (EOCP) and the National Childcare Investment Programme 2006-2010 (NCIP), which are being implemented by the Office of the Minister for Children.

With the closure of the EU co-funded Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme 2000-2006 (EOCP) in December 2007, the staffing support grant scheme which had assisted community childcare services to provide affordable childcare to disadvantaged parents is being replaced, from 1 January 2008, by the Community Childcare Subvention Scheme (CCSS) under the Exchequer funded National Childcare Investment Programme 2006-2010 (NCIP), the successor programme to the EOCP. The CCSS has been allocated €153 million over the next 3 years, representing a 16% increase in funding over the EOCP staffing scheme, and will continue to support community childcare services to provide reduced childcare fees for disadvantaged parents, complementing the universal supports in place for all parents. Under the new scheme, it will be possible to ensure that the level of grant aid which individual services qualify for will reflect the actual level of service they provide and the profile of the parents benefiting from their service. As part of their application for funding under the new scheme, services are required to ask parents using their services to complete a simple declaration form which will be included in a return to my Office and on which basis the level of subvention for each service will be determined. The subvention received by services will, in turn, be reflected in the reduced fees for parents who qualify as disadvantaged under the scheme.

In practice, this will mean that parents with children in such services and in receipt of most social welfare payments (or participating in a scheme such as Community Employment which demonstrates an underlying entitlement to same) or parents in receipt of Family Income Supplement (FIS), will see a weekly subvention in respect of their child. A higher subvention will be paid where the subvented child is a baby, in recognition of the higher costs associated with the care of children aged under 1 year. Parents who do not qualify for subvention will be charged the cost price for their childcare service, however, as community not-for-profit services will, generally, have availed of capital grant aid under the EOCP or NCIP removing the requirement to cover rent or a mortgage, and as the services are run on a

not-for-profit basis, this should still be significantly below the market price.

As part of their application for funding under the new scheme, some 820 existing staffing grant recipients have been invited to apply for the CCSS by making a return to my Office accompanied by completed parent declaration forms, together with a summary sheet and a summary fees sheet outlining the cost base and fees charged. To date 674 have applied and letters have issued to 459 informing them that they have been approved for transitional funding, subject to completion of the necessary contractual arrangements with Pobal. A further 154 have been asked to forward information which was omitted or incorrect in their original return. I have asked officials in my Office to issue a further invitation to Groups which have not yet applied for entry to the new scheme and would encourage them to return completed applications as soon as possible.

The table gives a breakdown of applications received from Groups per county.

County	No. of Applications to CCSS received
Carlow	12
Cavan	23
Clare	12
Cork	79
Donegal	33
Dublin	136
Galway	44
Kerry	36
Kildare	5
Kilkenny	12
Laois	9
Leitrim	18
Limerick	30
Longford	12
Louth	13
Mayo	43
Meath	7
Monaghan	20
Offaly	11
Roscommon	18
Sligo	17
Tipperary	27
Waterford	14
Westmeath	15
Wexford	21
Wicklow	7
Total	674

113. **Deputy Enda Kenny** asked the Minister for Health and Children if, in respect of an application for a community playgroup (details supplied) in County Mayo, she has received

details of the application concerned; the stage of the process the application is at; the expected date of approval; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [34551/07]

Minister of State at the Department of Health and Children (Deputy Brendan Smith): As the Deputy will be aware, I have responsibility for the Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme 2000-2006 (EOCP) and the National Childcare Investment Programme 2006-2010 (NCIP), which are being implemented by the Office of the Minister for Children.

With regard to the application for capital grant assistance under the National Childcare Investment Programme 2006-2010 referred to in the question, I understand that it is currently in the assessment process. The applicants will be informed of the outcome in due course.

Foster Care.

114. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Health and Children if and when foster allowance will be awarded to a person (details supplied) in County Kildare; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [34554/07]

Minister of State at the Department of Health and Children (Deputy Brendan Smith): The Deputy's question relates to the management and delivery of health and 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 the matter investigated and to have a reply issued directly to the Deputy.

Cancer Screening Programme.

115. **Deputy Charles Flanagan** asked the Minister for Health and Children the number of inquiries, reviews and investigations currently underway in relation to the cancer services at Portlaoise Regional Hospital; the terms of reference of each; the expected completion date of each; and if she will confirm that all reports will be published on completion. [34449/07]

Minister for Health and Children (Deputy Mary Harney): The review of mammograms at the Midland Regional Hospital, Portlaoise is complete. A report on the review will be published by the HSE after any individual identified in it has been offered the opportunity to comment, as is the normal legal requirement. A separate clinical review of ultrasounds at Portlaoise was completed last week and no cancers were detected in this review. A report on this will be published by the HSE when the necessary legal requirements have been completed.

I have asked the Chief Executive Officer of the HSE for a report on the circumstances that led to the decisions by the HSE to suspend breast

radiology services at the Hospital, to place a consultant radiologist on administrative leave and to initiate a clinical review of breast radiology services at the Hospital in the period November 2003 to August 2007. I have also asked for a report from the Board of the HSE on the management of all events starting from, and subsequent to, these decisions. I expect that both reports will be completed early in the New Year. The HSE has also informed me that it is still dealing with the situation regarding the Consultant Radiologist who has been placed on administrative leave. As regards the terms of reference of the reviews, my Department has requested the Parliamentary Affairs Division of the HSE to have a reply issued directly to the Deputy.

Health Service Staff.

116. **Deputy Jack Wall** asked the Minister for Health and Children the number of home helps affected by the non-payment of travel expenses in the Kildare and west Wicklow area; the period of time that the payments have not been paid for; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [34450/07]

120. **Deputy Jan O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Health and Children if she will expedite the payment of travel allowances to home helps in Kildare and west Wicklow as they are due and have been paid to home helps in other parts of the country; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [34473/07]

Minister for Health and Children (Deputy Mary Harney): I propose to take Questions Nos. 116 and 120 together.

Operational responsibility for the management and delivery of health and personal social services was assigned to the Health Service Executive under the Health Act 2004 and funding for all health services, including the payment of travel allowances 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.

Vaccination Programme.

117. **Deputy P. J. Sheehan** asked the Minister for Health and Children if mercury is still a constituent of the DPT vaccine given to babies at the age of two months, four months, and six months; if she will confirm that EU regulations want it removed; when it will be removed from the vaccine; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [34451/07]

Minister for Health and Children (Deputy Mary Harney): I have had enquiries made of the Irish Medicines Board, which is the expert authority in Ireland regarding medicinal products, and I am advised that paediatric vaccines, including the DTP vaccine, do not contain mercury or mercury compounds.

Health Services.

118. **Deputy Finian McGrath** asked the Minister for Health and Children if assistance will be given in the case of a person (details supplied) in Dublin 3. [34466/07]

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 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.

Child Care Services.

119. **Deputy Olwyn Enright** asked the Minister for Health and Children if her attention has been drawn to the fact that there are concerns that the new child care subvention scheme will result in parents of children utilising the services currently provided by groups (details supplied) in County Offaly having to pay substantially higher fees, will result in some parents withdrawing their children and will place at risk the continuing financial viability of this child care service and the employment security of those providing the service; if she will take action to address these concerns; her proposed amendments to the proposed child care subvention scheme; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [34467/07]

Minister of State at the Department of Health and Children (Deputy Brendan Smith): As the Deputy will be aware, I have responsibility for the Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme 2000-2006 (EOCP) and the National Childcare Investment Programme 2006-2010 (NCIP), which are being implemented by the Office of the Minister for Children.

The main supports the Government makes available to parents to assist them with their childcare costs are Child Benefit and the Early Childcare Supplement. The latter payment is the responsibility of my Office, and it alone amounts to expenditure of over €400m in a full year. These payments are universal and benefit all parents, regardless of their income, labour market status or the type of childcare they choose. In addition

to these universal supports, Government childcare policy has also recognised the need to target additional supports towards disadvantaged families.

Under the Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme 2000-2006 (EOCP), which is co-funded under the EU Social Fund (ESF), targeted support was provided through the staffing support grant scheme whereby community based not-for-profit childcare providers with a strong focus on disadvantage were awarded grant aid towards their staffing costs to allow them to operate reduced fees to disadvantaged parents. Funding under this scheme was originally awarded for a limited period during which services were expected to move towards sustainability. This funding was subsequently continued to the end of 2007, where it was considered necessary to enable services to continue to make their services accessible to disadvantaged parents. This continuation funding was subject to the condition that tiered fee structures were implemented by the services in question.

With the closure of the EOCP in December 2007, to continue to support community childcare services to provide affordable childcare to disadvantaged parents, the Community Childcare Subvention Scheme (CCSS) is being introduced from January 2008 under the Exchequer funded National Childcare Investment Programme 2006-2010 (NCIP), the successor programme to the EOCP. The CCSS has been allocated €153 million over the next 3 years, representing a 16% increase in funding over the EOCP staffing scheme, and will continue to support community childcare services to provide reduced childcare fees for disadvantaged parents, complementing the universal supports in place for all parents.

Under the new scheme, it will be possible to ensure that the level of grant aid which individual services qualify for will reflect the actual level of service they provide and the profile of the parents benefiting from their service. As part of their application for funding under the new scheme, services are required to ask parents using their services to complete a simple declaration form which is to be included in a return to my Office and on which basis the level of subvention for each service will be determined. The subvention received by services will, in turn, be reflected in the reduced fees for parents who qualify as disadvantaged under the scheme.

In practice, this will mean that parents with children in such services and in receipt of most social welfare payments (or participating in a scheme such as Community Employment which demonstrates an underlying entitlement to same) or parents in receipt of Family Income Supplement (FIS), will have a weekly subvention paid to the service in respect of their child. A higher subvention will be paid where the subvented child is a baby, in recognition of the higher costs associated with the care of children

aged under 1 year. Parents who do not qualify for subvention will be charged the cost price for their childcare service. However, as community not-for-profit services will, generally, have availed of capital grant aid under the EOCP or NCIP removing the requirement to cover rent or a mortgage, and as the services are run on a not-for-profit basis, this should still be significantly below the market price.

It is considered that the new scheme will provide an effective framework for the continued targeting of additional resources towards disadvantaged parents and their children while continuing to support community childcare services generally. The scheme has been informed by and takes account of a number of enhancements recommended by the report of the Value for Money Review of the EOCP. These include the fact that the subvention to services will be more responsive to the level of service provided as well as the degree of parental disadvantage supported and the ceiling for funding, which existed under the previous scheme, is being removed. Account will also be taken of all of the operational costs of the service rather than staffing costs alone. Services, including full-time, part-time and sessional ones, which at present are, in some cases, inaccessibly priced for disadvantaged parents, will be available to them at more appropriate rates under the new scheme.

The new scheme has clear advantages over its predecessor. There is an increase in the level of funding available under it, and a majority of services will benefit from the changes it introduces. Existing EOCP staffing grant recipients who enter the new scheme will continue to be funded at their current levels until July 2008. My Office has engaged in a series of meetings with existing grant recipients to outline to them the details of the new scheme and to gather feedback from the services themselves. A meeting with representatives of the City and County Childcare Committees has also taken place.

Transitional arrangements have been made under which existing grant recipients will continue to be funded at their current levels until 1st July 2008. This is to ensure that existing childcare services are facilitated to adjust to the new scheme, including making any adjustments necessary to their fee structures. As signalled when I announced the new scheme in July this year, the transitional period between now and 1 July 2008 is being used to monitor and review the impact it will have on individual groups, on the basis of the more detailed and comprehensive data received during November and December. Where appropriate, any adjustments necessary to the scheme to secure the best outcomes for childcare services and for disadvantaged parents and their children will be considered on the basis of this data and well in advance of the commencement of the new funding levels in July 2008.

I am pleased to advise the Deputy that eight of the Groups in question have been approved for transitional funding under the NCIP Community Childcare Subvention Scheme (CCSS), and letters of approval have issued from the Childcare Directorate of my Office. This funding will, for the first six months of 2008, be based on the level of funding currently being provided to the Groups under the EOCP staffing support grant scheme and subject to the necessary contractual arrangement with Pobal, who manage the day to day operation of the EOCP and NCIP. A further three Groups have applied to enter the new scheme and letters will issue from the Childcare Directorate of my Office this week requesting them to forward outstanding information. Applications have not been received from two of the Groups in question.

While I am glad to advise the Deputy that applications have been received from over 80% of existing grant recipients nationally and 70% of these have been approved in principle for transitional funding under the NCIP Community Childcare Subvention Scheme (CCSS), I have asked officials in my Office to issue a further invitation to Groups which have not yet applied for entry to the new scheme and would encourage them to return completed applications as soon as possible.

Question No. 120 answered with Question No. 116.

Voluntary Sector Funding.

121. **Deputy Niall Blaney** asked the Minister for Health and Children if she will intervene on behalf of the Donegal branch of the Alzheimer Society of Ireland in securing appropriate funding from the Health Service Executive to continue its work in helping 1,700 Alzheimer sufferers and their carers in County Donegal; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [34490/07]

Minister of State at the Department of Health and Children (Deputy Máire Hackett): Operational responsibility for the management and delivery of health and personal social services was assigned to the Health Service Executive under the Health Act 2004 and funding for all health services has been provided as part of its overall vote. Therefore, the Executive is the appropriate body to consider the particular 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 Staff.

122. **Deputy Arthur Morgan** asked the Minister for Health and Children the number of home help support workers employed by the Health

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Service Executive in each of the HSE areas. [34494/07]

123. **Deputy Arthur Morgan** asked the Minister for Health and Children the number of home help support workers who have signed or are expected to sign contracts in each of the Health Service Executive areas. [34495/07]

Minister for Health and Children (Deputy Mary Harney): I propose to take Questions Nos. 122 and 123 together.

Subject to overall parameters set by Government, the Health Service Executive has the responsibility for determining the composition of its staffing complement. In that regard, it is a matter for the Executive to manage and deploy its human resources to best meet the requirements of its Annual Service Plan for the delivery of health and personal social services to the public. The Executive is the appropriate body to consider the 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.

124. **Deputy Arthur Morgan** asked the Minister for Health and Children the number of agency staff providing extra care in the community; and the number of hours per week in each of the Health Service Executive areas. [34496/07]

Minister for Health and Children (Deputy Mary Harney): Subject to overall parameters set by Government, the Health Service Executive has the responsibility for determining the composition of its staffing complement. In that regard, it is a matter for the Executive to manage and deploy its human resources to best meet the requirements of its Annual Service Plan for the delivery of health and personal social services to the public. The Executive is the appropriate body to consider the 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.

Medical Cards.

125. **Deputy Jack Wall** asked the Minister for Health and Children the position of an application for a medical card for a person (details supplied) in County Kildare; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [34498/07]

Minister for Health and Children (Deputy Mary Harney): Medical cards are made available to persons and their dependants who would otherwise experience undue hardship in meeting the cost of General Practitioner (GP) services. In 2005 the GP visit card was introduced as a gradu-

ated benefit so that people on moderate and lower incomes, particularly parents of young children, who do not qualify for a medical card would not be deterred on cost grounds from visiting their GP.

Since the beginning of 2005 substantial changes have been made to the way in which people's eligibility for a medical card is assessed and these apply equally to the assessment process for a GP visit card. The income guidelines have been increased by a cumulative 29% and in addition allowance is now made for reasonable expenses incurred in respect of mortgage/rent, childcare and travel to work costs. In June 2006 I agreed a further adjustment to the income guidelines for GP visit cards. These are now 50% higher than those in respect of medical cards.

As the Health Service Executive has the operational and funding responsibility for these benefits, it is the appropriate body to consider the particular case raised by the Deputy. My Department has therefore requested the Parliamentary Affairs Division of the Executive to arrange to address this matter and to have a reply issued directly to the Deputy.

Care of the Elderly.

126. **Deputy Joe Carey** asked the Minister for Health and Children if her attention has been drawn to the removal of the care and case management scheme operating out of Raheen Community Hospital in east County Clare for the elderly population of east and south east Clare; if she will intervene and stop the disbandment of this service as the elderly population of east and south east Clare will suffer if this scheme is discontinued; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [34499/07]

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.

127. **Deputy Joe Carey** asked the Minister for Health and Children the position with regard to funding for the Clarecastle day care centre's dementia unit in County Clare; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [34500/07]

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 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 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.

128. **Deputy Joe Carey** asked the Minister for Health and Children if funding will be allocated to the day care centre in Kilmihill, County Clare in respect of staffing as this state of the art building is being left idle; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [34501/07]

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.

Mental Health Services.

129. **Deputy Enda Kenny** asked the Minister for Health and Children her Department's involvement to date with a facility (details supplied) in County Armagh; the financial contribution of the Government to date to this facility; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [34509/07]

Minister of State at the Department of Health and Children (Deputy Jimmy Devins): The Middletown Centre for Autism project is a North-South initiative between the Department of Education and Science and the Department of Education Northern Ireland with an input from a number of specialist groups, including the Department of Health and Children and the Department of Health Northern Ireland. To-date my Department has made no financial contribution to the funding of the project.

Nursing Homes Repayment Scheme.

130. **Deputy Terence Flanagan** asked the Minister for Health and Children if she will respond to a query from a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [34511/07]

Minister for Health and Children (Deputy Mary Harney): The Health Service Executive has responsibility for administering the Repayment Scheme and the information sought by the Deputy relates to matters within the area of responsibility of the Executive. My Department

has requested the Parliamentary Affairs Division of the Executive to arrange to have the matter investigated and to have a reply issued to the Deputy.

Medical Cards.

131. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Health and Children when a medical card will issue in the case of a person (details supplied) in County Dublin; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [34553/07]

Minister for Health and Children (Deputy Mary Harney): Medical cards are made available to persons and their dependants who would otherwise experience undue hardship in meeting the cost of General Practitioner (GP) services. In 2005 the GP visit card was introduced as a graduated benefit so that people on moderate and lower incomes, particularly parents of young children, who do not qualify for a medical card would not be deterred on cost grounds from visiting their GP.

Since the beginning of 2005 substantial changes have been made to the way in which people's eligibility for a medical card is assessed and these apply equally to the assessment process for a GP visit card. The income guidelines have been increased by a cumulative 29% and in addition allowance is now made for reasonable expenses incurred in respect of mortgage/rent, childcare and travel to work costs. In June 2006 I agreed a further adjustment to the income guidelines for GP visit cards. These are now 50% higher than those in respect of medical cards.

As the Health Service Executive has the operational and funding responsibility for these benefits, it is the appropriate body to consider the particular case raised by the Deputy. My Department has therefore requested the Parliamentary Affairs Division of the Executive to arrange to address this matter and to have a reply issued directly to the Deputy.

Health Service Allowances.

132. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Health and Children the rates for domiciliary care allowance that will apply in 2008; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [34615/07]

Minister of State at the Department of Health and Children (Deputy Jimmy Devins): From the 1st January 2008 the rate of payment for Domiciliary Care Allowance will be increased from €281.30 per month to €299.60 per month.

Foster Care.

133. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Health and Children the rates for foster payments that will apply in 2008. [34616/07]

Minister of State at the Department of Health and Children (Deputy Brendan Smith): My Office is currently liaising with the Department of Finance regarding the rates of the Foster Care Allowance to apply in 2008. I hope to be in a position to announce the rates shortly, subject to approval.

Health Services.

134. **Deputy Deirdre Clune** asked the Minister for Health and Children when she will receive the report of the expert advisory group on diabetes; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [34617/07]

Minister of State at the Department of Health and Children (Deputy Pat The Cope Gallagher): The Deputy's question relates to the management and delivery of health and personal social services, which are the responsibility of the Health Service Executive under the Health Act 2004. As the Expert Advisory Group on Diabetes is under the auspices of the Health Service Executive, 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.

Voluntary Sector Funding.

135. **Deputy Deirdre Clune** asked the Minister for Health and Children her views on providing core funding to the Irish Osteoporosis Society to ensure the society can carry out its support work in this area; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [34618/07]

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.

Rail Network.

136. **Deputy Frank Feighan** asked the Minister for Transport when is it envisaged Iarnród Éireann will undertake work on the automation of level crossing XS 87 at Cortober/Cordrehid, east of Carrick-on-Shannon, County Roscommon; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34508/07]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Noel Dempsey): The provision and automation of level crossings is an operational matter for Iarnród Éireann and not one in which I have any role.

Passport Applications.

137. **Deputy Phil Hogan** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the date an Irish passport was issued to a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34484/07]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Dermot Ahern): The person in question was issued with his most recent Irish passport on 7th February 2006.

International Agreements.

138. **Deputy Billy Timmins** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the legal advice from the Attorney General with respect to the requirement to hold a referendum on the reform treaty, in view of the fact that it is not a new treaty, but rather a series of amendments to existing treaties; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34641/07]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Dermot Ahern): At my request, the Attorney General has considered whether the legal effects of the Reform Treaty require amendment of the Constitution to enable ratification. The Attorney General has advised that such an amendment is required. Any amendment to the Constitution must be authorised by referendum. It is intended that legislation amending Article 29 of the Constitution will be brought before the House next year.

The fact that the Reform Treaty will be a series of amendments to existing treaties, rather than a consolidated text, was not of itself a deciding factor in determining whether a referendum would be required. I would recall to the House that previous amending treaties, including the Treaty of Nice and the Amsterdam Treaty, have been ratified by referendum.

Overseas Development Aid.

139. **Deputy Billy Timmins** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the amount of overseas development aid given to other countries in the years 2005, 2006 and 2007; the countries that were involved; the amount they were given; the way this money was used or monitored; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34642/07]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Dermot Ahern): Ireland's Overseas Development Assistance (ODA) comprises of both multilateral and bilateral contributions. Multilateral ODA consists of contributions channelled through multilateral and international organisations who conduct their activities in favour of development. These pooled contributions are not reported to Irish Aid on a country-specific basis. Bilateral ODA consists of contributions made directly by Ireland to developing countries, including contributions

made through NGOs, missionary organisations and other bilateral partners.

In 2005, the total ODA provided by Ireland was €578 million of which €190 million was multi-lateral ODA and €388 million bilateral. Within the bilateral programme, a total of €310 million was spent in other countries, the remainder being spent on bilateral funds which were not country-specific and on administration costs associated with the ODA programme. Appendix 1 provides a detailed breakdown of the expenditure in each country.

In 2006, total ODA amounted to €814 million of which €313 million was distributed through multilateral channels and €501 million through the bilateral ODA programme. Of this total bilateral figure, €370 million was spent in other countries with the remainder being spent on bilateral funds which were not country-specific and on administration costs associated with the ODA programme. Appendix 2 provides a detailed breakdown of this expenditure in each country.

For 2007, the total ODA is expected to be €815 million. As the Deputy will appreciate the final ODA expenditure figures for 2007 are not yet available. However the information requested will be available in the 2007 annual report which is scheduled to be published in early 2008.

Last year Ireland provided assistance to over eighty countries. However, Ireland places particular emphasis on long-term support to eight programme countries: Ethiopia, Uganda, Tanzania, Mozambique, Zambia, Lesotho, Timor-Leste and Vietnam. In 2007 an Embassy was opened in Malawi, which will become Ireland's ninth programme country. These countries are amongst the poorest in the world and Ireland's assistance to them is directed primarily to the social sectors of health, education and rural development in order to make a real difference to the lives of ordinary people.

The Irish Aid annual reports for 2005 and 2006 give a detailed analysis of expenditure in those countries. These are available on the Irish Aid website at www.irishaid.gov.ie. The programme strategies include monitoring and oversight to ensure that our assistance is implemented for the benefit of those for whom it is intended.

Appendix 1

ODA Payments To Other Countries In 2005	€
Afghanistan	2,520,453
Albania	567,120
Angola	2,857,287
Argentina	138,250
Armenia	164,411
Azerbaijan	16,564
Bangladesh	1,268,039
Belarus	22,400
Benin	20,283

ODA Payments To Other Countries In 2005	€
Belize	240,125
Bolivia	96,300
Bosnia-Herzegovina	1,172,548
Botswana	67,678
Brazil	1,076,795
Burundi	1,575,601
Burma (Myanmar)	640,113
Central African Republic	400,000
Chad	144,329
China	563,850
Chile	135,591
Cambodia	862,647
Cameroon	270,099
Columbia	1,301,818
Dpr Korea	250,000
Democratic Republic Of Congo	4,738,328
East Timor	4,518,514
Ecuador	85,000
Egypt	264,755
El Salvador	2,171,844
Eritrea	2,250,596
Ethiopia	35,139,768
Fiji	26,250
Gambia	129,342
Georgia	269,845
Ghana	999,584
Grenada	38,200
Guatemala	609,129
Guinea	148,899
Haiti	1,071,812
Honduras	2,583,385
Indonesia	6,592,935
India	5,304,762
Iran	100,000
Iraq	330,000
Ivory Coast	836,042
Jordan	27,500
Kazakhstan	23,237
Kenya	5,517,863
Korea	3,621
Kosovo	977,831
Kyrgyzstan	243,733
Laos	179,115
Lesotho	10,651,311
Liberia	3,488,833
St Lucia	81,000
Macedonia	7,852
Maldives	220,000
Mexico	55,125
Mali	94,364
Malawi	6,083,741
Moldova	118,019

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ODA Payments To Other Countries In 2005	€	ODA Payments To Other Countries In 2006	€
Mongolia	52,271	Botswana	185,355
Morocco	12,500	Brazil	1,217,825
Mozambique	38,817,356	Burkina Faso	62,448
Mauritania	166,130	Burundi	2,882,354
Myanmar	469,529	Burma (Myanmar)	99,085
Namibia	54,106	Central African Republic	1,315,000
Nepal	415,584	Chad	1,400,000
Nigeria	1,524,247	China	617,345
Niger	2,162,100	Chile	175,045
Nicaragua	799,661	Cambodia	3,279,642
Palestine Administered Areas	4,488,464	Cameroon	399,552
Pakistan	8,715,028	Columbia	1,370,488
Paraguay	19,624	Djibouti	300,000
Peru	766,597	Dpr Korea	930,000
Philippines	889,181	Democratic Republic Of Congo	9,976,916
South Africa	14,139,205	East Timor	7,269,912
Rwanda	2,115,384	Ecuador	40,289
Senegal	172,495	Egypt	311,696
Serbia-Montenegro	916,663	El Salvador	2,306,574
Sierra Leone	6,275,057	Eritrea	1,585,538
Somalia	2,458,957	Ethiopia	39,457,355
Sri Lanka	4,045,650	Gambia	230,856
Sudan	10,598,973	Georgia	381,903
Swaziland	18,375	Ghana	1,799,369
Tanzania	28,166,059	Grenada	24,360
Thailand	760,433	Guatemala	975,465
Uganda	38,377,780	Guinea	883,503
Ukraine	138,124	Guyana	7,449
Venezuela	17,400	Haiti	1,340,916
Vietnam	3,473,917	Honduras	4,479,243
Zambia	22,188,812	Indonesia	501,200
Zimbabwe	4,160,934	India	4,617,285
Total 2005	309,731,032	Iraq	1,350,000
		Ivory Coast	1,546,918
		Jordan	195,565
		Kazakhstan	3,009
		Kenya	11,814,703
		Korea	250,000
		Kosovo	615,626
		Kyrgyzstan	5,000
		Laos	1,897,500
		Lebanon	1,593,576
		Lesotho	10,835,042
		Liberia	5,670,554
		St Lucia	75,000
		Macedonia	12,716
		Madagascar	58,100
		Maldives	7,546
		Mauritania	592,865
		Mexico	91,750
		Mali	68,674
		Malawi	6,132,069

Appendix 2

ODA Payments To Other Countries In 2006	€
Afghanistan	3,576,828
Albania	779,058
Angola	2,259,381
Argentina	176,758
Armenia	191,289
Azerbaijan	982
Bangladesh	1,729,697
Belarus	210,626
Benin	88,215
Belize	240,000
Bolivia	423,605
Bosnia-Herzegovina	1,371,565

ODA Payments To Other Countries In 2006	€
Moldova	47,517
Mongolia	14,645
Morocco	134,280
Mozambique	41,881,672
Mauritius	20,000
Myanmar	1,226,244
Namibia	29,640
Nepal	739,435
Nigeria	1,808,201
Niger	3,151,666
Nicaragua	1,466,471
Occupied Territories	150,000
Palestine Administered Areas	6,179,781
Pakistan	3,104,537
Papua New Guinea	26,627
Paraguay	77,767
Peru	511,545
Philippines	1,430,682
South Africa	14,743,332
Rwanda	2,917,348
Senegal	202,326
Serbia-Montenegro	933,726
Sierra Leone	8,895,072
Somalia	5,220,901
Sri Lanka	300,167
St Lucia	86,434
Sudan	15,024,219
Swaziland	117,434
Tajikistan	81,679
Tanzania	30,567,113
Thailand	269,383
Togo	175,220
Uganda	44,831,057
Ukraine	255,263
Venezuela	17,267
Vietnam	6,103,249
Yemen	191,529
Zambia	24,233,613
Zimbabwe	8,350,290
Total 2006	369,805,517

140. **Deputy Billy Timmins** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the way the funding of €23,214,971 given to Concern worldwide in 2007 was and is being spent; the way this is audited or monitored; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34643/07]

141. **Deputy Billy Timmins** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the way the funding of €19,848,967 given to Trócaire in 2007 was and is being spent; the way this is audited or monitored;

and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34644/07]

Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs (Deputy Michael P. Kitt): I propose to take Questions Nos. 140 and 141 together.

Both Concern Worldwide and Trócaire receive significant funding annually from Irish Aid. The bulk of this funding relates to the Multi Annual Programme Scheme (MAPS) with other funding also allocated for emergency and humanitarian assistance and for development of education initiatives. MAPS is a funding scheme which has been established with a number of core NGOs with the aim of strengthening strategic and programmatic co-operation and providing a flexible and predictable funding framework. The current scheme, MAPS II, is a five-year scheme for the period 2007-2011. As well as Concern Worldwide and Trócaire, three other NGOs participate in MAPS — Christian Aid Ireland, Goal and Self Help Development International. Poverty reduction is the shared goal and the MAPS funding supports the work of Irish NGOs in tackling poverty and suffering in many of the world's poorest countries.

All of the MAPS II funding proposals were subjected to a rigorous appraisal and approval process by Irish Aid's Projects Appraisal and Evaluation Group which includes independent appraisal by external development specialists. All of the MAPS II funding proposals were subjected to a rigorous appraisal and approval process by Irish Aid's Projects Appraisal and Evaluation Group which includes independent appraisal by external development specialists. Bi-annual meetings are held with each participating NGO focussing on management, administrative, budgeting matters and reviews of annual narrative and financial reports. At least two country monitoring visits, led by Irish Aid, will be undertaken to each MAPS NGO within the five year timeframe. In addition, a mid-term review of MAPS II will be undertaken to assess progress followed by an end of programme evaluation. In addition to the funding relating to the MAPS programme, €6.47m and €1.73m respectively were allocated to Concern and Trócaire in 2007 for emergency and humanitarian assistance.

All emergency-related funding proposals submitted by an NGO partner are comprehensively appraised. Under the terms of the contract agreed with the NGO partner, each NGO is obliged to provide regular financial statements on spending and progress reports on implementation of the project. Irish Aid officials carry out spot check field missions to monitor the implementation of projects on the ground.

In addition, Concern and Trócaire have received €22,000 and €4,000 this year to support public information and education campaigns on development. These projects are monitored and

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audited by Irish Aid through reporting including as provided under the Development Education grant scheme. Concern and Trócaire are also required to submit each year full audited accounts.

Official Engagements.

142. **Deputy Billy Timmins** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if he will report on the Euro/Africa Lisbon summit held on 8 and 9 December 2007; the fringe meetings that took place; the items that were discussed at these; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34645/07]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Dermot Ahern): Ireland was represented at the second EU-Africa Summit in Lisbon on 8-9 December by the Taoiseach and by my colleague Micheál Kitt T.D., Minister of State for Overseas Development. The Taoiseach had a short meeting with President Mbeki in the course of the Summit.

The Summit marked an important step forward in the co-operation between our two continents. Discussions at the Summit covered many common challenges — governance and human rights; peace and security; migration; energy and climate change; trade, infrastructure and development. Global challenges are best faced in partnership, and the impetus given to the EU-Africa relationship by the Summit will help us to work together on this broad agenda.

The Summit also adopted a new EU-Africa Joint Strategy, and a first Action Plan for implementing that strategy, which outlines how the EU and Africa will strengthen their cooperation over the next three years. This comprehensive and far-reaching strategy also commits Europe and Africa to closer political dialogue. Civil society, which made a valuable contribution to the EU-Africa Strategy, also met in the margins of the Summit.

As was agreed within the EU before the meeting, clear and strong messages were delivered on the current situation in Zimbabwe in Lisbon by Chancellor Merkel and Javier Solana, who set out the EU's concerns and the need for progress to a more democratic Zimbabwe in which there is full respect for human rights. President Mbeki, in turn, set out what the Southern African Development Community is doing to bring the two sides in Zimbabwe together, a process for which there is the widest support on both the EU and African sides. While I regret that there was no overt criticism of President Mugabe's government on the African side, I would note that, significantly, only a very few spoke in his defence.

Ministerial Appointments.

143. **Deputy Dinny McGinley** asked the Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment if, in the interests of openness and transparency, he will appoint an operations inspector to the board of the Health and Safety Authority when the members of the board are being appointed in early 2008 [34487/07]

Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Billy Kelleher): The current twelve-person board of the Health and Safety Authority ends its term of office on 19th December 2007. In accordance with the Safety, Health and Welfare at Work Act 2005, I have invited organisations representative of employers and employees to nominate three persons each for membership of the new Board for a three-year term commencing on 20 December 2007.

The Safety, Health and Welfare at Work Act 2005 does not provide for appointment of any of the Executives of the Health and Safety Authority to the Board.

Job Losses.

144. **Deputy Michael D. Higgins** asked the Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment if he will seek activation of the European globalisation adjustment fund which was adopted on 20 December 2006 in order to be of assistance to workers in the Galway Bay region, such as the workers at a company (details supplied) who have recently been informed that they are to lose their jobs. [34510/07]

Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Micheál Martin): My Department is currently investigating all possible means of assisting the workers referred to by the Deputy. The IDA is co-ordinating a response by the various State Agencies in relation to these redundancies and a meeting with the company is being arranged for the week beginning 17 December, which is the earliest that Executives of the company are available.

FÁS will make its full range of employment services available to the company and its employees over the coming months. This will include intensive interviews with the affected workers to outline the range of supports and services available and the preparation of a Skills Analysis Report by FÁS based on identified workers' needs and local opportunities. It will also include referral by FÁS of redundant workers to jobs, training courses or other options and on-going support and action to keep redundant workers in touch with the labour market.

While my Department is currently assessing the suitability of the situation in relation to the strict criteria for an application under the Euro-

pean Globalisation Fund, the availability of funds from the European Globalisation Fund will not be a constraint on the support that will be provided to the workers concerned.

Sports Capital Programme.

145. **Deputy Jimmy Deenihan** asked the Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism his plans to develop multi-sports facilities; if he will give preferential treatment to groups who will apply for such a facility; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34562/07]

Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism (Deputy Séamus Brennan): Under the sports capital programme, which is administered by my Department, funding is allocated to sporting and community organisations at local, regional and national level throughout the country. Through the sports capital programme this Government has invested considerable sums into important sporting infrastructure in every county of Ireland. Since 1998 a total of €568m has been allocated in sports capital funding to 6,716 sports projects across the country. Additionally over €107m in capital funding has been provided towards the redevelopment of Croke Park. In 2007 alone €85m was allocated towards 935 separate projects.

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. Applications for funding under the programme will be assessed in accordance with the assessment criteria as will be outlined in the guidelines, terms and conditions of the Programme.

Social Welfare Code.

146. **Deputy James Bannon** asked the Minister for Social and Family Affairs if he will raise the fuel allowance in view of the rising cost of all fuels and taking into consideration the need for the elderly to keep their homes at a safe temperature; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [33247/07]

Minister for Social and Family Affairs (Deputy Martin Cullen): The national fuel allowance scheme assists householders on long-term social welfare or health service executive (HSE) payments with meeting the cost of their heating needs during the winter season. Fuel allowances which are paid from end-September to end-April represent a contribution towards a person's normal heating expenses. It is not intended to meet those costs in full. In Budget 2008 I have extended the duration of the payment by 1 week to 30 weeks in total. This increase in the duration

of the fuel season will cost an extra €5.6m per annum bringing the estimated expenditure this year to €167.1m for some 286,200 households that will benefit under the scheme.

Budget resources are concentrated on providing significant real increases over and above inflation each year in all primary social welfare pension, benefit and assistance rates. This is a more costly approach than increasing fuel allowances as the increase is paid for the full year and not just for the 30 weeks of the winter heating season. Income maintenance measures for social welfare recipients are significant with rates of payments increased in the context of each budget strategy. Social welfare rates have increased at a significantly greater rate than price inflation in recent years, which has assisted social welfare households to achieve some increase in their quality of life and in their ability to meet the cost of items such as fuel.

In Budget 2008 I have also increased the social welfare rates to keep them ahead of inflation. This reflects the Government's objective to ensure that the total weekly income of benefit and assistance recipient's, including the fuel allowance, is sufficient to meet all of their income needs, including heating costs. In that regard, total social welfare payments have increased by between 61% and 77% over the past six years. Total price inflation including fuel price inflation, was less than 23% in the same period.

Any other changes in relation to fuel allowances would have significant cost implications and would have to be considered in the light of the resources available for improvements in social welfare generally.

Departmental Computer Systems.

147. **Deputy Brian Hayes** asked the Minister for Social and Family Affairs the value of payments from his Department's offices in Dublin, Letterkenny, Longford and Sligo which use the overpayment and debt management computer system; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34457/07]

Minister for Social and Family Affairs (Deputy Martin Cullen): All overpayments are recorded on the new Overpayment & Debt Management (ODM) computer system.

The overpayment amounts relating to the headquarter buildings in question are:

Dublin: €4,194,749.

Letterkenny: €4,442,884

Longford: €14,894,223

Sligo: €69,255,373

Asylum Support Services.

148. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister

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for Social and Family Affairs when the weekly payment of €19.10 made to certain asylum seekers in direct provision accommodation was last increased; the level of weekly payment that would be required if this payment had been increased in line with the increases granted each year since that date in the lowest full adult social welfare rate; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34507/07]

Minister for Social and Family Affairs (Deputy Martin Cullen): The Direct Provision accommodation system is the responsibility of the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform and of the Reception and Integration Agency (RIA) of that Department.

Pension Provisions.

149. **Deputy Catherine Byrne** asked the Minister for Social and Family Affairs if a person (details supplied) in Dublin 20 is entitled to a State transition pension; if this pension is payable even though they are over the age of 65; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34564/07]

Minister for Social and Family Affairs (Deputy Martin Cullen): The person concerned applied for a State Pension (Transition) on 4th May 2006. According to the records of my Department, he has a total of 1,768 contributions in the period from 1956 to 2005 of which 936 are self-employed contributions which are not reckonable for State Pension (Transition). The remaining 832 contributions equate to a yearly average of 17, which is insufficient to qualify him for a State Pension (Transition). The minimum yearly average for a State Pension (Transition) is 24.

Self-employed contributions are reckonable for State Pension (Contributory). The person concerned qualified and is in receipt of a State Pension (Contributory) at the maximum rate with effect from his 66th birthday on 18th August 2006.

European Directives.

150. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food when she will implement the European Court of Justice decision which impacts on stocking rates on commonages in County Galway; the level of destocking required; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [34448/07]

Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Deputy Mary Coughlan): The European Court decision referred to relates to the Wild Birds Directive. The implementation of this Directive is a matter in the first instance for the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government. I am aware that the European

Commission services are concerned about the condition of the vegetation on some commonages in Galway which had been damaged by overgrazing. The implementation of the relevant commonage framework plans on those commonages does not have appeared to deliver the required result in terms of regeneration.

I understand that officials of the National Parks and Wildlife Service of the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government, accompanied by officials of my own Department, will meet local farmers and their representatives shortly to discuss measures that will ensure that environmentally sustainable farming practices are followed on the commonages.

Grant Payments.

151. **Deputy Olwyn Enright** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food when payments will issue to a person (details supplied) in County Offaly, under the farm improvement scheme; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [34474/07]

Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Deputy Mary Coughlan): The person concerned has submitted three applications for grant-aid under the Farm Improvement Scheme. These applications are currently being considered within my Department. Applications received under the Farm Improvement Scheme prior to its suspension on 31 October 2007 will be processed by my Department up to the level of funding provided for the Scheme in the 2006 partnership agreement, Towards 2016.

152. **Deputy Paul Kehoe** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food the reason for the problem processing the single farm payment for a person (details supplied) in County Wexford; when the problem will be resolved and payment made; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [34492/07]

Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Deputy Mary Coughlan): The person named established 41.21 entitlements during the Single Payment reference period. In 2006, he applied for and was accepted under the Consolidation measure of the Single Payment Scheme. His entitlements were consolidated to 34.64. However, in processing the consolidation, it came to light that a plot of land of 0.27 hectares had been sold by the person named. Under the rules of the Single Payment Scheme, lands that are sold cannot be counted for consolidation. A letter issued to him explaining the position and he agreed to a loss of 0.27 entitlements. In line with the conditions of the Consolidation measure of the Single Payment Scheme, these 0.27 entitlements had to revert back to the National Reserve

fund. This has now taken place and the balancing payment for 2007 will issue in the coming days. An advance payment of 50% already issued on 16th October.

153. **Deputy Michael Ring** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food when a person (details supplied) in County Mayo will receive their disadvantaged area scheme and single payment scheme payments for 2007. [34637/07]

Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Deputy Mary Coughlan): An official from my Department has been in direct contact with the person named with regard to the documentation required to release payments in this case as the applicant is deceased. My Department will process the applications on receipt of the requested documentation.

154. **Deputy Michael Ring** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food when a person (details supplied) in County Mayo will receive their REP scheme payment. [34638/07]

Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Deputy Mary Coughlan): The person named submitted the annual Application For Payment form on 4th December 2007 and it is being processed in accordance with Charter of Rights for Farmers guidelines.

School Accommodation.

155. **Deputy Damien English** asked the Minister for Education and Science her plans to advance the provision of additional accommodation for a school (details supplied); the budget set aside for this project; the stage the project is currently at; when work will commence; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [34465/07]

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. Progression of all projects to tender and construction, including the project in question, will be considered in the context of my Department's multi-annual School Building and Modernisation Programme. I intend to announce in January the first tranche of projects that will be proceeding to construction with further announcements throughout the year as the school building programme is rolled out.

Schools Building Projects.

156. **Deputy Niall Blaney** asked the Minister for Education and Science if she will expedite an application by a school (details supplied) in County Donegal for an extension; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [34488/07]

Minister for Education and Science (Deputy Mary Hanafin): The project to which the Deputy refers to is currently at an early stage of architectural planning. A meeting was held on 29 November 2007 with the school authorities and their Design Team to review the stage 3 submission (developed sketch scheme). At the meeting further information was sought from the Design Team before the stage could be cleared. When this is received further progression of the project can be considered.

The progression of all large scale building projects from initial design stage through to construction phase, including this project, is considered on an on-going 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 are delivered within the earliest possible timeframes.

157. **Deputy Niall Blaney** asked the Minister for Education and Science the position regarding the proposed new building project at a school (details supplied) in County Donegal; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [34489/07]

Minister for Education and Science (Deputy Mary Hanafin): An application for capital funding towards the provision of an extension at the school referred to by the Deputy has been assessed and the long term projected enrolments has been determined.

In order to determine how best to provide for the school's future accommodation needs, a technical assessment of the existing school buildings will have to be carried out in order to finalise the schedules of accommodation. The building project required to meet the school's accommodation needs will be considered in the context of the multi-annual School Building and Modernisation Programme.

158. **Deputy Finian McGrath** asked the Minister for Education and Science if she will advise and support a proposal (details supplied). [34493/07]

Minister for Education and Science (Deputy Mary Hanafin): While almost €600 million has been provided in the Budget for school buildings next year, given the priorities facing my Department, it would not be feasible to make funding available for the type of project to which the Deputy refers.

School Accommodation.

159. **Deputy Jimmy Deenihan** asked the Minister for Education and Science the names of the primary schools for Kerry that benefitted under the summer works scheme in 2007; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [34595/07]

Minister for Education and Science (Deputy Mary Hanafin): The Summer Works Scheme

County	Roll No.	School	Address	Project
Kerry	09878V	Aghatubrid N S	Killarney	Complete Replacement of Windows
Kerry	10326M	Scoil Nuachabhail	Gort A Tsleibhe, Baile Mhic Ealgoid	Boiler Replacement
Kerry	11248A	Sn An Ghleanna	An Daingean	Upgrade Electrical
Kerry	11419B	Scoil Bhreanainn	Portmagee	Widening Doors/Entrances
Kerry	12354E	Clogher Mxd N S	Ballymacelligott	Partial Replacement of Windows
Kerry	12832O	Scoil Mhuire B	Killorglin	Complete Replacement of Windows
Kerry	14987H	S N An Chlochan	An Clochan	Upgrade Electrical
Kerry	14998M	Lyre A Crompane N S	Listowel	Internal/External Doors
Kerry	17072T	S N Cill Cruinn	Lios Tuathail	Upgrade Mechanical
Kerry	17161S	Kiltallagh N S	Kiltallagh, Castlemaine	General Upgrade to Toilets
Kerry	18049G	Muire Na Mainistreach	Muire Na Mainistreach, Cill Airne	Complete Replacement of Windows
Kerry	18214S	Cil Conla N S	Cill Conla, Ballybunion	Sewerage
Kerry	18247K	S N Mhuire Na Mbraithre	Tralee	Lift
Kerry	18590A	Scoil Naomh Erc	Ballyheigue, Tralee	Builders Work
Kerry	18590A	Scoil Naomh Erc	Ballyheigue, Tralee	General Upgrade to Toilets
Kerry	18590A	Scoil Naomh Erc	Ballyheigue, Tralee	Partial Replacement of Roof
Kerry	18590A	Scoil Naomh Erc	Ballyheigue, Tralee	Partial Replacement of Windows
Kerry	18705O	Tarbert National School	Tarbert	Conversion Works
Kerry	19487M	Holy Cross Mercy School	New Road, Killarney	Complete Replacement of Windows
Kerry	19512I	St Olivers Ns	Ballycasheen, Killarney	Complete Replacement of Windows
Kerry	19659P	St Brendans N S	Fenit, Tralee	Builders Work — heating installation
Kerry	19659P	St Brendans N S	Fenit, Tralee	Complete Replacement of Windows
Kerry	19659P	St Brendans N S	Fenit, Tralee	Repairs of Roof
Kerry	19846O	Realt Na Maidne	Listowel	Complete Replacement of Roof
Kerry	19941I	Gaelscoil Faithleann	Cill Airne	Repairs of Roof

(SWS) was introduced in 2004 to provide capital grants for smaller-scale improvements works for both primary and post primary schools. Since then, thousands of projects have been completed in schools — such as gas, electrical and mechanical works, roof replacements and repairs, windows replacement, toilet upgrades, structural improvements and access works. The details sought by the Deputy are shown in the tabular statement.

School Staffing.

160. **Deputy Richard Bruton** asked the Minister for Education and Science if she will confirm the date when a school (details supplied) will reopen; and if she will take all reasonable steps to ensure that the special children enrolled in the school will not lose another term at this vital stage of their education. [34606/07]

Minister for Education and Science (Deputy Mary Hanafin): As the Deputy may be aware,

three teaching vacancies out of a total teaching complement of four teaching posts have arisen in the school in question for the 2007/2008 school year, namely the posts of principal and two teachers. Due to this exceptional number of vacancies, the school was unable to re-open in September 2007.

I am informed that the recruitment process is in hand and the Board of Management has advised that a person has accepted an offer of the principal's post in this school. The individual in

question is currently working through a notice period in his present school. Every effort is being made to expedite the recruitment process for the two remaining staff vacancies with a view to re-opening the school as soon as possible.

Arrangements have been made to facilitate some of the children's attendance at other schools as a short-term measure. Where this has not been possible home tuition has been offered to the remaining families. My Department is continuing to liaise with the school in the context of re-opening the school at the earliest possible date.

School Accommodation.

161. **Deputy Richard Bruton** asked the Minister for Education and Science if her attention has been drawn to the failure of part of the 1952 heating system of a school (details supplied); if she has emergency resources to respond to this problem; when decisions on the SWS will be issued; and if she will communicate to the school. [34607/07]

Minister for Education and Science (Deputy Mary Hanafin): I am aware of the difficulties relating to the heating system in the school referred to by the Deputy. The school authorities recently advised the Building Unit of my Department that the heating system has broken down and requested funding for emergency repair works to be carried out. Details of the estimated cost of the repairs have now been received and the school authorities will be advised of the outcome as a matter of urgency.

The Summer Works programme has, since its introduction in 2004, transformed the standard of existing school accommodation. With around 3,000 projects now having been funded under this scheme, my intention is to focus the significant extra investment in school buildings next year on delivering as many large projects as possible. There will not, therefore, be a new Summer Works Scheme as part of our building programme in 2008.

The level of investment in school buildings has never been greater with €4.5 billion to be invested in this area under the National Development Plan over its lifetime; further significant progress will be made.

Youth Services.

162. **Deputy Alan Shatter** asked the Minister for Education and Science her views on whether it is essential that the transition supports project funded by the European Social Fund and her Department continues to operate in 2008 to co-ordinate and intricate services to separated children seeking asylum and minors to enable them to participate in education to help prepare them for adult life here or in their country of origin; the funding provided; if the project is to be discontinued, the reason for same; and the alterna-

tive initiative, if it is proposed to replace the existing project. [34620/07]

Minister of State at the Department of Education and Science (Deputy Seán Haughey): The Transition Support Project is an inter-agency response to the need to co-ordinate, integrate and deliver services to Separated Children Seeking Asylum and to enable them to participate in education, formal and informal with a view to preparing them for adult life in Ireland, or in their country of origin. The Transition Support Project is currently in receipt of funding under the Special Projects for Youth Scheme administered by the Youth Affairs Section of my Department and the 2007 allocation is €103,845. The 2008 funding allocation will be decided before the end of Spring 2008.

It also receives funding under the European Social Fund "Equal" measure from the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment. This Equal Funding is due to come to an end in December 2007. The future provision for separated children is currently under consideration in the Department.

Site Acquisitions.

163. **Deputy Billy Timmins** asked the Minister for Education and Science her views on purchasing a site for a new primary school in Greystones, County Wicklow, known as the Scaipt site and in the ownership of Wicklow County Council; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [34639/07]

Minister for Education and Science (Deputy Mary Hanafin): The Department has no plans to acquire the site to which the Deputy refers. There are 2 sites reserved in Greystones for educational provision and the Department is focusing its attention on acquiring these.

Defence Forces Property.

164. **Deputy Jack Wall** asked the Minister for Defence the position of the transfer of a residential estate (details supplied) in County Kildare to a local authority; the position of repairs to the roads, footpaths and street lighting within the estate; the position of the sale of houses to the tenants; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34497/07]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Willie O'Dea): To date ninety three (93) of the houses in the estate in question have been sold and it is hoped to dispose of the remaining seven (7) houses at the estate as soon as possible. The roads, footpaths, street lighting and other services at the estate will have to be brought up to the required standard before they will be taken in charge by Kildare County Council. In this regard, the condition of the services concerned is under review

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with a view to reaching an agreement with Kildare County Council in the matter.

Defence Forces Operations.

165. **Deputy Thomas P. Broughan** asked the Minister for Defence the number of members of the armed forces including the Navy and Air Corp injured in friendly fire incidents at home and abroad each year since 2000 and to date in 2007; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34514/07]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Willie O’Dea):

There have been no recorded incidents of injuries sustained by Defence Forces personnel due to friendly fire in the period from 1st January 2000 to today’s date, 12th December 2007.

Defence Forces Strength.

166. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Defence if it is intended to augment the strength of the Defence Forces with particular reference to anticipated overseas deployments on EU and UN missions; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34596/07]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Willie O’Dea):

The White Paper on Defence of February 2000 set out a figure of 10,500 personnel for the Permanent Defence Force, as the strength sufficient to meet all foreseeable military requirements for the period comprehended by the White Paper (i.e. up to 2010). This remains the position. It is intended to maintain the established Government policy of ongoing recruitment to the Defence Forces.

The agreed Programme for Government provides for an additional provision of up to 350 troops to be in training at any given time to enable the Defence Forces to maintain a strength of 10,500 fully trained personnel. However, due to the requirement to prioritise funding for the Chad mission, it has not been possible to provide funding in 2008 to increase the approved strength of the Permanent Defence Force. This matter will be further considered in the context of the 2009 Estimates.

The White Paper on Defence provides for an allocation of up to 850 Permanent Defence Force personnel to be deployed overseas at any one time through the United Nations Standby Arrangements System (UNSAS). While this may be exceeded for short periods, deployments above this level are not sustainable on an ongoing basis within existing resources. Any commitments to EU or UN missions will be met within this context.

Defence Forces Equipment.

167. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Defence if he has a precise plan to

ensure within reason self-sufficiency in terms of the military hardware available to contingents of Irish troops who are expected to be deployed overseas with particular reference to air cover and fire power, helicopters, fixed wing aircraft or other equipment; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34597/07]

169. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Defence if he is satisfied that the extent of training and equipment available to Irish troops being deployed overseas is adequate; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34599/07]

170. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Defence if it is intended to make specific changes in respect of the strength or level of equipment available to Irish troops to be deployed overseas; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34600/07]

175. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Defence if all Irish troops serving overseas have a full complement of body armour, breathing apparatus or other personal safety equipment. [34605/07]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Willie O’Dea): I propose to take Questions Nos. 167, 169, 170 and 175 together.

The acquisition of new equipment for the Defence Forces has been and continues to be a key focus for me as Minister for Defence and significant investment has taken place in recent years in this regard. The net result is that Defence Forces personnel serving both at home and on overseas missions are equipped with the most modern and effective equipment, including body armour and breathing apparatus. This equipment enables troops to carry out the mission assigned, as well as providing the required protection specific to the mission. In the case of Liberia, for example, a wide range of equipment and force protection assets was deployed with the contingent. This equipment included Mowag APCs, armoured vehicles and support weapons, heavy machine guns and a mortar platoon.

On-going threat assessments are carried out in mission areas and a continuous review process on both personal equipment and force assets is in place to ensure that Defence Forces personnel are appropriately equipped to fulfil their roles in specific missions. Troops selected for overseas service undergo a rigorous programme of training designed to help them carry out their peace-keeping mission and to provide for their protection. Pre-deployment training is provided to members of the Permanent Defence Force and is updated in the light of any change in the threat assessment.

Question No. 168 answered with Question No. 53.

Questions Nos. 169 and 170 answered with Question No. 167.

Defence Forces Deployment.

171. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Defence if he has had discussions with his EU or UN counterparts in regard to coastal defence or surveillance; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34601/07]

173. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Defence if he has had discussions with his EU colleagues in the matter of coastal defence and surveillance; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34603/07]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Willie O’Dea): I propose to take Questions Nos. 171 and 173 together.

The Naval Service, which is based on Haulbowline Island, is the State’s principal seagoing agency with a general responsibility to meet contingent and actual maritime defence requirements. It is tasked with a variety of defence and other roles. Defence roles include defending territorial seas, deterring intrusive or aggressive acts, conducting maritime surveillance, maintaining an armed naval presence, ensuring right of passage, protecting marine assets and contributing to a blockade if required. The Naval Service also supports Army operations by sea lift and close naval support.

Under the Treaty of the European Union, the EU is developing a common foreign and security policy which does not extend to territorial defence. This aspect falls under national responsibility. I have not had any recent discussions with my EU or UN counterparts specifically on regard to coastal defence or surveillance. Following a Spanish initiative presented under the Luxembourg Presidency in February 2005, consideration is being given to the Maritime Dimension of the EU Headline Goal 2010. However, I have not had any discussions with my EU or UN counterparts specifically in relation to this.

Overseas Missions.

172. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Defence if he is satisfied regarding the adequacy of strength of proposed deployments of Irish troops overseas with particular reference to the need to ensure sufficient strength for their own protection and that of their colleagues having particular reference to previous experiences; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34602/07]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Willie O’Dea): Force Protection is always a key consideration in relation to the deployment of Defence Forces personnel overseas. A threat assessment is conducted prior to each deployment, and the threat

to Irish troops is evaluated on an on-going basis for the duration of the mission. Irish troops are armed and equipped as necessary to meet the force protection requirements. Mowag APCs are deployed where necessary to provide armoured protection, mobility, firepower and a communications platform.

In relation to the forthcoming deployment to the UN mandated EU operation in the Republic of Chad and the Central African Republic, known as EUFOR TCHAD/RCA, the threat level in the area of operations is assessed as Medium risk, and while the level of risk is consistent with any operational deployment into a dysfunctional African State, it is one which the Defence Forces have the capability to manage. The Irish contingent will be based on a mechanized Infantry Battalion Group comprising Manoeuvre elements and Combat Support and Combat Service Support elements. The contingent will amount to some 400 personnel.

Because of the nature of the operation and the mission area and environment, force protection will be a key consideration. It is expected that the Defence Forces will deploy a full range of Force Protection assets including Armoured Personnel Carriers (APCs) and Special Reconnaissance Vehicles. The Defence Forces will also deploy direct firing capabilities to include 0.5 machine guns, and indirect firing capabilities i.e. Mortars.

Question No. 173 answered with Question No. 171.

174. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Defence the extent of the discussions he has had with his EU or UN colleagues in the matter of the creation of rapid response units; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34604/07]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Willie O’Dea): In June 2004 the European Council approved the European Union’s decision-making and planning ambitions for its rapid response operations. Rapid response is defined as “the ability to take the decision to launch an operation within 5 days of the approval of the crisis-management concept (CMC)”, especially as regards battlegroup operations.

In the Headline Goal 2010, the EU set itself the objective inter alia, of being able “to respond with rapid and decisive action applying a fully coherent approach to the whole spectrum of crisis management operations covered by the Treaty on the European Union”. A key element of the Headline Goal is the capability to deploy forces at high readiness, broadly based on the Battlegroups concept. “Battlegroup” is a military term and refers to a specific form of rapid response capability. It comprises approximately 1,500 personnel with a readiness to deploy within 5 to 10

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days to a range of possible missions, sustainable for 30 days extendable to 120 days.

The purpose of the EU Battlegroups is to undertake operations (commonly referred to as the Petersberg Tasks) such as rescue tasks, tasks of combat forces in crisis management including peacemaking, in addition to peacekeeping and humanitarian tasks. Battlegroups could be deployed on operations at the higher end of the spectrum — i.e. robust peacemaking and high intensity combat operations.

In January 2006, the Government approved a proposal for me to enter discussions with Sweden, which is the Framework Nation for the Nordic Battlegroup, and other like-minded nations in relation to Ireland's contribution to EU Battlegroups. Representatives from the Departments of Defence and Foreign Affairs and the Defence Forces met with their Swedish counterparts on a number of occasions to discuss possible participation by the Defence Forces in the Nordic Battlegroup.

In November 2006, the Government formally approved the arrangements for Ireland's participation in the Nordic Battlegroup (NBG). It was agreed to both provide a contingent of the Permanent Defence Force to participate in the Battlegroup and to sign the Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs) for the NBG, subject to the approval of Dáil Éireann which was given on 5 April 2007. On 26 April 2007, I issued a letter of Accession to all participating members of the Battlegroup to join the Nordic Memoranda of Understanding (MoU). The Nordic Battlegroup Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) is an agreement between the participants comprising the Nordic Battlegroup, namely Sweden, Norway, Finland and Estonia, which set out principles in relation to the operation, deployment and management of the Nordic Battlegroup. The Operational Headquarters MoU defines the aim, principles and responsibilities for cooperation with regard to the establishment and operation of the EU Operational Headquarters (OHQ) in Northwood for the command and control of the Nordic Battlegroup.

The MoUs had already been signed by the existing participants in the Battlegroup. A Crisis Management Group for the NBG, has been established to manage and support Ireland's national decision-making process. The purpose of this group is to facilitate rapid decision making in the context of potential Battlegroup operations. The Group will advise Ministers and the Government on all relevant issues (policy, legal and operational) in respect of Ireland's participation in any proposed Battlegroup operation. This Group is chaired by an Assistant Secretary from the Department of Defence and comprises representatives from the Department of Defence, Department of Foreign Affairs, Department of

the Taoiseach, the Oireachtas and the Attorney Generals Office.

The Nordic Battlegroup will be on stand-by from 1 January 2008 to 30 June 2008. As part of the initial familiarisation and training phase for the Nordic Battlegroup eleven (11) members of the Defence Forces are currently deployed to the Force Headquarters in Sweden and two (2) are currently deployed to the Operational Headquarters in the UK.

Our planned contribution to the Nordic Battlegroup will amount to 100 personnel involving an Explosive Ordnance Disposal and Improvised Explosive Device Disposal (E.O.D./I.E.D.D.) team with its own security detail, together with staff posts at the Operational and Force headquarters. E.O.D. relates to normal type munitions whereas I.E.D.D. generally refers to devices devised by terrorist groups, such as car bombs etc. This level of operational commitment will only arise should the Battlegroup be called on to undertake an operation. The number of personnel involved operationally during the stand-by period, where the Battlegroup has not been mobilised to undertake an operation, will be of the order of 10 to 12 personnel. The on-call personnel for the contingent will be based in Ireland during the stand-by period.

During my visit to Sweden on 7 November 2007 to attend the Final Exercise (FINEX) of the Nordic Battlegroup, I held discussions with the Defence Ministers of the other four nations contributing to the Battlegroup. Ireland is committed in principle to participation in the Nordic Battlegroup in 2011. Very preliminary discussions have also been held regarding possible participation in the proposed Austrian/German Battlegroup in 2012.

Question No. 175 answered with Question No. 167.

Court Procedures.

176. **Deputy Paul Kehoe** asked the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform his views on supplying peace commissioners with a stamp to be used in their role, in order to make it more official and more secure than their signature; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34452/07]

Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform (Deputy Brian Lenihan): Peace commissioners are appointed under section 88 of the Courts of Justice Act 1924. That legislation does not require that peace commissioners add a stamp to their signature, and it is not a requirement of the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform that peace commissioners have a stamp. Stamps are not issued as a peace commissioner's signature is the only official requirement. I do not intend to amend the legislation relating to peace

commissioners at this time but I will keep the matter under review.

Residency Permits.

177. **Deputy Chris Andrews** asked the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform if he will grant compassionate leave to remain to persons (details supplied) in Dublin 2; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34453/07]

Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform (Deputy Brian Lenihan): I understand the immigration division of my Department has recently been in contact with the family referred to by the Deputy regarding their current immigration status in the State.

Citizenship Applications.

178. **Deputy Jim O’Keeffe** asked the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform when, the way and the basis on which persons (details supplied) obtained Irish citizenship; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34468/07]

Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform (Deputy Brian Lenihan): Officials in the citizenship section of my Department have informed me that the first named person received Irish citizenship in 2003 on the basis of his marriage to an Irish-born national. The second and third named persons are the sons of the first named individual and were automatically Irish citizens from birth on the basis of having an Irish-born mother.

179. **Deputy John Curran** asked the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform when he expects a decision to be made regarding an application for citizenship by a person (details supplied) in Dublin 22. [34486/07]

Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform (Deputy Brian Lenihan): An application for a certificate of naturalisation on behalf of the person referred to in the Deputy’s question was received in the citizenship section of my Department in June 2007. Due to the fact that applications on behalf of minors generally require less processing than standard adult applications, it is usually possible to finalise them more quickly. Based on current processing trends, it is likely that this application will be finalised in early 2009. I will inform the Deputy and the applicant when I have reached a decision on the matter.

Residency Permits.

180. **Deputy Brian O’Shea** asked the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform if he will review the application for subsidiary protection in the State for a person (details supplied) in County Waterford; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34513/07]

Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform (Deputy Brian Lenihan): I refer the Deputy to Parliamentary Question No. 149 of Thursday, 29 November 2007 and the written reply to that question. The position remains unchanged.

Garda Expenditure.

181. **Deputy Thomas P. Broughan** asked the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform the value of mobile phone bills for Garda inspectors, superintendents and chief superintendents in 2006 and 2007; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34515/07]

Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform (Deputy Brian Lenihan): In the time available it has not been possible for the Garda authorities to supply the details requested by the Deputy. I will be in contact with the Deputy when the information is to hand.

182. **Deputy Thomas P. Broughan** asked the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform the amount spent by An Garda Síochána on sending DNA samples to be tested abroad each year since 2000 to date in 2007; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34516/07]

Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform (Deputy Brian Lenihan): In the time available it has not been possible for the Garda authorities to supply the details requested by the Deputy. I will be in contact with the Deputy when the information is to hand.

Court Procedures.

183. **Deputy Brian O’Shea** asked the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform his plans to empower High Court judges sitting on the Admiralty Marshals Court to waive the State’s deduction of 12% levied as court fees in cases where a ship is being sold to recover unpaid crew wages and where it is apparent to the judge that the deduction of the said court fee will reduce the funds available below the level required to enable the full discharge of the aforesaid crews’ wages, which means effectively that it will be the crew themselves who will be paying most, or all, of the said court fees; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34565/07]

Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform (Deputy Brian Lenihan): I refer the Deputy to my answer to Question No. 526 on 31 October last. The position is unchanged.

Citizenship Applications.

184. **Deputy Billy Timmins** asked the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform the position in relation to applications for naturalisation for persons (details supplied); if they will be dealt

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with as speedily as possible; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34619/07]

Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform (Deputy Brian Lenihan): I refer the Deputy to my reply to Parliamentary Question No. 907 on 26 September 2007. The position remains as stated.

Court Procedures.

185. **Deputy Lucinda Creighton** asked the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform his reason for proposing the extension of the ambit of the Special Criminal Court for dealing with gangland crime; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [29466/07]

Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform (Deputy Brian Lenihan): Provision already exists for the forwarding for trial in the Special Criminal Court (SCC) of persons accused of both scheduled and non-scheduled offences. In the case of scheduled offences which are also indictable offences, accused persons shall be returned for trial to the SCC unless the Director of Public Prosecutions (DPP) otherwise directs. In the case of non-scheduled offences, accused persons can be returned for trial to the SCC upon direction of the DPP. The SCC has already been used in a number of serious non-paramilitary cases. Issues relating to the operation of the Court in such circumstances are, of course, kept under review.

Liquor Licensing Laws.

186. **Deputy Leo Varadkar** asked the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform if he will amend the liquor laws to restrict or end the practice whereby alcohol is sold by convenience stores and at petrol stations; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [29442/07]

Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform (Deputy Brian Lenihan): The position regarding the acquisition of off-licences is that an applicant who wishes to obtain such a licence to sell alcohol other than wine must apply to the District Court under section 18 of the Intoxicating Liquor Act 2000 for a certificate entitling him or her to obtain such a licence from the Revenue Commissioners.

The District Court may refuse to grant the necessary certificate on one or more of the following grounds: the character, misconduct or unfitness of the applicant; the unfitness or inconvenience of the new premises; the unsuitability of the premises for the needs of persons residing in the neighbourhood; or the adequacy of the existing number of licensed premises of the same character in the neighbourhood.

Notice of intention to apply for the certificate must be served on the Superintendent of the Garda Síochána within whose district the premises are located at least 21 days before the date of the hearing of the application. A notice of intention to apply for the certificate must also be published in a newspaper circulating in the place where the premises are located at least 21 days before the date of the hearing. The Superintendent of the Garda Síochána, any resident or owner of property in the surrounding area or any person who would be affected by the decision to grant a licence may then object on specified grounds in the District Court to the grant of the certificate.

I should also point out that under the Planning and Development Regulations 2005, any change of retail use which will involve the sale of alcohol other than wine requires planning permission in addition to satisfying the conditions already referred to in section 18 of the Intoxicating Liquor Act 2000.

Licences to sell alcohol expire on 30 September each year and may be renewed subject to the good character of the licensee and the peaceable and orderly manner in which the licensed premises were conducted during the preceding year. The Superintendent of the Garda Síochána for the licensing area within which the premises are located or a member of the public may object to the renewal of any licence on either of these grounds. In addition, any person may make an objection to the renewal of the licence where the District Court has made an order for redress under section 19 of the Intoxicating Liquor Act 2003 in relation to prohibited conduct under the Equal Status Act 2000.

The Government Legislation Programme published on 25 September provides for publication of a Sale of Alcohol Bill in 2008. This Bill will modernise and streamline the laws relating to the sale and consumption of alcohol by repealing the Licensing Acts 1833 to 2004, as well as the Registration of Clubs Acts 1904 to 2004, and replacing them with updated provisions more suited to modern conditions.

The proposed Bill will contain new provisions: requiring all planning authorities to address the regulation and control of the location of licensed premises in their development plans; requiring proof of planning permission and certification by a suitably qualified person of compliance with both planning conditions and fire safety standards to be presented to the District Court; extending the grounds on which the Garda may object to the grant of alcohol licences to include an undue risk of public nuisance or a threat to public order or safety; and clarify the right of members of the public to object to renewal of licences on stated grounds.

Furthermore, as I have already stated publicly, it is my intention to re-examine, as a matter of

priority, the existing legislation on the sale and consumption of alcohol with a view to identifying any further changes in the law which may be necessary with a view to maintaining public order and ensuring public safety.

Grant Payments.

187. **Deputy Phil Hogan** asked the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government the number of disabled person's grants in each local authority received in 2002 to 2006; the number that have been paid to date to 2007; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34491/07]

Minister of State at the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government (Deputy Batt O'Keefe): My Department's involvement in the disabled persons grant scheme relates primarily to the recoupment of a portion of local authority expenditure on the payment of individual grants. Details of the recoupments to local authorities so far in 2007 are set out in the table. Information on local authority activity under this scheme for the years 2002 to 2006 is published in my Department's Annual Housing Statistics Bulletins, copies of which are available in the Oireachtas Library and on my Department's website, www.envron.ie. Complete statistical details in relation to this year will be published in due course in the 2007 Bulletin.

Disabled Persons Grant

Local Authority	Number of Payments	Value of recoupments
		€
Carlow County Council	47	322,157
Cavan County Council	79	603,109
Clare County Council	86	701,294
Cork County Council	282	2,057,802
Donegal County Council	287	1,512,946
Dun Laoghaire/Rathdown County Council	184	1,245,293
Fingal County Council	144	984,887
Galway County Council	217	815,333
Kerry County Council	262	1,127,285
Kildare County Council	77	596,888
Kilkenny County Council	51	425,612
Laois County Council	128	1,162,531
Leitrim County Council	126	531,938
Limerick County Council	163	638,114
Longford County Council	69	290,463
Louth County Council	121	950,472
Mayo County Council	396	893,227
Meath County Council	170	1,072,277
Monaghan County Council	117	972,968
North Tipperary County Council	146	890,904
Offaly County Council	83	707,274
Roscommon County Council	112	673,692
Sligo County Council	59	141,886
South Dublin County Council	302	1,999,449
South Tipperary County Council	164	865,430
Waterford County Council	97	603,472
Westmeath County Council	84	678,802
Wexford County Council	107	752,963
Wicklow County Council	54	498,380
Cork City Council	266	1,218,359
Dublin City Council	1,297	7,371,030
Galway City Council	78	543,912
Limerick City Council	60	422,403
Waterford City Council	34	222,200
Sligo Borough Council	44	245,097

Local Authority Charges.

188. **Deputy Olivia Mitchell** asked the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government if he will extend to non-profit making sports clubs the non-metered water allowance promised to schools in the programme for Government. [34505/07]

Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government (Deputy John Gormley):

Article 9.1 of the EU Water Framework Directive requires Member States to take account of the principle of water services cost recovery, including environmental and resource costs, in accordance with the polluter pays principle. The Directive is being implemented in Ireland in relation to the non-domestic sector, including those engaged in the provision of educational, recreational or voluntary services, on the basis of recovery of water services costs through water charges by means of a meter-based volumetric charge which ensures charging accords to actual consumption.

The Education section of the Programme for Government contains a commitment to examine the provision of a water allowance to schools, with charges becoming effective after such allowance is exceeded. It will be necessary for any proposals to assist schools in meeting this aspect of their running costs to be framed in a way that is consistent with Ireland's obligations under the Water Framework Directive and my Department will co-operate with the Department of Education and Science in examining this issue. I have no scope to exempt any category of non-domestic user from the cost recovery requirement imposed by the Directive.

Proposed Legislation.

189. **Deputy Mattie McGrath** asked the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government if he would consider that the breeding of hounds and fox harriers be exempt from the new puppy farm licence law, similar to the arrangements made for the greyhound industry; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34552/07]

Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government (Deputy John Gormley):

Work is underway in my Department in drafting regulations to implement the majority of the recommendations of the Working Group to Review the Management of Dog Breeding Establishments. The question of whether or not to provide exemptions for specific types of organisations, or breeding establishments, from the requirements of the proposed regulations is being considered in the context of this work.

Departmental Expenditure.

190. **Deputy Joe McHugh** asked the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government if he will account for the reduction in projected expenditure for 2008 by 29%; the projects that will be affected; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34566/07]

Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government (Deputy John Gormley):

I presume that the Question refers to the social and community facilities capital schemes of 2006 and 2007. The allocation for 2008 reflects experience with the schemes to date and the level of drawdown of this grant aid by local authorities. The allocation will be sufficient to fund all approved projects.

Local Authority Funding.

191. **Deputy Joe McHugh** asked the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government the breakdown in relation to funding projects under the gateways innovation fund; the amount Letterkenny will receive under this fund; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34567/07]

Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government (Deputy John Gormley):

The Call for Proposals under the competitive Gateway Innovation Fund (GIF) issued on 8 June 2007, with a closing date of 15 November for submission of bids. Proposals from all nine gateways have been received in respect of the €300 million Fund and these are currently being evaluated by the GIF Management Committee (with appropriate input from other Departments and agencies as required), against the criteria set down in the Call for Proposals. Goodbody Economic Consultants have been commissioned to assist in the evaluation process and in particular in relation to the financial robustness of the proposals.

The Committee will make funding recommendations jointly to the Minister for Finance and myself. Together with the Minister for Finance, I then intend to bring recommendations on funding allocations to Government in the first quarter of 2008.

Departmental Bodies.

192. **Deputy Joe McHugh** asked the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government the breakdown of funding towards An Bord Pleanála in view of the fact that it is projected that it will receive €15.2 million; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34568/07]

Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government (Deputy John Gormley):

While my Department is responsible for payment of the annual Exchequer grant to An Bord Pleanála, the Board is an independent body, and as such, is responsible for determining the manner in which that grant is spent.

Details of the Board's income and expenditure are presented annually to the Oireachtas. Under the Planning Acts the Board is required to submit its accounts to the Comptroller and Auditor General for annual audit. These audited accounts are then presented to me, as Minister, together with the report of the Comptroller and Auditor General. Copies of the accounts, along with the Board's annual report, must then be laid before each House of the Oireachtas. The annual report for 2006 which also includes the audited accounts is available on the Board's website at www.pleanala.ie.

Tribunals of Inquiry.

193. **Deputy Joe McHugh** asked the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government the breakdown of spending on the Mahon tribunal; if he will account for the significant reduction in the 2008 Estimate, from €16.3 million in 2007 to €12.5 million in 2008; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34569/07]

Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government (Deputy John Gormley):

To date, my Department's expenditure in meeting the costs of the Tribunal of Inquiry into Certain Planning Matters and Payments amounts to almost €71.51 million, of which fees paid to the Tribunal's internal legal team amount to over €40.85 million and third party legal costs amount to €8.06 million. The salaries of the three Members of the Tribunal are paid separately from the Central Fund. The reduction in the Estimates provision for 2008 anticipates reduced expenditure on the settlement of third party cost awards made by the Tribunal in respect of the period to the end of 2002, by comparison with such expenditure over 2006 and 2007. It is understood that the Tribunal does not anticipate dealing with the award of third party costs in respect of the period since 2002 until late in 2009.

Water and Sewerage Schemes.

194. **Deputy Jimmy Deenihan** asked the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government if his Department has received the submission of Limerick County Council's preliminary report on the proposed sewerage scheme for Athea, County Limerick;

and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34594/07]

Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government (Deputy John Gormley):

I refer to the reply to Question No. 549 of 20 November 2007. The Council's Preliminary Report for the scheme is still awaited in my Department.

Local Authority Functions.

195. **Deputy Jack Wall** asked the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government the number of estates taken in charge by a local authority (details supplied) within the past five years; the location of these estates; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34630/07]

196. **Deputy Jack Wall** asked the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government the number of estates taken in charge by a local authority (details supplied) over the past five years; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34631/07]

Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government (Deputy John Gormley): I propose to take Questions Nos. 195 and 196 together.

My Department does not hold the information requested in the Questions.

Telecommunications Services.

197. **Deputy Michael Ring** asked the Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources when broadband will be extended to an area (details supplied) in County Mayo. [34512/07]

Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources (Deputy Eamon Ryan):

The provision of broadband services is primarily a matter for private sector service providers. Broadband service providers operate in a fully liberalised market, regulated by the independent Commission for Communications Regulation. The enabling of exchanges to provide Digital Subscriber Line broadband services is a matter for the service providers. I have no function in this matter. There are a number of platforms for delivery of broadband, and service providers are now offering broadband by wireless, satellite, fibre or standard telephone cable and more recently by mobile in all areas of the country. My Department operates a dedicated website, www.broadband.gov.ie, where potential broadband customers can ascertain the availability of services in their area.

Electricity Transmission Network.

198. **Deputy Pat Breen** asked the Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources if he will report on an application for a person (details supplied) in County Clare; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34636/07]

Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources (Deputy Eamon Ryan): Applications for connection to the electricity transmission network are a matter for EirGrid. Any outstanding or unresolved issues arising from a connection offer are matters for EirGrid and the Commission for Energy Regulation. I have no statutory function in the matter.