



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DÁIL ÉIREANN

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

Thursday, 13 March 2008.

Requests to Move Adjournment of Dáil under Standing Order 32 ...	239
Order of Business ...	240
Cluster Munitions Bill 2008: First Stage ...	249
Membership of Committees: Motion ...	250
Orders of Reference of Committees: Motion ...	250
Student Support Bill 2008: Second Stage (<i>resumed</i>) ...	250
Ceisteanna — Questions	
Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism	
Priority Questions ...	280
Other Questions ...	286
Message from Seanad ...	296
Adjournment Debate Matters ...	296
Adjournment Debate	
School Accommodation ...	297
Schools Building Projects ...	299
National Monuments ...	301
Inland Fisheries ...	303
Questions: Written Answers ...	305

DÁIL ÉIREANN

Déardaoin, 13 Márta 2008.

Thursday, 13 March 2008.

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

Paidir.

Prayer.

Requests to move Adjournment of Dáil under Standing Order 32.

An Ceann Comhairle: Anois, iarratais chun tairiscint a dhéanamh an Dáil a chur ar athló faoi Bhuan-Ordú 32. We now move to requests to move the adjournment of the Dáil under Standing Order 32. I call Deputy Crawford.

Deputy Seymour Crawford: I seek the adjournment of the Dáil under Standing Order 32 to raise a matter of national importance, namely, the failure of the HSE to deliver dental services in Cavan-Monaghan and elsewhere due to staff shortages. According to the HSE's letter, current service provision is predominately emergency only, yet the HSE has refused to pay for children who subsequently had to seek private treatment. In the same way, with the Department of Education and Science, it has failed to provide education structures for a child, although there was total agreement to provide such structures two years ago based on autism difficulties. The parents of the child have received a number of written commitments but as yet there has been no delivery. It is clear that the financial difficulties of the HSE and the Government are being imposed on the weakest section of the community, children and young people with specific difficulties.

Deputy Kathleen Lynch: I seek the adjournment of the Dáil under Standing Order 32 in the light of yesterday's debate on education to raise a matter of national importance, namely, the fact that St. Angela's College, a girls secondary school located at Patrick's Hill in Cork, was forced to close and send home its 500 pupils on Tuesday after strong winds and stormy weather affected its dilapidated buildings, causing slates to fall from the roof and leading to serious health and safety concerns for the students. The students are currently housed in a decaying 19th century building and decades old prefabs. In 1999 the then Minister for Education and Science, Deputy Martin, announced to an assembled group that he was about to give €4 million to build a new school but nine years later nothing has materialised. Funding must immediately come on stream to avoid further closures of the school and hardship to its 500 pupils.

Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin: I seek the adjournment of the Dáil under Standing Order 32 to raise a matter of national importance, namely, the need for the Minister for Health and Children to make herself accountable to the Dáil for the continuing impact of cuts imposed by the HSE; to take action to prevent the further cuts of €300 million threatened by the HSE chief executive, Professor Brendan Drumm; to set out where she considers redundancies should take place, given her statement that the HSE should adopt a redundancy programme, especially

[Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin.]

in the light of the impact on patient care of current staffing restrictions and the Labour Court ruling that the HSE was in breach of Towards 2016 and the EU information and consultation directive in the manner in which it introduced, without prior consultation, staffing restrictions in September 2007.

An Ceann Comhairle: Tar éis breathnú a dhéanamh ar an nithe ardaithe, níl siad in ord faoi Bhuan Ordú 32. Having considered the matters raised, I do not consider them to be in order under Standing Order 32.

Order of Business.

Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism (Deputy Séamus Brennan): It is proposed to take No. 11*b*, motion re membership of committees; No. 11*a*, motion re orders of reference of committee; and No. 15, Student Support Bill 2008 — Second Stage (resumed).

It is proposed, notwithstanding anything in Standing Orders, that business shall be interrupted on the conclusion of questions to the Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism until 2.30 p.m. on Wednesday, 2 April; Nos. 11*b* and 11*a* shall be decided without debate; and Question Time shall be taken at 2 p.m. for 75 minutes and in the event of a private notice question being allowed, it shall be taken after 45 minutes; and the order shall not resume thereafter.

An Ceann Comhairle: There are three proposals to be put to the House. Is the proposal that the Dáil shall adjourn on the conclusion of Question Time until 2.30 p.m. on Wednesday, 2 April agreed?

Deputy Richard Bruton: While I do not intend to divide the House on this issue, yesterday 20 Ministers were already abroad on so-called St. Patrick's Day duty and today 27 Ministers are already abroad. This is not a question of taking a brief recess to attend functions. We are now seeing Ministers leaving their Dáil duties for three weeks at a stretch. This is not the way business should be done here. We all accept that people need to attend important events. The taxpayer may look on and ask whether it will make any difference to have all these Ministers absent but the trouble is they will have some carbon offset headache to pay for when they come back. This is getting somewhat out of hand. Traditionally, the House always sat in Holy Week. The Government is continually fraying the edges and not respecting the House in the way it should. We have had no legislation for much of the period of this Dáil term and now Ministers skive off at the first opportunity. We need to take a look at ourselves. Resources are short. We should be using our time more effectively.

Deputy Michael Ring: It is like a Government in exile. Look at what is left behind to run the country.

Deputy Willie O'Dea: It could be worse. It could be the Deputy.

An Ceann Comhairle: Iarraim ar cheannaire an Lucht Oibre, an Teachta Gilmore.

Deputy Michael Ring: To have them running the country, God help it. We have them here. It is a disgrace. We were told years ago that without the dual mandate there would be more sittings. We should be sitting in America because that is where Ministers are. The Government is in exile, running away all the time.

An Ceann Comhairle: We must proceed.

Deputy Michael Ring: It is a disgrace. The people are sick of it. They are acting like dictators.

An Ceann Comhairle: There should be no more interruptions.

Deputy Fergus O'Dowd: They are acting like princes.

Deputy Michael Ring: God help the country.

Deputy Willie O'Dea: What if Deputy Enda Kenny was in charge?

An Ceann Comhairle: Unless Deputy Ring has a tip for Cheltenham, I ask him not to intervene.

Deputy Michael Ahern: It could be the Deputy. He should buy a lotto ticket.

Deputy Eamon Gilmore: There has been much comment in the past couple of days about the number of Ministers who are travelling abroad to attend St. Patrick's Day functions and how far they are travelling and so on. My view is that the St. Patrick's Day events are of enormous value to this country. That the country is the focus of attention on a worldwide basis for a day or two is of value, and it is of value that the Government is represented at such events. However, there is evidence that some members have been tearing the rear end out of it. Attention needs to be given to that issue.

With regard to the proposed recess, that St. Patrick's Day and Easter fall together is a rather unusual calendar coincidence. My main concern about recesses is not so much the forthcoming recess but the unreasonable recesses the House takes, at the Government's insistence, at Christmas and during the summer. While I do not propose to make a fuss about the manner in which the Easter recess falls this year, I give notice that if the Government has in mind that the House will rise at the beginning of July and not sit again until the end of September, the Labour Party will create one hell of a fuss.

Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin: At this time of year, around St. Patrick's Day, we have an opportunity to attract international attention and focus on this island's global role and potential. In participating in this Ministers play an important and valuable role, which must be acknowledged. The unusual coincidence of St. Patrick's Day and Easter falling in the same week has given rise to the proposal before us. My concern is that not all Ministers may be participating in legitimate representative roles internationally. I wonder if any of them are at a popular race meeting on the neighbouring island.

(Interruptions).

Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin: Clearly, we are in very good hands with the three amigos on the Government Front Bench, the Ministers for Arts, Sport and Tourism; Defence; and Communications, Energy and Natural Resources. I welcome the Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism back to the House. Clearly, he is in much improved health and I extend best wishes to him for the future.

An Ceann Comhairle: Iarraim anois ar an Teachta Ó Braonáin na ceisteanna sin a fhreagairt.

Deputy Séamus Brennan: Many events are held before St. Patrick's Day, the reason many of my colleagues have already left for their destinations.

Deputy Fergus O'Dowd: The Minister cannot join them because his annual budget has been spent.

Deputy Séamus Brennan: St. Patrick's Day presents an ideal opportunity to tell Ireland's investment and tourism stories. Successive Governments have found it valuable for Ministers to travel abroad and keep engagements to tell Ireland's success story.

Deputy Emmet Stagg: Will they also tell St. Patrick's story?

Deputy Michael D. Higgins: Let us not forget the snakes.

An Ceann Comhairle: I must ask again if the proposal that the Dáil shall adjourn on the conclusion of Question Time until 2.30 p.m. on Wednesday, 2 April agreed to. Agreed. Is the proposal for dealing with Nos. 11a and 11b without debate agreed to? Agreed. Is the proposal for dealing with Question Time agreed to? Agreed. I call Deputy Bruton on the Order of Business.

Deputy Richard Bruton: While I have heard of downsizing government, to see two small Ministers, Deputies Brennan and O'Dea, running the Government for the next two weeks is a positive development and I am all in favour of it.

Deputy Michael Ring: The Minister, Deputy O'Dea, will have no time for writing next week.

Deputy Richard Bruton: I note that much of the justification for 34 Ministers travelling abroad is to promote tourism. Is this a case of successful delegation on the part of the Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism, Deputy Brennan, or, having lived like a Saudi prince last year, has his welcome been outlived?

Deputy Séamus Brennan: It is a bit of both.

Deputy Richard Bruton: On a more serious issue, we have heard the Chief Whip and Minister of State, Deputy Tom Kitt, and the Taoiseach thinking aloud on legislation. The Minister of State indicated that changes were possible on penalty points. On the relevant legislation, of the 88,000 who ignored penalty points issued to them last year, only 17% were successfully prosecuted. The vast majority of this group are successfully ignoring penalty points.

On intoxicating liquor legislation, only 14 people have been prosecuted for selling drink to minors and 75% of those issued with fines for drinking in public places ignored them. Of these, only one in 200 was prosecuted for failure to pay the fine. Is it not time for more order and less law and enforcement of the laws in place rather than dreaming up new laws to grab headlines? The House continually passes laws which are not enforced.

On the cutbacks rumoured for later this year——

An Ceann Comhairle: We cannot discuss that issue now, as the Deputy well knows.

Deputy Richard Bruton: What role will the Dáil play in this matter? Will Supplementary Estimates be introduced withdrawing funds or veering them from——

An Ceann Comhairle: The questions are not relevant to the Order of Business.

Deputy Richard Bruton: On another issue, the Government has indicated that annual reductions in carbon emissions of 3% form part of the programme for Government. Today, we learn that the Taoiseach is fighting against the European Commission's proposal to implement less than half this figure by 2020.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: Who said that?

Deputy Richard Bruton: Will we see legislative proposals, as advocated by certain Ministers, to give legal effect to the Government's intentions on energy emissions?

Deputy Séamus Brennan: The intoxicating liquor Bill will be introduced late this year. The second issue raised by the Deputy will be dealt with in the road traffic Bill which is to deal with a number of road safety and road traffic issues arising from the road safety strategy. This legislation is being drafted and should be published in the course of the year. I will have to make inquiries concerning the final issue raised by the Deputy.

Deputy Richard Bruton: The Minister could ask the Minister beside him.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: The Government continues to show support for European Union targets which would bring us to the 3% figure.

Deputy Richard Bruton: That is not what is being said.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: That is the exact position.

An Ceann Comhairle: The issue is not relevant to the Order of Business.

Deputy Richard Bruton: Will the 3% figure be made a legal obligation?

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy and the Minister can have a chat about the issue afterwards.

Deputy Eamon Gilmore: No. 48 on the legislative list is the electoral (amendment) Bill to revise Dáil and European Parliament constituencies in the light of the constituency commission's report. Does the Government intend to legislate for the implementation of the published report?

Deputy Séamus Brennan: I understand the legislation will be published in the next session.

Deputy Eamon Gilmore: I have seen a copy of a communication issued by Fianna Fáil Deputy Michael Kennedy to one of his constituents in respect of the revision of the Dublin North constituency. Deputy Kennedy states that if Fine Gael and the Labour Party kick up a fuss, Fianna Fáil will be willing to refer the report of the constituency commission back to it for review.

Deputy Kieran O'Donnell: Was that a leaflet drop?

Deputy Fergus O'Dowd: G. V. set him up.

Deputy Eamon Gilmore: The communication continues: "If Enda Kenny and Eamon Gilmore came out strongly against it, I am certain Bertie Ahern would gladly refer the proposals back."

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Kennedy's correspondence and travails are not relevant to the Order of Business.

Deputy Emmet Stagg: The issue is related to legislation.

Deputy Eamon Gilmore: I want to know if Deputy Kennedy's sentiments reflect Government thinking.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputies should have a chat about it.

A Deputy: It is an important matter.

An Ceann Comhairle: It may be but the House cannot discuss it now.

Deputy Eamon Gilmore: I would like to know what the Government would like me to kick up a fuss about. If I kick up a fuss about something, will the Government change it? Deputy Kennedy has indicated the report will be referred back to the constituency commission if Deputy Kenny and I kick up sufficient fuss about it. Is that the position?

An Ceann Comhairle: There is only one way of finding out.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: As the Ceann Comhairle will agree, the answer to that question will be interesting. On a serious matter——

Deputy Michael Ahern: That would be a change.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: ——I would like to give the Ministers who remain an opportunity to make a landmark decision in respect of organised crime, an issue I have raised previously. The Taoiseach and the Tánaiste indicated that legislation on this matter would be brought forward. Unfortunately, organised crime is accelerating rather than declining. Given the seriousness of the issue, will the Minister indicate whether the criminal justice confiscation orders Bill and the extradition Bill are likely to be introduced as a matter of urgency to focus the attention of the House on an issue being talked about by everybody outside?

Deputy Séamus Brennan: I think the Deputy is talking about the criminal justice miscellaneous provisions Bill, which is due to be published in mid-2008. The heads of the Bill have been approved by the Government. It was necessary to undertake a restructuring of this Bill to make provision for other matters and requirements, many of which the Deputy has mentioned, and to take a broader view.

Deputy Seymour Crawford: In February last year the Minister for Health and Children guaranteed that she would bring a nursing home support Bill before the House and that it would be dealt with before Christmas. She then promised it would be dealt with this session. We are now in the dying hours of this session and there is no sign of that Bill. Can the Minister tell us when that Bill will be brought forward and if it has been approved by the Cabinet because it is causing serious problems for people?

In the same context, with the type of information we are getting from the Health Service Executive, and the Minister, when will the health information Bill be introduced to control the type of information we are getting in terms of whether it is the truth?

Deputy Séamus Brennan: The health (long-term residential care) services Bill will be published next session. The heads of the Bill have been approved by the Government. As the Deputy is aware, it is complex legislation but it will be ready during the next session.

Deputy Richard Bruton: Has it been through the Attorney General's office?

Deputy Michael D. Higgins: I want to clarify something about forthcoming legislation. I asked the Taoiseach more than once whether it was the Government's intention to implement the promise in the White Paper on foreign policy to ratify the United Nations convention against all corruption. My best recollection is that the Taoiseach said the two Bills for which the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform is the lead Department would be ready and therefore Ireland would be in a position to ratify the convention. On the pink list of legislation, No. 15 refers to the prevention of corruption amendment Bill, which enables the

Government to sign up to the guidelines of the OECD on corruption but does not enable the convention to be ratified. I ask the question I asked in the previous session. Is it the Government's intention to ratify the United Nations convention against all corruption as promised in the Government White Paper on foreign policy and, if so, when?

Deputy Séamus Brennan: I take the point the Deputy makes about ratification. The publication date I have is next session, the middle of April. That is the prevention of corruption amendment Bill, with 23 heads. As to the ratification, I will have to get more information from the Deputy on that.

Deputy Michael D. Higgins: To be of assistance to the Minister, I believe the Taoiseach inadvertently misled the Dáil regarding ratification of the UN convention against corruption. In previous answers he said there were two Bills for which the lead responsibility was the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform, which would enable the convention to be ratified. The Minister has just referred to the publication of the prevention of corruption amendment Bill, which was promised for this session but will be brought forward next session. However, that Bill is not sufficient to ratify the UN convention. I need to establish this as a fact. The non-governmental organisations are running a campaign on this issue; I ran a campaign on it about two years ago. The Taoiseach should either clarify what I believe he told the Dáil — if I am wrong I will be glad to hear it — and what the Minister has just said. I am simply saying that the prevention of corruption amendment Bill facilitates signing up to the OECD guidelines. It does not enable ratification to take place. What is contained in the White Paper is simple; I understand it is also in the Government programme. It states that the Government will ratify the United Nations convention against all corruption. Will it ratify the convention and, if so, when will it happen? When will the two Bills that have been lingering in the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform be ready? Will it be ratified next session?

An Ceann Comhairle: Can the Minister assist in this matter?

Deputy Séamus Brennan: The Deputy is correct. There are two Bills. The first one is the Criminal Justice (Mutual Assistance) Bill, which completed Committee Stage in the Dáil on 21 January. That is one of the Bills to which the Deputy refers. That Bill will enact certain of these necessary measures. The remaining requirements will be dealt with in the Bill I referred to earlier, the prevention of corruption amendment Bill, which is at an advanced stage of preparation and will be published in the middle of the next session. I understand both of those Bills are required to ratify the convention.

Deputy Michael D. Higgins: Will we then ratify the convention or signing up to the OECD guidelines, or both?

Deputy Séamus Brennan: I will have to clarify that. I understand that the passing of both those Bills ratifies the convention but I will have to check that.

Deputy Michael D. Higgins: I thank the Minister.

Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin: Ag beagnach deireadh Seachtain na Gaeilge, ba mhaith liom ceist a chur faoin teanga. We are almost at the end of Seachtain na Gaeilge. In the course of this week why did we not facilitate, as happened previously, a specific debate on the Irish language? Will that be facilitated on the resumption of the Dáil post Easter? I appeal to members of goodwill within the Government parties to facilitate an opportunity that is not designed to allow those who have great competency and fluency to demonstrate their skills but

[Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin.]

one that would allow each of us to participate out of goodwill in trying to identify the measures and new usage we can employ here to encourage a greater national use of our first language. Ba mhaith liom mo chomhgairdeas a gabháil leis an Ceann Comhairle as an méid Gaeilge atá in úsáid aige ón chathaoir.

An Ceann Comhairle: Go raibh míle maith agat a Theachta, ach níl sin in ord.

Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin: Will such a debate be facilitated post the resumption? Surely we can——

An Ceann Comhairle: It is a matter for the Whips.

Deputy Séamus Brennan: It will be facilitated.

An Ceann Comhairle: Yes, it will be facilitated.

Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin: It will be facilitated. Tá sin i bhfad níos fearr.

An Ceann Comhairle: Tá sé i bhfad níos fearr, ach níl sé in ord.

Deputy Tom Hayes: Will the Minister indicate if amended legislation on broadband is proposed? I ask the question because there is a crisis in many small towns and villages throughout the country——

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: Hear, hear.

Deputy Tom Hayes: ——regarding the issue of broadband. I have in my possession letters from four companies in my constituency that will move jobs totalling 150 in the next few months if broadband is not provided in their local villages. We have had commitments and statements but there has not been any movement on this issue.

An Ceann Comhairle: That is not in order.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: It is in order.

An Ceann Comhairle: Not at all.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: It is.

An Ceann Comhairle: I will decide what is in order. That is why I am here.

Deputy Tom Hayes: If legislation is not proposed I ask that time be set aside when the Dáil returns to discuss this important issue.

An Ceann Comhairle: That is a matter for the Whips.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: The Minister wants to answer the question.

Deputy Tom Hayes: I want to ask about amending legislation also.

An Ceann Comhairle: There is no legislation promised in this area.

Deputy Séamus Brennan: There is no legislation promised. Legislation related to ComReg was brought forward earlier last year which dealt with a number of the issues the Deputy raised.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: So nothing will happen. Lethargy.

Deputy Jan O'Sullivan: I want to ask about the adoption Bill to bring into force the convention on inter-country adoption. It is on the pink list which means it should be published this term. That Bill has been in the pipeline for the past ten years. Will it be published before the start of the next term?

Deputy Séamus Brennan: I understand it will be published next session.

Deputy Joan Burton: The Dublin transport authority Bill has been promised for a long time. Dublin buses, particularly those travelling from Swords into Dublin, are precluded from using the port tunnel, which would save half an hour's journey time. Without a Dublin transport authority Bill it appears only private bus operators will be allowed use the Dublin port tunnel and Dublin Bus buses such as the No. 40 bus from Swords will be banned from using the tunnel.

An Ceann Comhairle: We cannot discuss the No. 40 bus now.

Deputy Joan Burton: Apparently we need clarification as to whether Dublin Bus can use——

An Ceann Comhairle: On the legislation only.

Deputy Joan Burton: The port tunnel was paid for with tens of millions of euro of taxpayers' funds.

An Ceann Comhairle: I know.

Deputy Joan Burton: The main bus company for the city is Dublin Bus but it cannot use the port tunnel and it is an extra three quarters of an hour from Swords on a bad day's travel.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy cannot raise this on the Order of Business.

Deputy Joan Burton: It takes half an hour on a good day.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy cannot raise this on the Order of Business.

Deputy Joan Burton: We are barring Dublin Bus customers from using the Dublin Port tunnel.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy cannot raise this on the Order of Business. I call the Minister to respond on transport legislation.

Deputy Séamus Brennan: The Dublin transport authority Bill will be going to Government in early April and published shortly thereafter.

An Ceann Comhairle: I call Deputy Timmins.

Deputy Joan Burton: I have a second Bill I want to raise. I have asked about it before and I am minding it like a baby because people are waiting on it. Where is the property management services agency Bill to deal with management companies?

Deputies: Hear, hear.

Deputy Joan Burton: Tens of thousands of young people have bought homes but they are in a legal limbo regarding the management of their properties. The Government keeps promising but does nothing. Those three lads on the front bench — the Minister for Arts, Sport and

[Deputy Joan Burton.]

Tourism, Deputy Brennan, the Minister for Defence, Deputy O'Dea and the Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources, Deputy Ryan — could get up and do something about it, even if they are the only three Cabinet members left in the country.

Deputy Emmet Stagg: It is not as if they did not have the chance to do so.

Deputy Willie O'Dea: We have had more of a chance than the Deputy.

Deputy Séamus Brennan: The property services regulatory authority Bill will be published later this year.

Deputy Emmet Stagg: It was promised for January 2008.

Deputy Billy Timmins: I do not know if the Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism saw the documentary, “Fairytale of Kathmandu”, during the week but it threw up some disturbing issues. One of these was the wider issue of the sexual exploitation of children in underdeveloped countries.

An Ceann Comhairle: Is the Deputy going to ask a question on legislation?

Deputy Billy Timmins: I will, if the Ceann Comhairle gives me the opportunity.

An Ceann Comhairle: I will.

Deputy Billy Timmins: I am struck by the reluctance of modern Ireland — perhaps epitomised by the Ceann Comhairle — to put the head above the parapet and seek a discussion on this issue, lest we be accused of homophobia.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy must ask a question on legislation.

Deputy Billy Timmins: In conjunction with the Chief Whip, will time be given in the next session to debate the sexual exploitation of children, particularly in underdeveloped countries? It is an exploitation that it is assisted by many people who leave these shores on a weekly basis.

An Ceann Comhairle: That is a matter for the Whips and we cannot deal with it on the Order of Business.

Deputy Séamus Brennan: The Whips can discuss it.

Deputy Michael Ring: Two weeks ago a constituent of mine was killed on a railway crossing. I note the Order Paper includes the European Communities (Railway Safety) Regulations 2008. There are 230 railway crossings across the country. It is a health and safety issue. Families are seeking the erection of automatic barriers and the installation of flashing lights at these crossings. If not, others will be killed on them.

An Ceann Comhairle: Does the Deputy have a question on legislation?

Deputy Michael Ring: Is the installation of these safety devices to protect people's lives part of the EU regulation? Last fortnight, a life was lost on one of the 230 level crossings. We do not want any more lives lost on these crossings. We want Irish Rail to provide for the installation of automatic barriers and flashing lights.

An Ceann Comhairle: This concerns secondary legislation and cannot be raised on the Order of Business.

Deputy Séamus Brennan: This is secondary legislation concerning EU regulations. I will ask the Minister for Transport to revert to the Deputy.

Deputy Jimmy Deenihan: Will the Minister facilitate a debate on Chad and concerns over the UN mission there when the Dáil resumes?

An Ceann Comhairle: That is not in order, Deputy.

Deputy Paul Kehoe: Why is the Minister for Defence, Deputy O'Dea, nodding his head?

Deputy Jimmy Deenihan: We have been waiting some time for the Irish sports council (amendment) Bill, one area of the Minister's responsibility. As the Bill has not been published, the work of the Irish Institute of Sport is being held back and it is not as effective as it would like. When will the Minister introduce the Bill to the House?

Deputy Séamus Brennan: I am on Question Time today, so I will be able to expand on the legislation. There are complications to do with the establishment of subsidiaries.

The Whips are well disposed to a debate on the Chad mission.

Deputy Joe Costello: What is the progress of the national monuments Bill, which is the responsibility of the Minister? Designated national monuments are going to wrack and ruin because of the lack of adequate and modernised legislation in this area.

What is the position of the legislation, which may be relevant to the House at times, to deal with noise pollution? Perhaps that will be introduced in the next session?

Deputy Séamus Brennan: The national monuments Bill will be published in 2009. The heads of the Bill were approved by the Government in October 2001.

The noise Bill will bring into effect comprehensive legislation to address noise pollution. I do not have a date for its publication, so I will revert to the Deputy on it.

Deputy Eamon Gilmore: I would not be surprised if we did not have that Bill by 2009.

Cluster Munitions Bill 2008: First Stage.

Deputy Billy Timmins: I move:

That leave be granted to introduce a Bill entitled an Act to prohibit the trade in cluster munitions and to provide for connected matters.

An Ceann Comhairle: Is the Bill opposed?

Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach (Deputy Tom Kitt): No.

Question put and agreed to.

An Ceann Comhairle: Since this is a Private Members' Bill, Second Stage must, under Standing Orders, be taken in Private Members' time.

Deputy Billy Timmins: I move: "That the Bill be taken in Private Members' time."

Question put and agreed to.

Membership of Committees: Motion.

Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach (Deputy Tom Kitt): I move:

That Deputy Noel O' Flynn be discharged from the Select Committee on Social and Family Affairs and that Deputy Michael McGrath be appointed in substitution for him.

That Deputy Michael McGrath be discharged from the Joint Committee on European Scrutiny and that Deputy Noel O' Flynn be appointed in substitution for him.

Question put and agreed to.

Orders of Reference of Committees: Motion.

Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach (Deputy Tom Kitt): I move:

That Dáil Éireann, notwithstanding the Order of 22 November 2007, requesting that the Joint Committee on the Constitutional Amendment on Children examine the Twenty-Eighth Amendment of the Constitution Bill 2007 and consider the text set out in the Schedule to that Bill with regard to the matters set out in the Orders of Reference of the Joint Committee, and to report back to each House with recommendations in a final report four months from the date of establishment, now requests the Joint Committee to report back not later than 30 November 2008, and paragraph (5) of the Orders of Reference shall be substituted by the following:

'The Joint Committee shall have the powers defined in Standing Orders 83 (1) to (9) inclusive and 93(2)'.

Question put and agreed to.

Student Support Bill 2008: Second Stage (Resumed).

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

An Ceann Comhairle: I call on Deputy Connaughton who has 13 minutes, an unlucky number for some.

Deputy Paul Connaughton: It might be long enough.

This necessary Bill has many aspects. Every Member knows matters dealing with student grants and fees are extraordinarily important. While fees for third level education were abolished some time ago, I believe they should not be reintroduced. The abolition of third level fees has ensured we get the best possible benefit from our education programmes. Down through the years, all Governments have taken education seriously even though there are certain aspects to it with which this Government has failed miserably.

I have considerable experience of third level education both as a parent and a public representative. Many economists argue that not having third level fees does not make good economics. Unless there was a mechanism where the cut-off point for eligibility for fees exemption was extremely high, there would be fewer attending third level colleges. I accept there are no immediate plans to reintroduce third level fees, but if they were it would be a retrograde step of mammoth proportions. While family sizes may be getting smaller, for parents to put three or four children through third level college with maintenance and fees, they would need a money-making machine inside the door of the house.

An Ceann Comhairle: They might need one outside the door too.

Deputy Paul Connaughton: Yes, a Cheann Comhairle, as indeed I am sure you know.

Economists have a particular way of looking at matters. I want to ensure young boys and girls who have the ability and desire to get to third level, no matter what route they take, have the opportunity to do so. One of the great achievements of all Governments here is the remarkable link between students who may not have taken their studies too seriously or, for whatever reason, did not shine——

An Ceann Comhairle: How seriously do they have to be taken?

Deputy Paul Connaughton: The Ceann Comhairle is in a good mood today.

An Ceann Comhairle: It must be the stimulating speech the Deputy is making.

Deputy Tom Hayes: He knows there are ten races in Cheltenham today.

Deputy Seán Haughey: The Ceann Comhairle should tread carefully.

An Ceann Comhairle: That might be a reason for feeling differently.

Deputy Paul Connaughton: I am glad to see this phenomenon is not only in my house.

The system has now reached the point at which it is possible for young people who want to go forward to go all the way to postgraduate courses at university by availing of PLC courses and so on, irrespective of where they start from. I know what I am talking about. It is a credit to everybody concerned that the possibility is there for people who are prepared to persevere.

To return to the Bill before us, I have no objection to rejigging the administrative aspects of the disbursement of third level grants. As a public representative I have dealt with the VEC in Galway and Galway County Council for many years, and I have never found them to be other than co-operative and extremely interested in what they are doing. However, there are a few aspects I am concerned about. Over the years I have not been able to understand why things could not be done differently from an administrative point of view. I hope this will change under the new system. I notice that the academic year 2008-09 will not be affected by the changes in the Bill and the county councils will still deal with the universities and the VECs with the ITs.

One of the things I cannot understand — this Minister stands indicted in this area as well as everyone else — is why the application forms cannot be posted out in the early part of the year, around March or April, to allow students to apply for grant aid. This would ensure that the administrative problems associated with the arrival of thousands of applications do not occur at a crucial point in the months of August and September, when the grants should be made available. Last year the current Minister for Education and Science gave an undertaking in the House that the applications would be out much earlier last year than any other year, but this did not happen. The ruaille buaille in the local authorities and the VECs was the same as ever when they received large volumes of applications at once, and they found it impossible to have the approvals ready by the time the colleges opened. Whatever about the new legislation, I hope this will not happen this year. I can see no administrative reason for it. I am not involved in that side of it now but I assume the computer systems can cope with earlier applications. We have so many computers talking to each other nowadays that I cannot for the life of me imagine why it cannot be done.

The means test income limit is another area of concern. I do not have time to develop this point but I could talk about it all day. I do not think that €38,675 between two parents is a sufficiently high cut-off point for full grant eligibility. We all know about the graduation that

[Deputy Paul Connaughton.]

is down the line, although I do not have time to talk about that. An income of slightly more than €38,000 is very small if both parents are working, as it corresponds to €19,000 each, which is just above the social welfare limit. If there are two or three children living in a household with an income of €45,000 or €50,000 they would not get full grants but only partial grants. On an income that is only slightly higher again, all the children will receive is the amount of the registration fee. This means untold misery for many families. They are not even the new poor. At that income level, they are poor anyway. They must pay for childminding, the mortgage and so on, and then they are hit with this at a sensitive stage.

I am not talking about tricking around with 5% or similar. The figure needs to be substantially increased. If it is not, there will be two main effects. People who are academically capable of going on to higher education will be prevented from doing so and, worse than that, youngsters will be pressurised into taking jobs. When young people start to work in supermarkets and such places, they achieve a level of independence they should not have. The minute they get money in their pockets they think the world is at their feet and it is only ten years later, when they have missed their educational chance, that they see it was the wrong decision to make. They do not know this when they make the decision. This is why the income limit of €38,675 needs to be substantially increased. The full grant is €3,420 per student. One would imagine that should be increased, although I know the State does not have infinite resources. However, if more people in the category I am talking about could get the full grant it would represent substantial progress.

I understand the Bill contains provisions for an appeals mechanism. I often experienced clashes of interpretation between the local authority and the Department and have spent many an hour on the phone with Galway County Council and then with the Department attempting to clarify what is or is not accepted as income. I did not get an answer most of the time because one of these would start playing the other off. The only people to lose at the finish were the students. I always thought the VEC and the county council were just agents for the Department.

I hope the appeals mechanism in the Bill will allow a parent or mature student to argue his or her case to somebody who can make a decision on behalf of the local administering body, henceforth the VEC, and the Department. That person or persons, whoever they are, will be very busy if the appeals mechanism is what it should be.

Everything should be done for people who wish to re-enter the education system, including single mothers, people over 23 who have been employed, and so on. Whatever else we achieve through this Bill, measures to get people back into education will pay for themselves a thousand times over.

Deputy Charlie O'Connor: I welcome the opportunity to make my brief contribution to this important debate. I am glad to note that my colleagues across the floor are in good form, presumably because of the short holiday we are going to enjoy. I intend to spend St. Patrick's Day in Tallaght, in case anybody is looking for me. I was interested to hear from the Dominican order this morning that the next time St. Patrick's Day falls during Holy Week will be 2160. I am just trying to be helpful and hope people will mark this in their diaries.

Deputy Seán Haughey: This is very relevant.

Deputy Charlie O'Connor: Education has been the main theme this week and the Acting Chairman, Deputy Kathleen Lynch, was kind to me last night during Private Members' business when I spoke of a school in my area. It is important that I support educational facilities in my region and I made the point, as did my colleagues, that there is an accommodation crisis in the

Holy Rosary national school, Ballycragh. The Minister of State, Deputy Haughey, is here and I am anxious to stress to him that progress must be made on this matter.

I listened carefully to many of the contributions on the Student Support Bill and I think it will be important legislation. I am happy to see colleagues from all parties welcoming it and I hope it will pass through the Dáil easily. Many of the contributions have been very positive. Most Deputies have mentioned their constituencies and some have mentioned every street in their constituencies so I feel free to mention Tallaght a few times. I may also mention Firhouse, Greenhills, Templeogue, Brittas and Bohernabreena.

The purpose of this Bill is to provide for a unified grant payment scheme to replace the four existing schemes. It aims to place all student support schemes on a statutory footing for the first time and provides for awarding authorities to administer student grants in line with the provisions of the Bill. We should support this because all of us regularly see cases that relate to this Bill's remit in the course of our political business. At the eight clinics I hold throughout my constituency every week, but particularly at certain times of year, people come to me with concerns relating to the higher education grants scheme. My colleague, Deputy Cyprian Brady, also sees many such issues in his constituency.

There is always a challenge to ensure young people get places in third level education and we must be particularly active in this regard. Every constituency faces challenges but some, including Dublin South-West and other Dublin constituencies, need hard work from Deputies to ensure people get the opportunity to attend university.

I have told the Minister and Minister of State on a number of occasions that the problems many students and parents bring to us could be dealt with easily. One issue facing young people is that of third level places that are not available in the State and that force them to go abroad, particularly the UK. The Department should examine how such courses could be provided here because many Deputies meet young people who make this point every summer.

The Department faces a difficulty in dealing with returning emigrants. We have encouraged people and families to return to Ireland for many reasons, such as employment opportunities, but often those who return and wish to access third level education experience difficulties. The Department insists that such people must spend three years in the country before making an application but I feel we should approach this in a more commonsense way. The return of emigrants was formerly an issue that only affected the west but it now happens all over the country and I have recently seen many such cases in the Dublin region. The Department should examine this matter.

I am glad this Bill is before us because it gives us the opportunity to point out that students, particularly those who wish to access grants, should have as much support as possible. We must ensure that information is easily available. I was at a function for the opening of a citizens information centre, CIC, with the former Taoiseach, Mr. Garrett FitzGerald, not in Tallaght but in Crumlin, where I am from, and he made the point that many of the queries we get relate to the fact that the system does not work. There have been many improvements in this regard. I do not wish to embarrass the Minister of State but I have often said the Department of Social and Family Affairs is particularly good at disseminating information. There has also been much progress and reform in this regard in the Department of Education and Science. We must take every opportunity to point out that systems should be easy to access and that clients should be the focus of all schemes. People should be able to get information as easily and quickly as possible.

I was on a local authority in south Dublin from 1991 and I do not remember when I had to give up that position. I lament the fact that I had to leave the local authority and, as Deputy Tom Hayes will appreciate, most of the queries I receive still relate to local authority matters.

[Deputy Charlie O'Connor.]

However, time moves on and I am happy to be a TD. Local authorities and vocational education committees, VECs, have done a good job. I was a member of the County Dublin VEC from 1985 to 1991. This Bill attempts to bring about a tighter focus and I feel it will be supported because there is an issue relating to the ease with which students can access information.

I am bound to mention Tallaght in a debate like this. During the election a man told me that I am not really from Tallaght and I agreed. He asked how long I have lived in the area and I told him I have been there for 40 years. He responded "that is not long, is it?". The Tallaght I moved to needed many facilities, including educational facilities. While I was on the VEC I became a member, in 1990-91, of the interim board of the institute of technology, now known as the Institute of Technology, Tallaght, ITT, Dublin. This institution has a significant reputation nationally and I am glad progress has been made in this regard over the years.

Students at ITT come from many places and we tried to ensure as many people as possible, particularly local students, could access services and courses. I am glad to note that 2,400 full-time students and 1,400 part-time students were registered there last year. The Institute of Technology, Tallaght, has become a focus of attention in my town. I often point out that Tallaght is a city in all but name, with everything one would expect in a major centre of population. The institute of technology is part of local life and provides excellent educational facilities. I am glad that many Ministers and political personalities have visited the Institute of Technology, Tallaght, in recent times. As a local Deputy I feel I should highlight the importance of this college at every opportunity. I will not enter the argument on university status, as some colleagues do, because this is a matter for the future. I am proud of ITT and feel it is important that as many local people as possible can access its services. This is a relevant point to make in light of this Bill. Third level institutions and colleges around the country also attract people from my constituency. Many students from the country, including Tipperary and Cork, attend Tallaght IT and enjoy the facilities as well as the excellent classes. There is an issue about ensuring that Dublin South-West and every other constituency has access to education. I notice that the *Sunday Independent* listed me recently as having a university degree. I will out myself. I did not go to university. I attended school locally at Clarendon Street, the Christian Brothers in Synge Street and in Drimnagh. Also I did many part-time evening courses in industrial relations and public relations, although that does not show.

Deputy Tom Hayes: We know now where the Deputy got it.

Deputy Charlie O'Connor: I always had a very strong commitment to further education but I did not quite make it to university. I have met many people recently who have found themselves in the same situation and who had an opportunity to return to education. In that regard I particularly applaud the efforts of Trinity College on its access programme, the TAP, which has taken students from many places, including the Dublin region and Tallaght, and given them the opportunity to attend courses which they would not otherwise have undertaken. Through that system, many people have accessed university courses. In case Deputy Tom Hayes is interested I have just found that there is one student in Tallaght IT from County Tipperary. I must try to find him some day.

Deputy Tom Hayes: I thank the Deputy for the information. I would not even get that information in reply to a parliamentary question.

Deputy Charlie O'Connor: There is also one student from County Cork. I hope more students will come from the country and that the facilities and the courses in Tallaght IT will continue to develop.

I wish to speak about access to third level education. I am not saying my constituency is any more disadvantaged than elsewhere. Over the years, the so-called County Dublin area of need has been designated as far as my county is concerned in a number of areas, in a number of places in Tallaght west and also in Clondalkin. My colleague, Deputy John Curran, would want me to make that point. Other colleagues, including Deputy Cyprian Brady who is sitting beside me, will also make that point. We must always strive to ensure in terms of social inclusion that young people from so-called disadvantaged backgrounds get as many educational opportunities as possible.

The Taoiseach used to say, and still does, that at a time when all boats are rising we must make sure the little boats keep rising. At a time when all boats are under pressure — there is a touch of that in the economy at present — we must absolutely ensure that the small boats continue to rise. There is a whole range of issues relating to social inclusion in that regard. Certainly, so far as access to education is concerned there are particular challenges.

I am very proud of all the schools in my constituency. I am glad that many of them have made particular progress during the past ten, 15 and 20 years. Last week I attended a celebration with the Minister for Education and Science, Deputy Hanafin, in St. MacDara's Community College, which takes students from different areas, including Crumlin, Drimnagh and many parts of Tallaght. It was amazing to walk up the corridor and see commemorations of events over recent years where students from all backgrounds and areas did well not only in the college but made progress in later life. I do not want to make too much of a social comment in this regard, but there was a time in certain areas where certain skills and certain trades were not produced. I do not wish to speak about myself but somebody told me recently that as far as he or she knows — I was reared in Crumlin — there has not been a strong stream of Dáil Deputies coming from that area. I do not say that in any flippant way. It is important that every area has a chance in that regard. It has often been said to me that we have not had any judges yet from Crumlin, Drimnagh or Tallaght. I am not sure about the position in Drumcondra. I make that point in terms of access to education. That has to be the goal. I am sure the Minister of State, Deputy Haughey, will agree that we are all entitled to look forward to the day when people from every region in the country, including every part of the Dublin region, will be properly educated. I am a Dubliner and as I do not have any country cousins I cannot speak too much about the country. People should be able to complete their education and attend university. People should be able to compete for all those jobs. Whether they want to be judges, politicians, film stars or whatever there should not be a bar so far as where one has come from is concerned. That is very much about educational advantage and disadvantage and the progress that should be made in that regard.

There is a whole range of issues relating to student support that needs to be emphasised. All the colleges, including Tallaght IT, take particular care to ensure that students from disadvantaged backgrounds, students with disabilities and mature students who did not have that chance previously, are more represented. While there has been progress in that regard there is, as stated a few years, "a lot done, more to do". That is certainly true.

I referred earlier to the Trinity access programme and commend it. Much progress can be made throughout the country with regard to the access programme. Tallaght IT is committed to encouraging the participation of people from local disadvantaged backgrounds but also from other areas. It is not merely about getting them into college but supporting them during their time in college. In 2007-08, 53% of first year students attending Tallaght IT were drawn from those areas where traditionally there was a low turn out. The institute has a number of programmes and support schemes in place to enhance their participation.

[Deputy Charlie O'Connor.]

The theme of my contribution is that we have to continue to strive for those areas of disadvantage. There will always be areas throughout the country and in the Dublin region where people will have easy access to education. There has to be a concentration on those areas where there is still much to do, despite the progress. I can be proud of the progress in that regard in my constituency but everyone else can speak about their own areas. That is what we must continue to do. Those people are entitled to our support.

I look forward to supporting the Bill. I thank the Acting Chairman for her courtesy and wish her a happy St. Patrick's Day.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Kathleen Lynch): I thank the Deputy.

Deputy Tom Hayes: I welcome the opportunity to speak on the Student Support Bill. Our attitude to education is one thing that unifies this House. It goes back many years, with successive Ministers with responsibility for education who have made various changes to create what is an education system of which we are proud. Like anything, it needs alteration as time goes by. Varying circumstances lead to us implementing changes.

The Student Support Bill is about helping students pass through college and deal with the issues that affect them in college years. It is a major transition for anyone who is living in a protected environment in an economy that is doing well to leave home in a rural area and move to universities in the cities to take up a different life, where they are exposed to facets of modern life such as drugs and drink. These are in the world and it is important to discuss the lives of students.

We are very proud of our education system, which has helped the Celtic tiger. We refer to managing the economy and the business of running the country but the reality is that our education system played a major part in the type of graduates that emerged, particularly from UL, which was granted university status some years ago. Some of the courses offered there are much sought after in the business world in Ireland and abroad. This has attracted a major amount of industry to Ireland and I commend this.

I wish to refer to many aspects of this Bill and many issues that affect students. I feel strongly about the acquisition of computers for students. A computer is an essential part of any student's life. Irish banks offer students overdrafts and I question the wisdom of this. Why do banks encourage students to have interest-free overdrafts for a number of years? I challenge the banks to grant aid or give students a laptop. It would be a far better gesture than giving an overdraft that could be spent on parties. It must be paid back but it is given interest free. I challenge the banks to help students who are worse off and need computers. If the banks do not do it, the Department should intervene when it is allocating grants to allow for the purchase of computers.

As a representative of a rural constituency with no third level institution apart from the Tipperary Rural and Business Development Institute, TRBDI, I know there is particular pressure on the parents who must send their children to college and pay for rent or accommodation compared to those living in cities such as Dublin or Cork. It is a major cost for parents who must fork out large sums every week for student accommodation. There should be a tax break. I know people with three children in college who find it extremely difficult. They must remortgage their house, take out loans or use their savings. Having to pay for accommodation during the week, as well as providing it at home during the weekend, is grossly unfair. Of all the matters examined in education, this has not been considered. There should be a tax break for these people. I know of many instances of this in my constituency.

The grant application form should be on-line. I hope this will be realised in the Bill. Everything is on-line, including applications for passports, driving licences and car tax. Students who are so competent with computers should be given access to applications on-line.

The VECs and councils implement these grants. As public representatives we meet those on the verges, particularly the self-employed who cannot get grants. The process has been greatly streamlined and VECs and local authorities should be commended for very good work.

When people go from a safe and protected environment into the world of education, there is not enough guidance or help for students managing their finances. Many end up in debt or borrow money from other students or brothers and sisters. Some receive money from home, others receive grants and some work at weekends. At that point in their lives, a certain number of students need help and support in managing their finances. They may come from homes with little expertise at managing finances so the students have no training. There is a back-up role for student unions or universities to help students to manage their finances. We should encourage this when referring to student support. We should consider that for this Bill. It would be money wisely invested and would provide a back-up in the long term. Whether these people finish college, it would be beneficial if they were given guidance. Will the Minister of State consider the issues of finance management and computers? There is a new category of poor person in terms of those who send their children to college and I urge that everything possible be done for them. In that regard, the Bill is welcome and timely.

Last week I was involved in the decision of my parliamentary party' to support university status for Waterford Institute of Technology because, given the impact of the University of Limerick on the mid-west, it would be good for the south east. As we develop universities, Waterford Institute of Technology should have such status. I hope the Government will be able to see its way towards supporting this call.

There are many proposals before the Department regarding the Tipperary Rural and Business Development Institute, now known as the Tipperary Institute, which has a significant future and for which land is ready at Ballingarrane, just outside Clonmel. I would like the institute to be developed because not enough students attend it. Deputy O'Connor referred to the numbers attending the Institute of Technology Tallaght. We must all look after our own corner; therefore, I ask the Department to consider the Tipperary Institute. As the economy changes and we move away from dependence on the building industry, many rural businesses have the potential to be developed and have a new role, particularly given the World Trade Organisation negotiations. Considerable changes are in store for rural Ireland and, as such, County Tipperary needs bodies such as the business institutes in Thurles and Clonmel.

I thank the Acting Chairman for the opportunity to say these few words on what is an important Bill. We are proud of developments in the education sector. Students from my locality are touring the Houses. I do not know whether they are present, but I welcome the students from Cashel community school.

Deputy Cyprian Brady: I welcome the opportunity to discuss this Bill which is relatively short but, in terms of future progress, important to our localities and the country. Its purpose is to provide for the making of grants to enable students to attend higher and further education courses. Its main objective is to create a more coherent system for grant administration. Currently, there are four means-tested schemes. I compare this matter to the need for a treaty on an expanded European Union, as the education grants system has expanded significantly and our population of young people has increased dramatically during the years. Given these factors, streamlining the system is timely. The higher education grants scheme is one of the four schemes and administered by local authorities. In some cases, implementing it has proved

[Deputy Cyprian Brady.]

difficult and has led to a number of issues. The remaining schemes are administrative and managed by the vocational education committees.

The Bill will enable the development of an awards system to deliver grants on time to those who need them most. As public representatives, we have all encountered particular higher education grant cases that revolved around misunderstandings on the part of officials or mistakes on the part of applicants. When the time comes to apply for grants, there are always issues. Given that grants could make the difference between an individual attending or not attending a third level or further education course, their importance cannot be underestimated. The Bill provides for the streamlining of all grants in order that the payment of maintenance grants will be provided for through a unified grants payment scheme under the umbrella of the VECs, an issue I will address shortly. It will also reduce the number of grant awarding authorities from 66 to 33, an amazing streamlining of the system, improve efficiency and consistency and ensure those who apply for grants will be considered within appropriate timeframes and those who are eligible will receive payments promptly. The granting of funds under the schemes can make the difference between a person continuing his or her education or losing out, in some cases due to administrative failures.

The Bill will introduce service level improvements, including guaranteed timeframes for more timely payment of grants and more efficient arrangements for handling applications, making it easier to apply and for grants to be paid. The Bill will make a significant contribution to promoting greater equity of access to further and higher education, as alluded to by previous speakers. The student grant schemes are central to our national strategy for equity of access and support more than 56,000 students attending further and higher education courses. Eligible students attending approved full-time third level courses or approved PLC courses who satisfy the prescribed conditions of the schemes in respect of age, residence, nationality, means and previous academic attainment are awarded grants. Given the increase in numbers in the past 15 to 20 years and the fact that so many are in a position to continue on to further education courses, we need a scheme and framework that can cater for the numbers involved and supply a service to which people are entitled to expect.

Student grants represent an important strategic investment in people. Personal wealth should not be a barrier to education. The House has often debated how people are included in or excluded from access to education. In my short time in the House I have noticed that we spend much time discussing education matters, a significant area for all Deputies. Given that we have taken considerable strides forward, some of the comments from the other side of the House amaze me because they are always negative. During this discussion the funding of education, in particular, has been raised. The majority of Deputies have gone through the education system. When I was in school, there were raffles and sales of work. These fund-raising functions were organised to raise funds for charities or specific items for the school and are not a new phenomenon. Having listened to some of the comments made, one would imagine that no progress has been made, but we should accept that considerable strides forward have been taken and move on. There will always be areas in need of further investment and in respect of which improvements can be made.

The only education providers in the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s were the religious orders. There was no investment in education, in either buildings or people, and this continued under successive Governments for some time. Huge strides forward then were made in respect of how education is considered and the importance of education in providing choices for people entering their early teens and young adulthood.

This links into the improvements that have been made in adult education in respect of giving people a second chance. The National College of Ireland is one of the institutions located in

my constituency and it has proved to be a huge success there. As one of its philosophies, it has the concept of life long learning, that is, from birth to death one is learning continually. People should be given an opportunity to continue so doing throughout their lives.

Student grants represent an important investment in people. Such grants provide the means for individuals to achieve their full potential. This is our way of supporting a socially inclusive society that enables us to increase substantially the pool of highly skilled and qualified graduates who are needed to maintain our competitiveness and to sustain the economic progress that we have experienced. We must invest further in fourth level education to remain competitive and the Minister for Education and Science, Deputy Hanafin, has a particular interest in this regard.

Government Members have long realised that Ireland must continue and make progress in this regard. Those who stand still are going backwards in the competitive global economy in which we compete. Given the advances we have made in technology, pharmaceuticals and research and development in particular, further investment in fourth level education certainly will prove successful in maintaining our competitiveness and the impact that Ireland has made as a relatively small country on the periphery of Europe. During a discussion that took place last night on software and information technology industries, it was noted that as a small country we compete with the US, India and China in respect of the supply and production of software. For four or five years from the late 1990s to the early 2000s, Ireland was the world's leading producer of software, which is a great testament to the quality of the people who leave our educational institutions.

Financial barriers have long been recognised as a major disincentive for many students who wish to access third level education and I see this phenomenon day in and day out. Deputy O'Connor mentioned this in respect of Tallaght and the position is similar in the constituency of Dublin Central, particularly in its inner city areas. Financial barriers always have been an issue and have been a barrier to people moving on and making choices. This has changed and continues to change in many of Dublin's socially deprived areas. I refer to the difference in the confidence shown by young children who are leaving school at present as a direct result of the investment made in our educational system at primary, secondary and third levels. The difference such investment has made in some of the aforementioned areas is startling.

The significant increases in the ordinary rate of maintenance grant in recent years have made the third level option more affordable for a broad range of students and their families. In my constituency, such grants have enabled students from working class areas to achieve their full potential. Without such grants, these individuals would not have the financial means to engage in third level education. Some valuable programmes also have been introduced by many of the institutions and private concerns in the area I represent. One that struck me in particular is the scheme that has been under way since the establishment of the financial services centre in Dublin 1 and the docklands area. It has encouraged students to go on to third level education and several companies in the Irish Financial Services Centre have sponsored individual students. I take this opportunity to acknowledge the great work they are doing.

The increase in students attending second and third level education has been remarkable in disadvantaged areas, particularly within the constituency I represent. Grants have acted as an incentive to encourage these individuals into education. I refer to areas of the city that experienced generations of unemployment and were socially deprived over successive generations. There was a complete lack of investment in infrastructure, facilities and schools and the changes that have taken place recently have made a great difference to such districts. Two years ago in one such area, 15 young people completed their leaving certificate examinations in a school for the first time, which was a great achievement in that area. Those young people went on to a

[Deputy Cyprian Brady.]

fast-track programme into apprenticeships and at present, 12 of the 15 are in full employment in various locations throughout the city. This exemplifies the change that has taken place as a direct result of some of the initiatives that have been taken.

Major improvements have been made by the Government in both the income limits for eligibility and the actual grant levels for third level student support. For the current academic year 2007-08 the reckonable income limits for ordinary maintenance grants was increased by 3.5%. This increase exceeds the increase in the average industrial wage for the September to September period. The top limit for grant eligibility where there are less than four dependent children has been increased from €46,700 to €48,355, ensuring that a significantly higher number of students from households with moderate incomes will not have to pay the student service charge of €825.

While this might seem small in relative terms, this can make a huge difference to a family that is trying to ensure its children, whether there are two, three, four or whatever number, get the best options regarding their education. This constitutes another change that has taken place in many districts and is particularly evident in my constituency, where parents now are more aware of the value and importance of education for their children. In some cases, those parents may not have had such opportunities. They may not even have completed their junior certificate in some cases, certainly not their leaving certificates, and are not in a position to assist their children. However, many existing schemes encourage parents to become more involved, thereby becoming involved themselves in the learning process, as they try to assist their children to continue in education. This is to be greatly welcomed because in some cases, generations of families have had no access to second, let alone third, level education. The existence of such programmes, which will assist those people to move on themselves, is to be greatly welcomed.

In addition, more than 13,300 students in receipt of the special rate of maintenance grant are benefiting from an even more substantial increase of over 14%. The higher rate of this grant is now at a record level of €6,690 for the present academic year, compared with just over €2,000 in 1996-97.

One must consider the manner in which Ireland's demographics and population are changing. The substantial increase in the number of places at third level in the past 20 years was one of the critical cornerstones of our overall national economic strategy. Furthermore, the availability and supply of substantial numbers of highly qualified graduates contributed significantly to Ireland's much-improved economic circumstances. All Members have heard the phrase pertaining to our well-educated young workforce and this factor has been highly significant in attracting foreign direct investment. One should consider how the numbers have changed recently. Full-time enrolments have grown in third level from just under 41,000 in 1980 to almost 140,000 at present. The entry rate to higher education has grown from 20% of 17 to 18 year olds in 1980 to a present rate of approximately 55.5%. More than half of school leavers continue on to third level education, a dramatic change in comparison to the position ten or 15 years ago. I recall a lecture given by the Governor of Mountjoy Prison, Mr. John Lonergan, in which he described the relevance of a person's postal address to his or her chances of going to prison. The relationship between where a person comes from and the population of Mountjoy Prison was startling. I do not doubt that the investment made in recent years will improve the lot of many of the young people who grow up in these areas. As issues will continue to arise in terms of individuals slipping through the net, we have to provide supports and proper programmes to ensure we minimise the number of such individuals. We will take huge strides if we continue the progress and investments made. The Minister of State, Deputy Haughey, and the Minister, Deputy Hanafin, have a particular interest in maintaining this progress.

The main objectives in implementing change are to enable improvements to the services provided for the 56,000 students in receipt of grants and the second level and mature students considering their future options and to ensure public confidence in an award system which delivers grants on time to those who need them most. The Bill will prove successful in making the system more efficient in providing grants on time. We have all experienced cases where people missed deadlines. Colleges are not in a position to change their regulations to cater for individuals owing to the numbers with which they have to deal. By reducing the number of grant awarding bodies from 66 to 33 and giving the VECs which have played a vital role in improving education full control of the system, the Bill will ensure grants are paid on time to those who are entitled to receive them. It will also maintain an even balance for people, whether they are from marginalised or affluent areas.

Deputy Joanna Tuffy: It was reported in a newspaper that the Department intended to introduce new rules to allow for the assessment of persons under the age of 23 years as independent applicants, which is already the case for those over that age. I accept it will be difficult to provide for this because, for example, students from outside Dublin who attend college in the city will have to rent accommodation. How will some be defined as independent and others, dependent? Earlier this week I received an inquiry on behalf of a constituent under the age of 23 years who was independent and did not enjoy a good parental relationship. I was asked whether provision could be made for the constituent in question under the education grants scheme but that is not possible. If a person starts college this year and the new scheme is introduced while he or she is still in college, will he or she fall to be dealt with retrospectively under the new provision?

There could be injustices on the other side also. If a 40-year old loses his or her job in the construction sector and moves back in with his or her parents because he or she never managed to buy his or her own property, he or she will be assessed on his or her parents' income. Will that situation continue to obtain? In the current housing environment he or she could be 60 years old and still living with his or her parents. Where will such persons stand if the new provision is introduced? We need to move to a system under which everybody over the age of 18 years will be assessed as an independent adult rather than on parental income.

As a clerical officer in Bolton Street, I used to administer the European Social Fund moneys and had to investigate the attendance roster to make sure students attended classes before paying grants. I am sure such moneys were paid irrespective of income. Several years ago the Labour Party published a report on improving access to universities, *Keeping the Gates Open*, which found that the information technology sector was the first to achieve better access for people from differing socio-economic classes thanks to the introduction of ESF grants. The barrier of grants and fees meant that those on lower middle incomes, in particular, chose to work instead of attending college. That was due as much to the psychological barrier as it was to the financial one. Access to college increased for everyone after the Labour Party abolished third level fees. We need to broaden the criteria because difficulties will arise in assessing why one 18 year old is independent while another is not. There is also scope for manipulating the system. Therefore, it would be better to consider a general grants scheme to cover everybody.

It is unfair that part-time students have to pay fees for third level courses, even though they cannot apply to participate in grant schemes. Equal access to education is not relevant solely to the latest crop of school leavers, approximately 50% of whom attend third level education. Those in their 50s and 60s suffered greater inequality of access when they left school. During one period 20% of school leavers went to college, while the other 80% entered the workforce. The people in question now face discrimination if they attend third level education because they are more likely to undertake part-time studies. They will have to pay fees of several

[Deputy Joanna Tuffy.]

thousand euro and continue to work. It would be difficult, therefore, to take advantage of the available education opportunities part-time. Last year the USI issued a statement welcoming a commitment by the Government to abolish third level fees for part-time students. As I could never find a definite commitment in that regard, the USI statement may have been premature. However, the Government's next step should be the introduction of free fees for part-time students who take qualifying courses. Aontas also campaigned on this issue and it has been recommended in a number of reports commissioned by the Government and included in the White Paper on lifelong learning. The Labour Party was the first to make it a policy that students should have free tuition when studying part time.

As a Senator, I repeatedly raised the need to make the third level education system more flexible.

The fact that our system is so rigid is a huge barrier that prevents people from less well-off backgrounds from going to college. First, they do not have the culture of going to college, but second, they feel obliged to go out to work to contribute to the family. If we had a more flexible model of education some of those people might be more inclined to go to college at whatever stage, be it from school or later.

We should have a system where one can study part-time and then change to full-time study or where one can work and study or study part-time during the day. One should be able to go in and out of the education system. Even though modules have been introduced our education system is still very much based around one-size-fits-all approach in which a once-off chance is provided to a person when he or she finishes school or one never goes. We need a more flexible system based around the idea of lifelong learning, as referred to by Deputy Cyprian Brady. Such a system would provide people with a chance to access education and get a third level qualification no matter what are their circumstances or what lifestyle they live.

If we are to have a successful economy we need more educated people. We cannot rely on the construction sector any more. We need people to be trained in science and engineering among other areas. We would get more people from different socio-economic backgrounds back into the workforce if we had a more flexible third level education system. A more flexible model of education would not differentiate between full-time and part-time students. It should be possible to study on either basis at any time of one's life. Everybody should be provided with free tuition for the equivalent of four years in third level regardless of how they choose to study.

I glanced through a report in a newspaper recently suggesting the institutes of technology had much fewer applicants this year, especially in the science and engineering area but also in other sectors. The usual problem that we have every year is that we have thousands of vacant full-time college places that are already paid for and which are part of the system. The Department has funded the teachers, equipment etc. but the places are not filled. This is a case of money going down the drain. A more flexible system of education would allow people who had just been made redundant to avail of some of the vacant places and study part-time or whatever way suited their needs best. As it is, those places are vacant and the money spent on them is wasted. The system is not flexible enough. Even if the colleges wanted to do this they could not do so because the Department has not sanctioned such flexibility. Similarly, people drop out of college after starting courses.

I went to university. I studied English and history in Trinity College. Subsequent to that I studied legal studies part-time in the DIT. My first full-time job was as a clerical officer in DIT, Bolton Street. I have a family background in institutes of technology in that sisters and brothers attended them and my father worked in the system for a long time. That system has tradition-

ally had the type of flexibility we should have in universities. A great deal can be learned from the IT and VEC sector in terms of their flexibility and creativity in how they organise their courses and how they adapt to people's needs and come up with new course ideas.

When I worked in Bolton Street I saw one person who started off as an apprentice, became a part-time student, then a full-time engineering student and who eventually completed a post-graduate qualification. That is the way our education system should work. If that individual had wanted to go the university route he probably would not have had a chance. When he started he was very unlikely to end up with a post-graduate qualification but achieved that by working his way through the IT system.

Universities, including Trinity College, have many access programmes but they are very much tokenistic. They are good in themselves but the university structure is still very much elitist and inflexible. Universities do not open to the same extent as ITs. Even ITs do not open as much as they should and are not as flexible as they should be but universities are particularly bad in that regard. It should be a requirement of universities that they are open all the time and that they operate in a similar manner to the ITs whereby one can move from part-time study to full-time study and *vice versa*, and that one can progress from a certificate to a diploma to a degree and beyond that to a post-graduate degree.

There is a need for an Irish open university system. I accept one can study many of the UK Open University courses here but they are very expensive. An eight week Open University course costs approximately €350. It is a very good system and we should have a similar one here that is modelled on the UK Open University but where the courses are more geared to Ireland. If one studies an Open University course on the criminal justice system it is very much focused on the UK criminal justice system and would not be related to our system. The same is true of nursing and other courses. For that reason we need an Irish open university and we need to provide a grant scheme to help people to take up courses. Distance learning is an excellent system that allows people to access course materials on-line, at home and at one's own pace. One can build up modules as one goes along. One can start with an eight week course and then do a year-long course and gradually build up towards a degree.

Regarding the need to get more people to study science at third level, it is necessary to do more work at second level to encourage students towards science, engineering and technology. We need to convince people that it is desirable to study at third level. A recent study by the OECD found that Irish students came top of the league in terms of their awareness of the importance of the environment but they were only 15th in terms of their awareness of science. We need to tap into the interest of Irish students in the environment, especially given the importance of climate change and the need for energy conservation, the need to protect habitats and all those issues that have come much more to the fore in terms of the political agenda and public interest. Much more needs to be done to make students realise at second level that if they want to do something to protect the environment it can be done through science which is key in terms of dealing with climate change etc. Environmental science should be made more of a core part of the curriculum. Multimedia teaching materials such as DVDs are very much central to education in this area as there are many programmes about the environment. In order to promote science at third level we should tap into the interest in the environment and the practical applications of science.

As a local public representative people have raised the issue of the difficulties experienced by community groups. A great deal of work is done in my constituency by women's groups in particular which promote third level study. Very often they work in conjunction with NUI Maynooth and UCD. Women's studies and community studies are popular and they are good in themselves but much more can be done in terms of grant provision to encourage those

[Deputy Joanna Tuffy.]

women, and men also, to study other subjects. Much more needs to be done about community education for men because it has been difficult to get men to study on a second chance basis.

We should encourage these people to study science and engineering so they can contribute to the knowledge based economy we want to develop in the future. Many of those groups have brought to my attention the issue that they can get financing for so much, perhaps to certificate level, but when they go on to do a degree it becomes extremely expensive and many of them drop out.

The Bill is welcome. I worked in the administration of grants and it is good that there is just one system streamlined into the VECs instead of involving both councils and VECs. However the Government must address equality for part-time students. They should get the same entitlement to free tuition all the way to degree level. The Government must also address a more flexible model of education and the need to encourage as many people as possible, particularly returning and mature students, to study science and technology.

Acting Chairman: Deputy Michael Kennedy has 20 minutes.

Deputy Michael Kennedy: Beidh mé ag labhairt ar feadh deich nóiméid agus beidh an Teachta Áine Ní Bhrádaigh ag labhairt ar feadh deich nóiméid. Tá athás mór orm labhairt ar an mBille seo. Ba mhaith liom tacú le na Teachtaí ar fad a chur fáilte roimh an mBille seo le déanaí.

I am sure the Minister for Education and Science, Deputy Hanafin, and the Minister of State, Deputy Haughey, share my belief that there has been much open, transparent and constructive discussion on this Bill in recent weeks since it was announced. Before anybody criticises the existing grant distribution system it is worth pointing out that the student population in the State has grown from approximately 21,000 people to more than 137,000 in the space of 40 years. What seems an inappropriate system now had operated relatively efficiently until quite recently. In pointing this out I am not attempting to blame anybody in the system but to welcome the proposed changes provided for in the Bill. However, there are many reasons for making the changes suggested in the Bill.

The Union of Students in Ireland, USI, which has its finger on the pulse of discussing the needs of students, describes the system as a financial support maze. From the queries I have received over the years I agree with that statement. The system has too many authorities, separate assessment criteria, forms and different application processes. When one combines those together it spells the need to change the system. Until now there has been far too much bureaucracy in the system. Nobody can deny the proposals to streamline the grant system are welcome or that they will greatly improve the system of distributing grant aid to students. This does not detract from the sterling work done at local level by the local authorities and the VECs. This contribution needs to be acknowledged, and from the debate I have heard most Deputies on all sides agree both those bodies have done fantastic work over the years.

In replacing the existing system the Minister and her Department do not seek to punish the local authorities but to relieve them of a major workload and hand it over to an agency that is possibly better equipped to administer the grant aid programme. I commend the proposals to give sole responsibility for the administration and payment of the grants to the VECs. I am aware of the argument promoted by the USI and others that perhaps the Department of Social and Family Affairs would be more appropriate but I disagree. The VECs comprise a network of specialised education committees. No Department can compete with this expertise and the knowledge it has gained over the years. Many Deputies have alluded to the fantastic local

information the VECs have, which is unrivalled and unparalleled. That is a vote of confidence in the VECs and I have no doubt about their ability to carry out the proposed duties.

The new streamlined approach to be offered by the VECs will end the great variations in the processing and payment of the grant applications. The USI submission refers to the time lag from one county to the other. We all share that view and it is one of the reasons the streamlining approach is necessary. It will also bring a certain level of relief to those who apply for an educational grant. I think not only of the overwhelmed and confused young people embarking on their college careers, but older people who endeavour to return to college. I commend Deputy Haughey on his work in lifelong learning. Fantastic work is being done there and it goes right across the community. For older people the application process can be intimidating. We all hear anecdotal evidence of older people who are put off returning to university or college because they feel stupid not being able to figure out which form they should fill in or where they should apply. I do not blame them because we have all gone through bureaucratic mazes from time to time.

Aontas, the adult education agency has spoken about the number of queries it receives annually. Last year it received over 3,500 queries and over a quarter of those were concerned with the application process for the grants. The complexity of the current system must be seen for what it is, a barrier to funding and education. By giving students the opportunity to apply to just one body, the VEC, as proposed here, one of these fears is allayed. Similarly, getting information from one body will allow the applicant to ascertain, in one telephone call, which grant he or she is applying for and the criteria involved.

The new scheme gives a commitment to applicants for a decision in a short space of time, and three weeks has been mentioned. From my past queries this three week time period is very welcome. The Bill gives a commitment to provide successful applicants with their grant payments within a month. Nobody in the House will disagree that prompt payment is necessary. Not only will this relieve the immediate financial burden of families whose children are about to receive the grant, it also limits the risk of people dropping out because they cannot wait to get the money. I am relieved the thousands of older pupils about to leave my area of north Dublin will encounter a more straightforward process than the one their older siblings had to deal with.

I welcome the plans to change the eligibility criteria of applicants. I particularly welcome the changes on residency requirements. Although the number of years prior to application is greater, there is greater flexibility. Students will be required to have resided in the State for three of the past five years, meaning the years many students spend travelling the world before they seek their college degrees will no longer hinder them. I have encountered the problem where young people who have gone on their world trips to Canada or Australia encounter difficulties when they come back. The new rule will be a welcome benefit. I also welcome the establishment of the appeals body, which will directly tackle fraudulent claims as well as plans to use students' PPS numbers as a single identifier along with a new central database. That would better identify those in receipt of undeclared incomes. It also proposes to use the PPS numbers to monitor the academic progress and attendance of students in receipt of grants. This ensures the funding goes to those who deserve it. It is essential that where State money is being paid we should be able to track where it goes, who benefits from it and how.

Deputy Tuffy spoke about science degrees and it is worth remembering that Ireland is second in the list of OECD countries for science graduates per 100,000 people employed in the 25 to 34 age group. That is a tribute to the Government plans and grants that have been provided for science education at third level.

Acting Chairman: There are just 11 minutes left in this slot. The Deputy has one minute left of his own time.

Deputy Michael Kennedy: You have interrupted my train of thought, so I will finish. Go raibh maith agat, a Chathaoirligh.

Acting Chairman: Well done on the use of Irish.

Deputy Michael Kennedy: Go raibh maith agat. Tá tusa ag déanamh iarracht a rá cúpla focal freisin, nach bhfuil?

Acting Chairman: A little bit.

Deputy Áine Brady: I welcome the opportunity to contribute to the debate on the Student Support Bill 2008, and I thank Deputy Kennedy for sharing his time with me.

I support the general principle of the Bill because it will provide for a single statutory basis for all student grants and replace the four different schemes currently operated by local authorities and VECs. Coming from a constituency that is home to an expanding third level institution, namely, NUI Maynooth, it gives me great insight into the challenges that students face when applying for grants. Since getting elected last May, I have had many students approach me with different issues and concerns relating to the grant application process. It is timely that we look at the application procedures and see how best we can streamline and improve the student grant process. We need to make it more user friendly for the students, the awarding bodies and the educational institutions.

The principal objective of the Bill is to create a more coherent and streamlined system for the administration of these grants, which will facilitate consistency of application and improved client accessibility. It will enable the development of an awards system that can deliver grants on time to those who need them most. The development of a unified system of student support, consolidating the existing four schemes for students attending higher education and post-leaving certificate courses, will greatly assist those embarking on higher and further education who need financial support. This Bill marks an important milestone in that process. Given the skills, experience and knowledge of the Vocational Education Committees, it is appropriate that they are given sole responsibility for the administration of student maintenance grants. The VEC sector brings with it a distinct and rich educational tradition in administering some of the existing grant schemes.

The proposals will reduce the number of grant awarding authorities from 66 to 33. Reducing the numbers of awarding authorities to this level will bring greater focus to the overall student grant schemes. It will also ensure that the VECs will become the experts in this area and future reform can be based on the experience they gain from their new expanded role. I have had problems with the strictness of the residency clause, particularly for mature students. I am delighted to see that the clause has been altered, although it is probably still a little too strict for mature students.

The checks and balances in the Bill merit mention. The Bill includes the introduction of a new independent appeals board, which will promote greater transparency in the grant-awarding process. The Bill also provides for the strengthening of the process whereby fraudulent claims can be rigorously pursued by an awarding authority. Substantial offences and penalties are set down, providing a firm basis to pursue those who have provided false or incomplete information to obtain a grant. Provision is also being made for transitional arrangements with the local authorities to smooth the process between the existing arrangements and the new arrangements.

The core objective of any change is to enable improvements in the standard of service provided to the 56,000 students around the country in receipt of grants, and to those potential further and higher education students considering their future options. For instance, NUI Maynooth has made significant strides in ensuring that under-represented groups are able to access third level education. In particular, mature students, travellers, students with a disability and students from socio-economic disadvantaged areas are encouraged to participate and engage in the opportunities a university education provides. I commend the Minister of State, Deputy Haughey, for the work he has done in the area of life-long learning. For each of these groups, the availability and timing of State financial support makes the difference between going to university or not. The introduction of this Bill will both endorse and continue to promote such equity in access.

Around €243 million was disbursed through the schemes in 2007, benefiting more than 56,000 students in further and higher education. Our challenge for the future is to ensure that we continue to make progress, in both the income limits for eligibility, and the actual grant levels for third level student support. We must continue to work to improve the standards for our students and in particular, to reduce the financial barriers that have long been recognised as a major disincentive for many students who wish to access third level education. The significant increases in the ordinary rate of the maintenance grant over recent years have made the third level option more affordable for a broad range of students and their families. In approving even higher increases in the special rate of the maintenance grant, we continue to target that support at those most in need and encourage access to further education for everyone.

I wish all those involved in the transitional arrangements the very best in moving from our current procedures to the more coherent and structured approach in awarding student grants, and I commend the Bill to the House.

Deputy Seymour Crawford: I welcome the opportunity to speak on this important Bill. It is important because it recognises the issue of student grants for the future of our young people. I pay tribute to the VECs and the county councils for the work they have done in making the grants available. I was a member of Monaghan County Council, which had one of the best records for fast payment of grants. We took a cross-party decision that even if we had to borrow the money, students would come first and get their money on time. In this context, teachers and others involved in secondary schools need to make sure students are properly advised and encouraged to apply on time. In the past, the county council or the VEC often did not get the requisite information on time and grants were subsequently delayed. The Minister, as the person in charge of the taxpayers' money funding these grants, should use the opportunity early on in the year to encourage principals and teachers to get students to apply on time.

The Bill is fairly simple and is not contentious. It provides for a unified grant payment scheme and for the awarding authorities to administer student grants in line with the provisions of the Bill. Although it was not one of the issues for which it lobbied, the Irish National Adult Learning Organisation recognises that by simplifying the range of different grants and awarding authorities, information will be more accessible and the whole process of obtaining funding will be much simpler.

It is clear that people generally welcome this Bill. I also note that Aontas received 3,485 queries on grants. The last speaker, Deputy Áine Brady, referred to the fact that in her short time in the Dáil she has received many queries from students. I assure the Deputy that it is one of the major issues in the Summer and Autumn that Oireachtas Members will have to deal with. We are very conscious of the need to streamline the grants system and ensure that people know their entitlements.

[Deputy Seymour Crawford.]

To be blunt, I have no personal experience of third-level education. My education was at the university of life. I had to move on to my home farm at an early stage and did not get the opportunity to attend a third level institution. However, I recognise that it is extremely important, not just for people in cities but for people in rural Ireland. The problem in the Cavan and Monaghan areas, and the Border region generally, is that all of our students must travel to third level education, with the exception of those who attend the Cavan College of Education, which has a high number of students in attendance. That college is linked with other colleges so that students can get the opportunity to be near home at the outset and then travel for their final courses. There is also Miffett College, a smaller college in Monaghan. It is important that such colleges are recognised and that the payment structures and the way they are treated is changed. I hope the Department will deal with that.

The other issue of concern is that some students must opt out of college for various reasons, for example, because of family sickness. If they are unable to finish their first year in college, they find that when they return the following year, they cannot get grant aid to begin the course again. Often such students will end up claiming social welfare benefits or taking up low-paid employment, rather than returning to college. This must be sorted out. If there is a genuine reason for a person opting out, common sense must be applied.

One of my concerns regarding this more centralised scheme is that there would be more red tape and the problems of individuals would not be taken into account. There are special cases and people with special problems. I dealt with such a special case recently. A woman became seriously ill with cancer, for the second time. She first became ill five years previously. On the first occasion, she was able to claim sickness benefit and a small benefit for her children. However, two years ago, quietly, in the Social Welfare Bill, the benefit for children was removed if the income of a spouse was over a certain limit. That was done, literally, in the dark of night and caused a major problem for this family. The family was extremely annoyed when they realised that when the woman got sick for a second time, the children were not granted even that small amount of money. The other issue was that while she was alive and on sickness benefit, grant aid for her two children, who were attending college, was not considered. One can only imagine the drain on the family's income which was caused by her serious illness. The woman passed away in early January and it transpires that her children's applications might be reconsidered. Fortunately, I had insisted that they submit their applications anyway, even though I knew they would not receive a grant at the time. I have since been able to get their application upgraded. I spoke to the person dealing with the case at local authority level who told me that she had never had as difficult a discussion as the one she had with that woman, who was dying of cancer, because she was unable to help her out in any way.

We should not have a system that prevents us from taking into account the special needs of a family like the one I have just mentioned. The structure in place ensured that the two students in question did not get their proper rights. We must have a structure that is flexible. I accept there is an appeals mechanism in place but having dealt with appeals systems in agriculture and other areas, I know it can take some time. It is not automatic and does not always deal with the situation as it should.

Another issue of concern is that where a person, especially a PAYE worker, earns even €1 over the limit, there is no grant. In a Border area most students must travel to third-level institutions, stay overnight and so forth. If a family must pay for a student to attend college in Dublin, Galway, Cork or wherever, it can be very costly but there is no tax relief on that cost. A similar family living in Dublin, Galway or Cork would not have to shoulder the costs of accommodation and so forth. This system militates against those living in rural Ireland and I ask the Minister to re-examine this issue. I have already asked the Minister for Finance to do

so on a number of occasions. If fees must be paid, tax relief is available but the same is not true for accommodation.

Another problem in the Border areas concerns Northern Ireland. Until last year, colleges in Northern Ireland did not charge fees. That has now changed and is causing problems for students who aimed to undertake courses in Northern Ireland, some of which cannot be easily undertaken elsewhere. Often, with students in Border areas, members of their family have already attended university in Belfast, Coleraine or Jordanstown and elsewhere in Northern Ireland and they wish to follow in their footsteps. There are now major problems in that regard and I ask the Minister to examine the issue.

Regarding people who come from abroad to live here, I welcome the changes which have allowed for much more freedom for such people. However, there is still room for improvement. At present, people coming to live here must wait a long time for a residency permit. If they do

1 o'clock not have such a permit, they cannot obtain third level grants. I recently wrote to the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform in an attempt to find out what the situation was with regard to the processing of a student's residency application. I was simply told, in a nice way, that it would be another eighteen months to two years before the case was dealt with, by which stage, the student in question would be finished college. The mother of the student is a highly-skilled doctor. She was recruited from abroad to work in the health service. Her husband had a serious accident and is no longer fit to work, but because of his wife's income, he is not receiving any social welfare payments. One can imagine the dire situation that family has found itself in because it cannot obtain a residency permit and, thus, a grant. While I acknowledge the many improvements made in this area, I urge the Minister to improve the position further.

I also welcome the improvements for children living away from home. I note that the USI refers to the fact that the Student Support Bill will pave the way for students under 23 and living away from home to be independently assessed for the purpose of grants.

Last year, I dealt with a case of a student whose relationship with her father had broken down to such an extent that they no longer communicated with one another. She also had difficulties with her mother. The student was shown no latitude when she failed to obtain information from her father on his income and, as a result, was not awarded a grant. When a student is clearly living outside the home — in the case to which I refer the young woman was living with her partner and had no contact with her parents — it is vital that he or she is given all possible support.

I recall the case of a married student aged under 23 years who could not secure a grant without providing details of her parents' income. I am grateful that these types of concerns have been listened to and hope the new provision will deliver what is necessary.

The need for lifelong learning was raised. Deputy Mansergh, like me, has been involved in Northern Ireland affairs for some time — the role of some is greater than that of others. I was involved at an early stage in establishing a cross-Border project between Emyvale and Aughnacloy to bring students together in a unique partnership. The project received international support and has resulted in the opening of a school for lifelong learning in the area. I thank the Minister and others for their assistance in this regard. Knockconan national school, which was officially opened a few months ago, is a credit to all those involved in it. The facility provides accommodation for people from both sides of the Border to enable them to work and learn together at national and adult level. It is an encouraging development which I hope will mark the dawn of a new era.

In welcoming the thrust of the Bill I hope it will not become bogged down in red tape. This week, the House discussed the need to ensure patients come first in the health system. It is

[Deputy Seymour Crawford.]

vital that students' needs come first and anomalies are addressed to ensure young people are given the best possible chance to secure education and employment. The education system is a source of pride for Irish people.

Only a limited number of high quality jobs are available in Border areas, such as counties Cavan, Monaghan and Donegal, to attract graduates from the area to return home. While it is important to ensure students receive a proper education, are given opportunities and tax relief is made available to their parents, where necessary, it is also vital that the Border region, which suffered most as a result of the Troubles of the past 40 years, receives a fair share of high quality jobs. In light of the new dispensation in Northern Ireland and along the Border, I hope the Government will make a real effort to ensure highly qualified graduates have an opportunity to return home and rebuild the region's economy which badly needs a boost.

Deputy Martin Mansergh: I welcome the Student Support Bill 2008. The expansion of the third level sector over the past 20 years, building on earlier progressive developments in the late 1960s and early 1970s, has been a major success story. We have moved from a relatively low rate of third level participation in higher education to a relatively high rate. In recent years, we have also begun in earnest to develop a fourth level, with the research councils working well. An issue has been how universities can compete with better funded institutions, especially in the English speaking world. The better funding for research is perhaps a good part of the answer.

With regard to student support and fees, this has been the subject of ongoing debate and some decisions over the past 15 years. The Rainbow coalition introduced free third level fees, which had previously been means tested. Fianna Fáil, though opposing the measure at the time, albeit with some divided opinions on the issue, has not reintroduced fees, despite the urgings of heads of universities, some economists and the OECD.

The current position is popular with parents and students and in my opinion not reversible. While it is true that a similar measure was reversed in Britain, the UK operates under a different electoral system and has in many respects — perhaps as a result — a more passive electorate. In the short term at least, the universities would not be better off with a reintroduction of fees, as one can be certain that the Department of Finance would claw back every cent of grant paid in lieu of fees. In a tougher budgetary climate, one can probably anticipate some renewed pressure on this front.

According to the Book of Estimates, total student support stands at €263 million, an increase of 8% on last year. This probably also reflects an increase in numbers. A significant registration fee of more than €800 has been imposed, from which poorer families are exempt. Young people and their parents should not be deterred by financial considerations from entry into third level education, particularly if we seek greater social inclusion. Young people starting out in life, by which I mean graduates, should be unencumbered with debt. I am not, therefore, enamoured of student loan schemes and the like.

One of the Minister's virtues is that, coming from the education sector, she is not a believer in change for change's sake or simply for the purpose of leaving a political imprint. What is working well and is well accepted, she prefers rightly to leave alone. She has firmly rejected the reintroduction of third level fees and has my support in that regard. When one of her predecessors flew a kite on this issue, my constituency predecessor and a former Minister for Education, Deputy Noel Davern, was the first on the Government side to state clearly the proposal was not acceptable. Third level fees are very much an issue in Tipperary, which, apart from the Tipperary Institute, sends most of its third level students outside the county. Keeping

a student at college away from home, even from a maintenance point of view, is expensive in any case. Paying fees on top of this would be a punishing additional burden.

Another area where the Minister has rightly ignored siren calls from experts and some urban based opposition is the idea that special support conditions should be introduced for the sons and daughters of farmers. The suggestion is that not just income but the value of assets essential to the business should be taken into account. In most cases, farmers are not on high incomes and most of their children will have to make a living off the land. There is, therefore, every incentive for them to go to college, where possible. As matters stand, farmers often sell sites where they can to pay for their children to go to college. The Minister is right to maintain the *status quo*. Plenty of places are available for everyone at this stage.

I welcome the intention of the Bill to streamline responsibility for grants and give it to the vocational education committees. The Minister has resisted the temptation to create one central authority and opted instead for a local county based body solely engaged in educational management, which is accessible to students and parents for advice, consultation and discussion in case of any problems arising. There is an independent appeals mechanism. It would be welcome if grants could be paid more expeditiously and up-front but I accept that a certain proportion of students drop out at the end of the first term having decided that third level is not for them.

The level of and access to maintenance grants has improved a good deal during the years. They also apply to more courses. I agree with Deputy Crawford on the value of lifelong learning. When it can be afforded, there may be cases where maintenance grants would be justified for much older categories. The lifelong education sector is still relatively under-developed. Judging simply from constituency feedback, the current system is generally working well. I hope it can be sustained and further improved, not least through the bringing into operation of the enabling parts of the Bill, even though we are now passing through more challenging economic and financial times.

Maintenance grants arise only where one is studying away from home. Whereas in Britain there is a strong tradition of students going to colleges away from home, not least for financial reasons, here students operate where possible from a home base. In that regard, many parts of the country, including most cities, are well provided for, even if there is a short commuting distance involved. In addition, since the provision of a stock of purpose built student accommodation under the Finance Act 1998, for which I personally pushed strongly as a member of the tax strategy group at the time, the frantic search for suitable digs each autumn has eased off considerably.

In principle, like any measure for the relief of taxpayers, there is something to be said for it, but, from a financial point of view, I doubt that the tax relief proposed by Deputy Crawford for accommodation is practicable. It immediately raises equity considerations in that 40% of income earners do not pay tax. I am not sure, therefore, that it would be the best way of approaching the issue as against further improving maintenance grants if there is any money available.

There is one city, Waterford, and one region, the south east, of which Waterford is the capital, that do not have a university. The Government commissioned and has published the report, which I welcome, on the case made by Waterford Institute of Technology for designation as a university. I must declare an interest in that I am a member of the institute's foundation advisory board as a public representative and have supported the case for some years, with virtually every public representative, employer and trade union body in the south east region.

I would like to be objective about the Port report. It is cautiously supportive but with many caveats, some of them insisted upon, I suspect, by the Department of Education and Science.

[Deputy Martin Mansergh.]

Dr. Port states: “We would respect and support WIT’s view that it has many of the features of a university, and arguably should be considered as a candidate for university status”. However, that is set against what he explicitly describes as departmental opposition against further transfers into the university sector. Dr. Port is more emphatic in his view of the economic, social and cultural benefits for the region.

I understand and appreciate the Department’s concern about maintaining the integrity of the IT sector. There are two other applications, from DIT — I have a sister working there — and, since yesterday, Cork Institute of Technology. There may be strong educational arguments in both cases, but Waterford is unique in having a strong regional case. I would not exempt the north west from this, as part of that region is close to Derry, with the University of Ulster Magee campus. Cross-Border co-operation in this area and agreement on reciprocity of conditions for students studying on each side of the Border is very important.

As an adviser, I was involved to some degree in 1989 in consultations on the decision to make the national institutes of higher education in Limerick and Dublin into universities. There was a great deal of resistance at the time, both covert political, so to speak, and from some of the existing universities. The Taoiseach at the time and the Minister of State’s father, the late Charles Haughey, with the Minister at the time, Deputy Mary O’Rourke, had to assert themselves, take their courage in both hands, resist the pleadings of former institutions which they had attended, alumni etc., and make the decision. Does anyone regret that decision or believe it was a mistake? They were the first two universities created in the State; Maynooth has been designated since. I suspect there is a good deal of lobbying by existing universities against the creation of a university in the south east, but as Dr. Port points out, Waterford is 100 kilometres away from a similar institution. With all due respect, it is not for UCD or UCC to decide whether there will be a university in the south east.

I draw the attention of the House, the Minister and the Department to the fact that our neighbours, but also our competitors, in Britain in the past week have published and adopted a far more positive and forward approach to this issue. Mr. John Denham, the Secretary of State for Innovation, Universities and Skills, published a paper entitled, *A New University Challenge*. I will read some key passages from this document. The introduction states:

Never have universities been more important to Britain. They unlock the talents of students; promote shared values; extend opportunities to an increasingly wide range of people; drive local and national economic growth; provide a highly skilled workforce; create innovative world beating products and services; create jobs; and support communities.

This document:

(i) sets out evidence and case studies on how local higher education delivered or supported by universities unlocks the talents of people and drives economic regeneration, and identifies key success factors from past projects . . .

Universities unlock the talent of students . . .

Locally based provision is made particularly important by our goal of reaching out to adults who have missed out on higher education in the past.

There is then a reference to the development of the University of Essex in Southend. It states: “For the University of Essex, the new building represents the beginning of a vision to make Southend a vibrant university town”. It further states:

Local university provision can help an area retain skills. We know that many students stay to work in their university town, which is a way of retaining their skills and talent to benefit the local area. Conversely, if people are forced to leave to study, many of them will not return afterwards, and will ultimately make their homes elsewhere.

Higher education brings wider social benefits. Graduates enjoy better health; lower levels of obesity; are more likely to vote; and are more likely to display tolerant attitudes.

The report continues:

Locally focused higher education does not only have a role in reversing economic decline. It can be a major component of strategies of population growth, ensuring that new development has access to sources of skills and innovation.

On the development of the University Campus Suffolk, it stated, “Prior to the development of University Campus Suffolk, Suffolk was the largest county with a population of over 500,000 without an Higher Education Institution.”

Concerning the development of the new university in Cumbria, the report continues:

The new university development in Cumbria will not only deliver — on the doorstep — higher education in one of the most isolated and deprived areas of England but it will also provide, with partners, the skills that are essential to create the workforce that will decommission the Sellafield nuclear power plant.

The University of Cumbria was launched last year as a new kind of institution with distributed campuses designed to meet the diverse needs of learners in urban and rural locations and to serve employers and employees in both the public and private sectors throughout Cumbria and beyond.

The report’s findings state:

We will make the process of gaining a university centre one that better fits our understanding of the role of universities in unlocking potential of towns and people and driving local regeneration. The Government’s investment in new higher education provision to unlock the talents of people and to drive local economic regeneration, has been a success story in recent years. But we want to go further. The Government has therefore asked the Funding Council to lead a debate with a wide range of organisations to develop a transparent mechanism for communities to put together a bid for funds for a higher education centre or university campus.

As Members know, the attitude in Ireland is rather discouraging to those institutions applying for university status.

It is clear the British Government is adopting a different and more forward and up-beat approach. Waterford Institute of Technology, WIT, would have no difficulty obtaining university status immediately on that basis. Waterford and the south-east region cannot be held to ransom to a too-cautious departmental policy. We must compete internationally and the south east’s *per capita* income is languishing somewhat.

I welcome the publication of Dr. Port’s report and want it debated in the House. In the case of WIT there is a compelling educational and regional policy case for university status. There is no other rival application that has the same force as WIT’s. I hope the Minister for Education and Science and the Government will take a courageous decision — it would be courageous because vested interests are involved — to provide Waterford and the south east with the

[Deputy Martin Mansergh.]

university everyone in the region desires. Neither the rest of the country nor the Government have the right to hold back the south east in this.

I accept there are wider policy considerations. I do not favour every institute of technology being turned into a university. Some have separate roles and provide a more limited range of courses than that normally associated with a university. WIT is a mature institute of technology.

Deputy Peter Kelly: I wish to share time with Deputy Johnny Brady.

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

Deputy Peter Kelly: I congratulate the Minister for Education and Science, Deputy Hanafin, on the job she did. We are lucky to have a Minister with a keen interest in education who loves her brief. As a former teacher, she has great practical experience in the area. It is a pleasure to work with her for the betterment of education facilities. Last Monday, the staff and students at Athlone Institute of Technology, welcomed the laying of the foundation stone for an extension to the campus by the Minister for Finance, Deputy Cowen. The institute has done tremendous work in producing graduates of the highest standards.

The four existing means-tested maintenance grant schemes are the higher education grants scheme, which generally applies in the university sector; third level maintenance grants scheme for trainees, which applies to level 6 or level 7 courses in institutes of technology; the vocational education committees' scholarship scheme, which generally applies to level 8 courses where students have already pursued a level 7 course; the maintenance grants scheme for students attending post-leaving certificate courses.

The higher education grants scheme is a statutory scheme under the Local Authorities (Higher Education Grants) Acts 1968 to 1992, administered by local authorities. The other three schemes are administrative schemes managed by vocational education committees.

In accordance with the commitment in the programme for Government, the Minister for Education and Science plans to introduce a single unified scheme of maintenance grants for students in higher education. The objective is to create a more coherent administration system to facilitate consistency of application and improved client accessibility. It will also ensure public confidence in the awards system which delivers grants on time to those who need them most.

The Department of Education and Science engaged in extensive consultations with the key stakeholders such as the Irish Vocational Educational Association, the County and City Managers Association, the Union of Students of Ireland and various social partners. It also consulted Departments, such as the Department of Social and Family Affairs, and the Revenue Commissioners to map the most logical and effective arrangements for the future structure and administration of the student support schemes. Achieving consensus is the best approach to decision-making and drafting legislation. I hope other Departments will follow the example shown by the Department of Education and Science to reach consensus with relevant stakeholders in future decision-making processes.

Arising from these consultations, the Minister for Education and Science announced her decision to consolidate the administration of the planned unified grants schemes within the VEC sector. Following that announcement, the Government approved the drafting of the Bill along the lines of the general scheme presented to it. The Bill is the part of a broader programme of legislative and administrative reform of student grants being undertaken by the Department of Education and Science.

The purpose of the legislation is to provide for the making of student grants to enable students to attend higher and further education courses. The Bill's principal objective is to create a more coherent system for the administration of these grants, which will facilitate consistency of application and improved client accessibility. In short, it will enable development of an awards system that can deliver grants on time to those who need them most.

The Bill provides for the structures around which an efficient and customer-friendly student grant process can be built, as well as providing the general basis on which students will be eligible for a grant to attend courses of higher education. It aims to place all student support schemes on a statutory footing for the first time. It gives effect to the announcement made in 2006 that the 33 VECs were to be given sole responsibility for the administration of student maintenance grants, reducing the number of grant awarding authorities from 66 to 33. This provides for greater consistency of application and increased clarity and accessibility for students and institutions alike.

I thank the county councils which administered part of the scheme up to now. I thank, in particular, Mr. Tommy McDonald, the finance officer at Longford County Council, and all his staff for their help, courtesy and efficiency in the way in which they have dealt with the scheme. I welcome the fact that the VECs will be running the scheme in the future and wish Ms Josephine O'Donnell, CEO of County Longford VEC, and all the members of the committee every success in its administration. I have no doubt they will be customer-friendly. I am also delighted that the scheme is moving from the county council to the VEC and glad to see it will be administered by the staff of a body with members who are elected to represent the people. I am a strong advocate of democracy and consider that all decisions to be taken in this country should be left in the hands of elected representatives, be they town councillors, county councillors, TDs or Ministers. That is what the people want. We want democracy. It is a well known fact that nowadays all our politicians are accessible to the public. Most politicians, county councillors and town councillors included, are available 24 hours a day, seven days a week to deal with their constituents and give a very good service.

The Bill provides for transitional arrangements with local authorities, periodic inspections, reviews and audits of the performance of awarding authorities, and the transfer of functions from a VEC which is not performing its functions effectively or has failed to follow a direction of the Minister. That is not the case with Longford VEC, an excellent body which carries out its duties with responsibility and in the best interests of the public it serves.

The Bill also gives the Minister the power to make regulations regarding applications, including a requirement that an awarding authority give notice of its decisions to applicants within a specified period. It is important that people are not left hanging but are notified of decisions as soon as possible. Education is and has always been the only way forward. We need everybody to be highly educated. It is fair, right and proper. When people are educated to the highest standards, they are able to look after themselves and create a good future for themselves and their families.

The Bill obliges students to inform awarding bodies of any change in their circumstances and those of their parents or spouses that might affect their entitlement to a grant. An independent appeals board will be established in order to introduce further transparency into the grant awarding process. I welcome this, as people should have the chance to appeal. Sometimes there have been problems with grants, as students, through circumstances beyond their control, are lumped in with their parents from the point of view of income. Perhaps some time in the future we will see them being evaluated in their own right, without the incomes of their families being taken into consideration. Students who want to go on to higher level education are serious people who want to do well and are genuinely interested in furthering themselves. I welcome

[Deputy Peter Kelly.]

the establishment of an appeals board and hope those who sit on it will be understanding and sympathetic. It has come to my notice that students who are just slightly outside the income bracket sometimes end up having to work very hard at weekends and in the evenings, trying to mix work with study. Every facility should be given to those who wish to study and improve their knowledge.

Acting Chairman: The Deputy has seven minutes remaining, if he still wishes to share his time.

Deputy Peter Kelly: I am still sharing.

Acting Chairman: I mention this because Deputy Brady is here.

Deputy Peter Kelly: Deputy Brady is here and very welcome. It is good to see him. He is one of rural Ireland's most popular personalities and the Chairman of the Joint Committee on Agriculture, Fisheries and Food.

Acting Chairman: I am doing my best here.

Deputy Peter Kelly: I thank the Acting Chairman.

The Bill gives VECs the power to carry out inquiries, which will strengthen the process of pursuing fraudulent claims, although up to now I have definitely not heard of any fraudulent claims. Provision is made for the recovery of debt and the sharing of acquired personal information to verify information supplied as part of the application process. The existing definition of "spouse" as it pertains to married couples and cohabiting heterosexual couples is retained pending the review of social welfare schemes for compliance with the Equality Acts. A change is to be made in the residency requirements in respect of eligibility for maintenance grants. In addition, all students must now meet the new requirement of having spent three out of the last five years resident in the European Union, EEA or Switzerland, rather than the previous requirement of one year in the European Union, to qualify for the fees grant. This will enable those who do not meet the residency requirement in the State but meet all other requirements for a maintenance grant to qualify on the basis of EU, EEA or Swiss residence for a fees only grant.

The Bill sets out the categories of nationalities that qualify for a grant as EU, EEA or Swiss nationals or those with official refugee status or other persons entitled to the rights and privileges specified in section 3 of the Refugee Act. It also enables the Minister to prescribe additional categories of non-EU or non-EEA nationals, subject to consideration of any or all of the matters laid down in the legislation. It further provides that the detailed conditions of the new unified scheme of student grants, regarding such matters as eligibility, means of applicants and classes of grant, may be prescribed by regulation.

The Minister has the power to prescribe different categories of student, including dependent, independent, mature and tuition students. This will enable the Minister to extend the current definition of an independent student if there are compelling reasons, as well as the resources to do so. The Minister will have the power to address by regulation the current provision, whereby all students under 23 years are assessed with reference to their parents' income, even when they have been living and continue to live independently of their parents and have been self-supporting for a number of years. The Bill will provide for drawing up a scheme of grants by way of regulation, including the power to make regulations governing the assessment of means to determine the eligibility of a student. The provisions will limit the assessment of means to income only.

The Bill gives automatic approval to institutions that come under the universities, institutes of technology and Dublin Institute of Technology legislation, are in receipt of exchequer funding for the provision of PLC courses or are institutions in the EU that are financed essentially out of public funds.

The Minister has power to prescribe other educational institutions in the State that provide higher education and training subject to principles and policies set down in the Bill, including the resources available for the provision of student support, having consulted with the Higher Education Authority and having obtained the consent of the Minister for Finance.

It requires approved institutions to draw up and implement access plans and equality policies. This underpins and supports Government policy to improve equality of access to further and higher education for under represented groups. It also provides that only full-time courses provided by approved institutions can be deemed to be approved courses.

The Bill provides the Minister with the power to prescribe approved courses and sets out the matters that the Minister shall have regard to for the purposes of prescribing a course. These include the nature and level of the qualification to be awarded to the student on completion of the course, the educational institution that provides the course and whether it leads to a higher education and training award or a further education and training award.

While the Bill limits the approval of postgraduate courses to courses within the State, the provisions, as currently drafted, enable the Minister to prescribe postgraduate courses in Northern Ireland as approved courses for which both maintenance and fees grants can be payable. I welcome that Irish citizens who find a course is not available here will have the opportunity to study that subject elsewhere.

Regarding transition arrangements and implementation plans, the changes in the eligibility requirements and the administrative arrangements will only apply to new entrants to the grant scheme following the commencement of the Act. It is currently envisaged that commencement will allow for the new scheme to come into operation for the 2009 — 2010 academic year. The timing of the commencement of the Act will depend on the satisfactory conclusion of discussions with the VECs on the administrative arrangements for the new scheme.

I thank the Acting Chairman, Deputy Charlie O'Connor, for his courtesy and the good job he is doing on behalf of Tallaght, which, I believe is his constituency.

Deputy Joan Burton: I welcome the publication of this Bill as it is long overdue. Before becoming a full-time TD I was a senior lecturer at the Dublin Institute of Technology and I am declaring that interest.

On the role of colleges of technology in education in Ireland, the country is at a crossroads in terms of the development of third level and fourth level education. Discussion around the Lisbon treaty referred to the knowledge economy but I prefer to speak of the knowledge society as this paints a larger picture. The knowledge society consists not only of people who study for economic reasons but also those who study to contribute to society.

The history of third level education in Ireland shows a university sector that has, traditionally, been well-endowed and centred in the main cities. Then there are the colleges of technology and anyone who examines the history of Irish economic development will acknowledge they have played a key role in giving people access to third level education and apprenticeships within a reasonable distance of their homes. This is the case in developing areas of greater Dublin, such as the Acting Chairman's constituency of Tallaght and my constituency of Blanchardstown, and, more particularly, in areas along the west coast, including Sligo, Galway and Mayo and in the south and south west. There are very successful colleges of technology in Tralee, Cork, Waterford, Carlow and Athlone.

[Deputy Joan Burton.]

It is important to this debate that we acknowledge that we used regional funds in the early days of the European Union to grant-aid, through European social fund, ESF, programmes, access to education for a whole cohort of students at all levels. In many cases this education was provided closer to students' homes and this meant the cost to families of young people participating at third level was lessened. Ireland places a huge value on education and the opportunity it provides to every child to progress and, as an adult, find gainful employment or, in more recent times, start a businesses. Education means young people need not necessarily emigrate or even migrate but can stay at home and build a professional life, even in remote areas of the west, south west and south east of Ireland.

It is important that in the debate on third and fourth level education we acknowledge the strength of the history of education in Ireland and the opportunities it has given people who otherwise might not have participated at third level. The Minister is currently examining various reports by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, OECD, including the report by Dr. Jim Port on Waterford and its status as a college of technology. We must have a debate in the Dáil on promoting the greatest possible amount of participation in third level education in Ireland and the Minister for Education and Science must give it much consideration. We must give people who missed out the first time round an opportunity to participate in third level education; some 20% have missed the opportunity to complete second level education.

Figures released last week show that an extra 10,000 people became unemployed last month, about four fifths of whom were men. Many of these people lost employment in the construction industry. It is important that we talk about educational pathways of opportunity, not just FÁS courses, which train people in a narrow, technical way for upskilling relating to a limited range of jobs. A broad approach is needed that will allow people get back into education and have the opportunity to progress to third level and compete for the types of jobs international investment brings to Ireland. There are serious concerns among employers that they cannot recruit the type of engineers, IT specialists, people with management skills and mathematical skills needed for the jobs on offer. This has been pointed out in a number of reports on skills in Ireland and it is critical to the future of third level education.

The original institute of technology structure was financed effectively by our use of EU regional funds. The overwhelming majority of the students who went to colleges of technology were financed out of the regional Structural Funds. It was a very good use by Ireland of EU Structural Funds.

We are here debating the Student Support Bill. Student support is moving inexorably into the university sector or into the institutes of technology which award degrees at primary and higher level. The key issue is whether we are offering the same range of opportunity for student support to students attending colleges of technology, institutes of technology and universities as were available 20 or 30 years ago when we used European funds. The answer is we are not. What is happening is that the current student support system is tilted quite unfavourably against people in the PAYE sector. I think it is tilted, and probably sensibly so, very favourably towards people who are farming or have self-employed backgrounds. When one comes to filling in the student application it must include the parents' means. A parent may be in the PAYE sector, such as a civil servant in a decentralised location, or a bus driver in the Dublin area. If in the year before their child goes to college they have overtime or bonus payments and are paid a trade union rate in terms of wages, they are unlikely to find that their child will qualify for either a full or a partial third level grant. This is our biggest problem.

We are saying to people who are largely coming from rural areas, farming and small business backgrounds that they will qualify because of the way in which the means test is structured but it is unlikely that many sons or daughters of people in the PAYE sector will qualify. I have had this debate with the Minister on numerous occasions and I have said to her that the college grant system needs an overhaul. We can go back to the de Buitléir report, published 15 years ago, which suggested the means test should be comprehensive and administered by a Department such as the Department of Social and Family Affairs to ensure fairness across the country. That recommendation was never followed up, partly because it was politically controversial. There was a perception that some of the people with, say, the largest farms and large businesses would end up not getting college grants. Given that we want, according to all the skills surveys, more than 60% of students from secondary school going into third level, it is important that we hold to the objective of people from rural backgrounds going to college. I think we are doing well with that objective. However, we have to ensure that people who come from urban and PAYE backgrounds have the same access if we are to continue increasing the numbers. I think the Minister has ducked that issue.

It was the Labour Party, rather controversially in terms of the left and the right, which introduced the right to free undergraduate tuition at third level. I was one of those in the Labour Party who strongly supported the then Minister for Education, Niamh Bhreathnach, in bringing in that initiative. It is fashionable on the ultra right and the ultra left to condemn free fees because it is seen rather like universal child benefit as giving Mr. and Mrs. Millionaire's children an advantage, as well as helping everybody else.

The issue of universal access to third level education is like the argument for universal access to primary and secondary education, that as a society we have to encourage as much educational qualification and achievement as possible for the economy and the jobs and society we wish to promote.

The opening of third level education to people in urban areas, which was the particular consequence of the Bhreathnach initiative, has been fantastic for society. It has produced the cohort of young people with high levels of skills who could stay at home in Ireland and work for multinationals coming into Ireland and also establish their own businesses. They are the Celtic tiger graduates and young people. This is not about an urban-rural divide. It is about encouraging as many people as possible to get into third level education and to get appropriate levels of qualifications and skills. I do not think the Minister has grasped that issue.

We have a serious deficiency in the teaching of maths and science. I do not know the detailed qualifications of the Cabinet and Ministers of State. It seems an awful lot of them are lawyers and solicitors. Few parties have engineers or scientists. I am happily joined by one of the few esteemed scientists in the Dáil, Dr. Mary Upton. She is unusual in most of the political parties, whether on the Government or Opposition benches. That is indicative of how as a society we look at and promote science in education.

People who write good books are interviewed on the "Late Late Show". People who make millions of euro, as business people, and people who have ideas in areas such as taxation, as I do occasionally, are interviewed on programmes. One seldom sees Gerry Ryan, Pat Kenny or others rushing to interview the latest maths star, even though Pat Kenny was originally a distinguished engineer, or the latest person who has done really interesting work in one of our senior colleges.

Large numbers of young men are becoming unemployed from the construction industry. Many of them either have only limited second level qualifications, having completed their leaving certificate, or have only completed the junior certificate. I know many of these young men. They have worked hard in construction for the past ten years. They have an amount of

[Deputy Joan Burton.]

skills, entrepreneurial flair and talent. As a country we would be crazy to say to those young men coming out of the construction industry, given the downturn, that they should become unemployed, go on the dole and should not be ambitious about their education.

We could use those young people as a critical resource in terms of further education. That is one of the issues that needs to be addressed. In that respect this Bill is important. How will those people access third level education? In the current grant structure they will not necessarily easily qualify unless they face into long periods of required unemployment which we do not want them to do.

Debate adjourned.

Ceisteanna — Questions.

Priority Questions.

Arts Funding.

1. **Deputy Olivia Mitchell** asked the Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism if he will report on the value for money being achieved from the per cent for arts scheme; if he will recommend a revaluation of the scheme to determine if it is achieving best outcomes; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10974/08]

Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism (Deputy Séamus Brennan): As Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism I have responsibility for the promotion of the per cent for art scheme. At present my Department is chairing the interdepartmental public art committee. This committee is examining the current guidelines for the scheme and it will report to me on the matter early in due course. In that context, information on investment under the scheme is being collected from all participating Departments and agencies. When that information is available, a true assessment of the impact of the scheme can be made. There is no doubt that the visual impact of this scheme has been overwhelmingly positive. If the guidelines need to be updated, especially in the context of the monetary cap on the scheme, or in the context of proportionality, the guidelines will be republished.

The per cent for art scheme has enhanced and embellished our land, city and townscapes immeasurably. The scheme has given an invaluable platform to many of our visual artists and I look forward to its continued relevance.

Deputy Olivia Mitchell: I hope the Minister has more luck than I had in gathering information about art pieces when I submitted questions to all Departments. The feedback I received was worrying. I agree that the scheme has major potential and has provided art around the country, has provided employment to young, emerging and established artists and has raised awareness of art. It has major potential but from what little research I have done it seems we are not getting the best bang for our buck. Most Departments have no clue how much they have spent. Three Departments had a vague idea of what they had spent but in most cases where they had an idea, capital projects that would have qualified for the per cent for art scheme did not draw it down. What I found most worrying was the opportunity lost by the scheme. The Departments of Health and Children; Transport; and the Environment, Heritage and Local Government, the three big spending Departments in terms of capital projects, had no idea how much they had spent and no way of finding out. They did not see any reason to keep a register of what had happened in the past or to change their ways in the future. The

exception is the HSE, which is considering employing someone to deal with public art. To date, no one knows what art is out there, there is no register or audit and no idea if items purchased with public money are still in place. Driving around the country, I see that pieces of outdoor sculpture have been stolen or defaced or degraded by the environment. Also, inappropriate pieces are being purchased and I am worried about the quality of the selection process and the monitoring of projects. Is anything happening in that regard?

I appreciate that most counties have an arts officer but they tend to be called in only for work undertaken by the local authority. We must use the resources we have to allow local authorities to take on public arts officers or consultant arts officers working between a few counties. There must be more monitoring of the scheme if we are to get bang for our buck. Does the Minister agree? I wish him well in seeking a register of what is out there, which I failed to do.

Deputy Séamus Brennan: This scheme goes back a long way, to 1978, when the Office of Public Works established an artistic embellishment scheme based upon the principles of the per cent for art scheme, whereby 1% of all construction budgets could be applied to an artistic feature. In 1986 the Department of the Environment established a similar scheme and the Minister with responsibility for arts became involved thereafter. It has a long history and has been underused. I would like to breathe new life into it by relaunching it. With that in mind, an interdepartmental committee on public art has been reconvened and has held three meetings to date. The committee is tasked with reviewing the guidelines of the scheme.

Some people confuse the scheme with motorway art. It could be a hospital or school that spends the 1% on its grounds. There is a cap on the scheme and for projects costing between €2.5 million and €6.3 million, an art budget of 1%, up to a maximum of €38,000 is allowed. For projects costing between €6.3 million and €12.7 million, an art budget of €51,000 is allowed. If we are to make progress we must change the caps. The figure of 1% does not quite capture it. I support the concept and would like to breathe new life into it and relaunch it. I will keep the pressure on the committee.

Deputy Olivia Mitchell: I welcome that. In terms of the cap, there is potential and the Minister needs someone in charge of the scheme locally to draw three or four together. We could get better value for money if one project was undertaken. It does not need to be sculpture, it could be a piece of work or a music programme.

Deputy Séamus Brennan: I take note of that.

National Aquatic Centre.

2. **Deputy Mary Upton** asked the Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism if the review of the first full years trading at the National Aquatic Centre is complete; when he expects the benchmarking exercise to be available; the reason given by the NAC for a decision to increase fees for a participation club (details supplied) by over 300%; his views on the unusual offer made to members for the club in lieu of the proposed increase; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10988/08]

3. **Deputy Olivia Mitchell** asked the Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism if he has satisfied himself with the operation of the National Aquatic Centre; the criteria in terms of outcomes that have been established against which to measure success; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10935/08]

Deputy Séamus Brennan: I propose to take Questions Nos. 2 and 3 together.

[Deputy Séamus Brennan.]

The National Aquatic Centre is operated by NSCDA (Operations) Ltd., a subsidiary company of the National Sports Campus Development Authority. All day-to-day operations of the National Aquatic Centre are a matter for the authority and the operations company.

When the National Aquatic Centre was restored to the ownership of the NSCDA not only did the centre require an extensive capital programme, much effort has gone into rebuilding the reputation of the centre and increasing its customer base.

Notwithstanding the need to provide an initial subsidy to the centre in its first full year of operation after it was repossessed by the NSCDA. I have previously stated my view in the House that the centre should in time be able to operate on a self-financing basis. In order to assist in this overall process, the National Sports Campus Development Authority has arranged for a financial assessment study to be carried out which will benchmark the National Aquatic Centre against other equivalent facilities. Work commenced in early February with an estimated timeframe of approximately two months. This exercise, together with the centre's 2007 performance, will inform the level of standard against which future performance will be measured.

Regarding the particular club referred to by Deputy Upton, I have been advised that negotiations are continuing with regard to the fees for usage of the centre's facilities in 2008. I hope an agreement can be reached which is satisfying both to the centre and the club in question. I am advised, however, that the proposed annual fee to which the Deputy refers does not represent the level of fees which are to be charged to the club but, rather, the commercial value of the pool usage which the club is seeking. Furthermore, the "unusual offer" referred to by the Deputy was in fact proposed by the club itself not the management of the centre and was acceptable to the centre and subsequently withdrawn by the club.

Acting Chairman: I call Dr. Upton.

Deputy Olivia Mitchell: Nearly as distinguished as Pat Kenny.

Deputy Mary Upton: I thank the Minister for the reply. I tabled the question in respect of the club, which is of the view that there was a proposed increase of 150%. The NAC swim club is critical to a number of athletes, including paraolympians. Its social value is making a major impact. The fee structure seems extraordinary in terms of required increases. I referred in my question to the "unusual offer" which I now understand was made by the club. The National Aquatic Centre sees the offer as a commitment, but it was meant as a once-off *pro bono* gesture and not to be included formally as a continuous commitment, as the club cannot commit to such fees.

Deputy Séamus Brennan: No club could accept the situation in which the club in question finds itself. I am anxious and have instructed officials — in so far as they are involved because this is a matter for the centre as opposed to officials — that an agreement acceptable to the centre and the club should be reached. I told the House previously at Question Time that the centre should at least break even on its day-to-day operations. We should retain this target because not to do so would lead us down a long road towards a subsidy. Irrespective of the capital subsidy for the project, providing a current funding subsidy on a long-term basis would be the wrong direction to take. The club should not and will not be the one to suffer in the middle of such a policy. The centre is doing better in the first quarter of this year than it did in the first quarter of 2007. Its financial operations have shown an improvement, which is encouraging. I am hopeful an agreement can be arrived at.

Deputy Olivia Mitchell: I raised this matter previously and agree that we must target a break-even figure for the operation of the centre. Like Deputy Upton, however, I wished to raise the question of the particular club mentioned. I will not go into detail on the problems it is facing because this matter raises a broader question concerning how the centre has been managed. Since its inception, it has haemorrhaged money and credibility. It does not have a CEO. While everyone states it is a beautiful centre, it is under-utilised and there is a suggestion it is not being managed well. The CEO issue and dissatisfied swimming clubs show a lack of determination on the Minister's part to turn around fortunes in respect of what was a significant investment of more than €70 million of taxpayers' money, including €2 million in subsidies last year and a sum of €600,000 to put its roof back on.

The development in question is part of the centre's attempt to break even, but should it not be marketing the pool to bring attract additional business in order that it can be used? It costs more than €1 million per year to heat and is under-utilised. The way to break even is not to chase away current customers. The reduced figure suggested to the club's members, many of whom are disabled and some of whom are paralympians, is more than €1,000 per year per member. If members of the same family — three children, for example — are in a club, as is often the case, the price being asked is ridiculous in respect of a facility where we want to increase the level of participation. The Minister must address the management problem quickly.

I am sorry to learn that Swim Ireland has washed its hands of the dispute. It is the representative body and should get involved in the matter. Unless a settlement is reached in the next week, the centre may lose the club. It has lost the water polo club and the divers are worried that they will need to leave when their renewal date is reached. That was not the intention behind the centre. I would not have a problem with subsidising it were it being utilised to the maximum and providing the national and local facilities envisaged, but it seems it is a white elephant.

Deputy Séamus Brennan: Attendance figures for the NAC in 2007 amounted to 540,000 and its financial performance in the first quarter of this year has been better than in the first quarter of 2007. Its performance is improving.

Deputy Olivia Mitchell: From a low base.

Deputy Séamus Brennan: Granted. The CEO position has been advertised and someone of a strong nature has been identified. The post will be filled shortly.

It is legitimate that the taxpayer should fund the capital cost. However, the taxpayer is entitled to seek to have the day-to-day costs covered in so far as they can. I did not insist on that this year and instead agreed to a current subsidy of €1.8 million, meaning the clubs need not carry the cost. To ask the centre to strive to break even is not unreasonable, as it would have many good effects. The centre will continue to be a success.

Deputy Mary Upton: I am reassured to know that the Minister is hopeful that an agreement will be reached with the club. It would be a tragedy for sport and the club, in particular, if the agreement were to fall apart.

Without going into the specifics of the charges — I accept that the details must be hammered out — what is being referred to broadly is out of line with what would occur in respect of another club. The club's loss of a swimming lane could be seen as imposing an additional charge of 25%. Various factors were built into the desired outcome of the negotiations. The sports facility is an important one. It would be a great shame if it were to be neglected or any necessary subsidies were not provided. It is one of the few family friendly facilities in the Dublin area. I am anxious to be reassured on the project's success.

Deputy Séamus Brennan: The Government and everyone in the House are fully supportive of the NAC and wish it success.

Horse Racing Ireland.

4. **Deputy Olivia Mitchell** asked the Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism if he envisages new funding arrangements for Horse Racing Ireland; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10976/08]

Deputy Séamus Brennan: Government support for the horse and greyhound racing industries is provided under the horse and greyhound racing fund which was established under the Horse and Greyhound Racing Act 2001 for the purpose of further developing both racing industries. Under the provisions of the 2001 Act, the fund receives a guaranteed level of finance based on excise duty on off-course betting in the preceding year subject to a minimum level based on the 2000 amount adjusted for inflation. Any shortfall in the amount generated by the excise duty is made up by direct Exchequer subvention. In 2004 the Government agreed to increase the aggregate limit on the fund from €254 million to €550 million to allow for continuation of the fund for a further four-year period to 2008. Since 2001 the fund has provided a guaranteed level of funding for Horse Racing Ireland which will have amounted to more than €436 million by the end of 2008.

In 2008 Horse Racing Ireland, HRI, is to receive more than €61 million from the fund.

Since the establishment of the fund a major period of development of the horse racing industry has resulted. The funding has allowed Ireland to develop into a world centre of excellence for horse racing. Horse Racing Ireland has undertaken a capital investment programme that has underpinned growth in the sector.

In 2004, HRI launched a €250 million capital development fund for Irish racecourses, which is being spent over five years, to continue the substantial upgrading of racecourses. HRI will provide up to €135 million in grant aid and the racecourses will finance the balance from their own resources.

The allocation of €70 million under the new national development plan for capital investment for the horse and greyhound racing industries will assist long-term planning, which will result in the further development of a network of modern well-managed facilities that will continue to be attractive to the public.

To date, the fund not only has helped towards providing some top class racing venues and facilities but also has underpinned significant employment in the horse racing industry. The prize money it has facilitated has been an important boost for horse breeding, which is a significant net contributor to the economy and has an important role to play in generating employment, particularly in the tourism and agri-economy sectors, making it a significant regional employer and an important contributor to rural communities.

The current round of the fund is due to expire at the end of 2008. A review of the horse and greyhound racing fund will be undertaken this year and any extension of the fund will require the approval of the Government and the Oireachtas.

Deputy Olivia Mitchell: I agree with the Minister that this is a highly important industry for many reasons, including employment and rural employment in particular. Horse Racing Ireland and the bloodstock industry together constitute one of our critical industries and it is appropriate that the State should ensure that horse racing is facilitated, if not subsidised. As this is such an expensive sport obviously it has difficulty breaking even and traditionally, betting has been used as a way of funding it.

However, the Minister must realise the present position simply is not sustainable. Even were a new fund to be created, I presume this would require legislation at some point during the year, it would not be sustainable for the taxpayer to pay more towards the sport of horse racing than to all other sports combined in respect of current expenditure. It is quite shocking to note that the Sports Council, which funds a considerable number of sporting bodies, received approximately €57 million this year while the racing fund, which admittedly also includes greyhounds, amounts to €66 million in current spending. This cannot be justified or sustained. Consequently, what thought has the Minister given as to how the industry is to be funded?

While I apologise for going on at some length, this is a complex issue. I understand the reason the tax rate has been reduced from 5% to 1% is because of the threat posed to book-makers' shops by on-line betting. However, I am uncertain of the validity of that argument as I have not noticed any falling off in off-course betting. This year's results for Paddy Power PLC, show its profits were €72 million, half of which is attributable to on-line betting. However, the remainder came from the retail business that is done in off-course shops.

Acting Chairman: If the Deputy wishes the Minister to reply, one minute remains.

Deputy Olivia Mitchell: I note Paddy Power PLC has opened 18 new shops, ten of which were new and the rest being acquisitions. I find it hard to believe it could not sustain a higher rate of tax, if that is what is required. This is not a sport in which many people actively participate. Given the obvious limits to the State's resources, such funding should be going into increased activity, particularly for young people. While I recognise this is an extremely important industry to Ireland, such moneys should not be sourced from the sporting fund. Will the Minister reconsider the taxation issue or have any other bright ideas come up? Other countries appear to employ a mix of what we do but not all of them accept that on-line betting will be the end of off-course excise duty.

Deputy Séamus Brennan: On-line betting and technology certainly has changed the nature of many industries, including this one. The Deputy will recall this goes back to 2001, when the House enacted the Horse and Greyhound Racing Act. It considered it to be a formula to — pardon the pun — ring-fence the income and support for the horse and greyhound racing industries. The view taken in 2001 was that the formula was a guaranteed level of finance based on excise duty on off-course betting in the preceding year, subject to a particular level of shortfalls. This has led to Horse Racing Ireland receiving €61 million from the fund in 2008.

As I noted in my response, an opportunity exists to review the position. The current round of the fund is due to expire at the end of this year and a review of the fund will be undertaken in the course of 2008. If it is decided that an extension of the fund is needed, that will require the approval of this House by way of legislation and obviously it also will require the support of the Government. There will be an opportunity to review the position. This matter was examined carefully in 2001 when it was felt that given the importance of the industry, its size, the employment it offers and so on, a formula was needed for the future financing of the industry and that formula was arrived at in the 2001 legislation.

Everyone should be slow to disturb it if it is succeeding. However, that would not prevent the Government from reviewing it to ensure it is succeeding and that review is under way.

Deputy Olivia Mitchell: May I ask a brief question?

Acting Chairman: We are out of time.

Deputy Olivia Mitchell: I understand Horse Racing Ireland has made a recommendation. Has the Minister received it yet? It also has recognised this is not sustainable. Has he received recommendations for alternative sources of funding?

Acting Chairman: The Minister should respond briefly.

Deputy Séamus Brennan: I am unsure whether I have received a formal recommendation. I receive regular submissions from Horse Racing Ireland but I do not recall a specific one on that subject.

Deputy Olivia Mitchell: Perhaps this industry should be financed from the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment rather than through sport.

Deputy Séamus Brennan: I also should point out that this area substantially is a matter for the Minister for Finance.

Deputy Olivia Mitchell: I accept that.

Acting Chairman: As the Member who tabled Question No. 5 is not present in the Chamber, I will move to ceisteanna eile.

Question No. 5 lapsed.

Other Questions.

Tourism Industry.

6. **Deputy Brian Hayes** asked the Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism whether he has consulted with the Department of Finance regarding the implications of section 74 of the Finance Bill 2008 in respect of car hire on tourism; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10956/08]

Deputy Séamus Brennan: I am aware that VRT relief on cars used in the short-term car hire industry was introduced in the Finance Act 1992 and amended subsequently in 1993, 1994 and 1998. The measure is aimed at boosting supply of hired cars to facilitate the development of the tourism industry.

I am advised by my colleague, the Tánaiste and Minister for Finance, that the measure has been abused by some in the car hire and leasing industries as a tax avoidance measure to support a range of business models that have nothing to do with the tourism industry. Accordingly, the Finance Bill 2008 introduces an amendment to tighten up the application of the existing policy and to restrict such abuse, while still facilitating the availability of vehicles for the tourism industry generally.

I understand that, in the course of debate on Committee Stage in the Dáil on the Finance Bill, the Tánaiste indicated the Revenue Commissioners could defer implementation of the amendment as an administrative arrangement until September 2008. This would allow the sector some time to regularise its current position in order that it be fully compliant with the requirements of the legislation for the 2009 season. The concession will not apply in the case of abuses of the VRT refund scheme or the application of the current VAT rules.

I understand the Tánaiste also offered to consult with the car hire trade to determine whether its concerns warrant changes to meet the objective of the short-term car hire scheme in respect

of the tourism sector, while excluding the possibility of abuse and if so, what changes would be required. I have asked my Department, having regard to any significant tourism impacts that may be identified, to monitor and, if appropriate, assist in any consultations engaged in by the Department of Finance.

Deputy Olivia Mitchell: I agree the Department of Finance cannot but ensure that schemes are not amenable to tax evasion and that it has to be vigilant of abuse in cases where VRT is not payable. However, it is almost impossible for the car hire industry to implement the scheme as proposed without increasing its costs enormously. Even though car hire companies will have to be aware whenever a car reaches its 34th day of hire and pay VRT for outstanding days, they have no guarantee that customers will not move to the next company to hire a car for another 34 days. It is a cumbersome scheme which will increase the cost of car hire generally. The industry's understanding was that the moratorium on the implementation of this measure was imposed to allow time for consultation and changes.

This is a finance measure but the Minister has also to be conscious of the effect it will have on car hire by tourists, particularly in the regions. The car hire business exists for people who may fly into cities but want to travel to the regions. Will the Minister ensure meaningful consultation takes place before this section of the Act is implemented with a view to making the system less cumbersome for the industry so that it does not increase the price of car hire generally? Our costs are high enough as it is.

Deputy Séamus Brennan: We keep a close eye on the scheme to ensure it does what is intended. The long list of avoidance practices which gave rise to concerns include breaking a long-term hire into a number of shorter term hires, providing different cars of the same type or model, including replacement cars within the short-term fleet and providing vehicles as insurance replacements. A concession originally intended to support the tourism industry was increasingly used to support a range of unrelated business models. I accept the Deputy's point that it is important from my perspective that the measures are simple and do not damage the car hire or tourism industries in any way and I will monitor them closely.

Arts and Culture Plan.

7. **Deputy Joe Costello** asked the Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism the way he is promoting accessibility to the arts for all sectors of society in Government owned and sponsored institutions and organisations; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10837/08]

9. **Deputy Eamon Gilmore** asked the Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism further to Question No. 61 of 25 October 2007, the progress made towards extending the opening hours of national museums and galleries; when these extended opening times will take effect; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10824/08]

Deputy Séamus Brennan: I propose to take Questions Nos. 7 and 9 together.

Government policy on the arts is set out in the programme for Government and elaborated further in my Department's statement of strategy and my recently published arts and culture plan 2008. One of the stated objectives of this policy is to encourage and support the strategic development of the arts in geographic communities and communities of interest for the disadvantaged and for minority groups. My policy is to promote and strengthen the arts in all its forms, increase access and participation and make the arts an integral and valued part of our national life. Consequently, all funding allocated by my Department to the arts is aimed at, *inter alia*, addressing the issues of cultural participation, access and social inclusion.

[Deputy Séamus Brennan.]

Provision is made within the annual funding allocations to the national cultural institutions for education and outreach programmes, which are a key element in addressing and promoting accessibility for all sectors of society. Within these institutions, education and outreach programmes are aimed particularly at disadvantaged sections of society. The institutions are also actively engaged in promoting accessibility through primary and secondary school programmes, in many cases targeting schools designated as disadvantaged.

My Department and the agencies under its remit are also considering the recent ESRI report, *In the Frame or Out of the Picture: a Statistical Analysis of Public Involvement in the Arts*, in the context of the accessibility question. In September 2007 I announced proposals for more flexible opening hours in the national cultural institutions, and especially the national museums and galleries, to reflect the changed lifestyles of those who wish to visit. I am particularly anxious to extend Sunday opening hours and to arrange for late openings at least one night per week. The funding allocated to the national cultural institutions for 2008 includes additional funding to facilitate these extended opening hours. Significant progress is being made on this issue and Sunday opening will be in place at the main institutions, with the exception of the National Library, from this May.

Deputy Mary Upton: The NESF report, *The Arts, Cultural Inclusion and Social Cohesion*, and the report to which the Minister referred, *In the Frame or Out of the Picture*, have indicated clearly that people from disadvantaged socioeconomic or educational backgrounds are less likely to access arts facilities. I am concerned that much of what the Minister said was aspirational, with little delivery thus far on his objectives. I welcome his comments on outreach but much more can be done, such as reduced ticket prices or family entrance fees. Involvement with local government on promoting the arts should be encouraged.

In reply to a parliamentary question put in October, he stated that a strategy committee was to be established. What exactly has happened in that regard, apart from the establishment of the committee? I fear we will have a recurrence of the arts in education report, in respect of which we are still awaiting action after 18 months.

Deputy Séamus Brennan: The NESF report, about which I have spoken publicly, points out that access to the arts is an issue and artistic exclusion is as painful in many ways as social exclusion. I fully accept that and intend to work towards the solutions it suggests.

Other issues arise regarding, for example, access by non-nationals to the artistic world in a strategic context. I recently published the Department's plan for 2008, which addresses in detail the issue of access in the context of opening hours, forthcoming events and what agencies are doing to ensure more structured access to the arts. That plan and the Department's strategy will continue to press for greater access to the arts.

Deputy Olivia Mitchell: Dublin City Council organised a successful culture night during which access was free to theatres and all cultural facilities under the council's remit. I understand the event will be repeated this year. Does the Minister see a role for himself in encouraging local authorities and arts venues to participate in a national culture week? Access also requires awareness because the reason people do not participate is often that they are unaware of what is going on or are not conscious of art galleries and museums. They may not realise a play is being staged down the road in The New Theatre. Is there anything the Minister can do to ensure there is a national advertising campaign for such a week which would go a long way towards introducing people to the arts, perhaps for the first time?

Deputy Séamus Brennan: Yes. On page five of the Arts and Culture Plan 2008, I propose a national cultural day in order to welcome a new audience. It is debatable whether it can be expanded beyond a day or whether it should be focused on a few hours. The concept of focusing in this way is almost simplistic but it highlights the importance of a national cultural day. It can be put together along the lines of the city council's successful evening some months back when it focused on a few hours; because it highlighted those few hours the cultural institutions got a huge response with which they were very happy. I hope to be able to proceed with the national cultural day I proposed in the document during the summer, if not sooner.

Deputy Mary Upton: My first point is along the lines outlined by Deputy Mitchell on advertising and informing people. A greater effort is required at local level. A case can also be made for a national television campaign to keep people informed and aware of what is going on. For example, airports can be useful from a tourism point of view in terms of galleries and museums and when they are open.

An interesting statistic from the In the Frame report was that ethnic minorities do not interact very much with the arts other than through churches. Perhaps this is an opening through which the arts can be promoted and encouraged. We can all examine how that approach can be further used to encourage ethnic minorities and the population in general to engage more in the arts.

Deputy Séamus Brennan: That is a useful suggestion which I will examine more closely.

Sports and Public Health.

8. **Deputy Jan O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism the role his Department plays in facilitating the level of co-operation between public health policy and promotion and sport policy; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10847/08]

Deputy Séamus Brennan: The Government recognises the major role that sport can play in enhancing the health of people through active participation. The Irish Sports Council, ISC, which is funded by my Department, is the statutory body responsible for encouraging the promotion, development and co-ordination of competitive sport and for increasing participation in recreational sport. My Department and the ISC liaise with the Department of Health and Children and the HSE on matters of mutual concern.

Officials from my Department and the council have actively participated in the development of key initiatives such as, for example, the national children's strategy and the task force on obesity. The ISC participates in various working groups and committees of both the Health Service Executive and the Department of Health and Children on broad public health issues. For example, the chief executive officer of the ISC chaired the national obesity task force and also serves on a number of other groups including the national implementation committee for the children's strategy and a high level group on cardiovascular disease prevention.

At national level, the ISC has developed a close working relationship with the population health function of the HSE and has regular meetings with it to discuss areas of common interest and possible co-operation. In recent years the ISC has received funding from the HSE of €200,000, which is used to promote programmes that target obesity at local level through the local sports partnerships, LSPs.

My Department and the council also worked with the Department of Health and Children to secure support from the dormant accounts fund to employ social inclusion development officers in 20 LSPs throughout the country to promote participation opportunities for people

[Deputy Séamus Brennan.]

with a disability. This year, funding of €1.5 million has been allocated from the dormant accounts fund for this initiative.

With regard to the LSPs, all of the LSP boards and committees include a local officer representing the HSE. In most cases, the HSE representative works directly in the area of health promotion with an emphasis on physical activity promotion. As part of the work of the LSPs, they develop a local strategic plan for sport and this plan is closely linked to the positive health messages endorsed by the HSE. Furthermore, the LSPs deliver programmes and projects in conjunction with the HSE to target specific groups that have traditionally low levels of participation in sport and physical activity. Examples of these types of projects include participation programmes for older people, women and people from areas of disadvantage.

The ISC is committed to the roll out of the LSP network on a nationwide basis to increase participation at a local level, ensure that local resources are used to best effect and to make sure that the experiences of participants in sport are positive. This network is due to be completed later this year, with 33 sites established covering the whole country.

Deputy Mary Upton: The Minister referred to the obesity taskforce. My understanding is that many of the sections of its report are gathering dust and little progress has been made. It is very important that the Department with a responsibility for sport has an input and that there is interaction with the Department of Health and Children. What is the role of the Department of Education and Science in terms of interaction? There is a need for considerably more joined-up thinking. A delegation appeared before a committee yesterday from the Federation of Irish Sport. One of the points it made was that a cross-departmental interaction is required, especially including education.

There is a significant drop-out rate among young people playing sport in the 15 years to 19 years age group. That is an age when one hopes young people are retained within sporting activities but, unfortunately, for a variety of reasons they seem to drop out. The encouragement does not seem to be there. What we are trying to do is to lay down the framework for healthy lifestyles.

To return to the debate we had last night on primary schools, there is a lack of adequate PE facilities in many schools. Again, what we are trying to do there is put down the building blocks and give young children an opportunity. If we do not do that at a very early age then we cannot expect that they will be able to maintain an interest in sport because they will never have had that opportunity. I would like to hear the Minister's comments on the role of primary schools in regard to sport and health and the factors that influence the drop out of teenagers, especially between the ages of 15 years and 19 years according to the reports.

Deputy Séamus Brennan: We are all learning that health is a multifaceted area that needs to be supported and tackled with a range of resources. We referred to obesity and research and how sport can be used as a weapon against obesity, and by virtue of that against ill health.

The role of the alcohol industry is an important one. The question is whether we can continue the double think of supporting the industry at one level and denouncing it at another level, especially in the context of sport. I do not have the figures for the drop-out rate of young people aged between 15 and 20 but I know it is substantial. We do need to address that issue to try to hold on to young people. It is not easy to hold on to them up to the age of 15 but beyond that other interests present and it becomes increasingly difficult to continue to retain them in sporting activities. That is why the Irish Sports Council programmes are very important.

Deputy Upton inquired about obesity. I recognise that issue has to be addressed at various levels, including diet. Lifestyle is an important factor in obesity and environmental issues. The

role of sport is very much at the centre of health promotion. Sport can play a leading role in tackling obesity. We are making every effort to ensure that is happening and to bring about joined-up Government in terms of health, sport, the environment and various Departments and agencies that have a direct involvement in it.

Deputy Olivia Mitchell: There is no disputing the correlation between physical activity and better health and we have had all the warning signs that our population is heading in the wrong direction. I feel sorry for the Minister because to talk about a drop-out rate is one thing, but so many children never participate in a sport because there are so few facilities in schools. Even in our constituency many schools have no sports hall. It is no wonder they do not get involved in sport, get no interest in sport and, if they take to a sport, drop out, particularly girls.

From the lottery funding point of view, now that we have many facilities around the country there is an opportunity to be more focused on what facilities are provided in future. Given that the Department of Education and Science has little interest in sport, is there a case to be made for changing the guidelines to ensure facilities provided are placed near schools so that if a school has no sports ground, children have access to them? Few grants of the capital lottery money go to public, State schools. Am I correct?

Deputy Séamus Brennan: Yes.

Deputy Olivia Mitchell: Some have gone to private schools. There is an assumption that State schools will receive funding from the Department of Education and Science but that is not happening. Perhaps it falls to the Department of Arts, Sport and Tourism to target facilities that would be available to school children. I have raised the issue and I know Deputy Brennan is examining the guidelines for the applications to try to be more focused and get multi-user and multi-ownership of facilities. That is the key to getting participation at an early age.

Deputy Séamus Brennan: Now that the sports capital programme is so many years old and has provided so many thousands of infrastructural projects up and down the country we are examining the next round of that and how we can make it even more effective. One way to do that is to ensure facilities can embrace the educational system. That might be as simple as ensuring a facility is built on an adjacent site or in consultation with a school, or it might be more complicated. We are closely examining the notion that facilities built through the sports capital programme would be available to schools. We did not do this in the past because we were focused on providing the facilities for the clubs, agencies, towns and teams. In this round we can examine synergies between schools and the lottery funding.

Deputy Mary Upton: I refer to the first part of the Minister's reply and the drop-out rate for 15-19 year olds. The Minister made many soothing noises, which are all very reassuring. He said we must address it, but what exactly will we do, who will do it and when will it happen? This problem has been around for a long time. The drop-put rate remains consistently high, yet nothing has happened. Can we have an action plan, a timeframe and some definites about when it will be in place?

Deputy Séamus Brennan: It would be unfair for any of us to give the impression that nothing is going on in that area and I do not think Deputy Upton suggests that. Many schools are trying hard and doing their best for students from age 15 upwards and putting on physical education programmes. An amount of the sports capital programme money allocated in recent years has gone to more than 60 different sports. We tend to think of football when we look at that scheme but there is a range of up to 60 other sports and they engage the attention of many 15

[Deputy Séamus Brennan.]

to 19 year olds in quite a systematic way. Quite an amount is going on, Deputy Upton says we can do more and that is true. I will take a close look at the options available.

Question No. 9 taken with Question No. 7

National Archives.

10. **Deputy Michael D'Arcy** asked the Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism when the new board of the National Archives Advisory Council will be appointed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10938/08]

Deputy Séamus Brennan: The principal function of the National Archives Advisory Council, NAAC, is to advise me in the exercise of my powers under the National Archives Act on all matters affecting archives within the scope of the Act, and on the use of the archives by the public. The council also has a statutory function to advise the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government on keeping local authority records. The term of office of the current members of the NAAC expired recently.

The National Archives is facing into years with a complex agenda including the redevelopment of its headquarters and the revision of the National Archives Act. A complete changeover at this point would leave very little of the corporate memory of the NAAC. For continuity some of the members should be reappointed to the council, if they are willing to serve a further term of office. Accordingly, I am currently considering appointment of a new board. In view of the complex nature of the work facing the council in the coming years, I do not propose to rush into these appointments and will ensure that the council is provided with the necessary expertise to fulfil its duties. I anticipate, however, that I will make these appointments shortly.

Deputy Olivia Mitchell: I recently read that the Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism, Deputy Brennan, has 199 board positions within his gift. This is a serious responsibility and I do not need to lecture him on the importance of choosing the right people. I have no problem with the members of the former board. If he wants to reappoint all of them I will not complain. However, appointments should be made. This is a statutory body. By law we should have it, but we have had no body since last November. As the Minister said, part of its obligation is to advise him. If there had been such a body it might have advised the Minister not to put what little genealogy records we have left in the hands of groups of people charging for it. This is public information and it is the wrong choice. I am appalled that the few genealogy records we have, having burned nearly 1,000 years of records in 1922, which are parish records collated and gathered using public money, are not available to the public. On St. Patrick's Day we will spend hundreds of thousands of euro, millions of euro as Deputy Tom Kitt erroneously stated this morning, sending Ministers overseas to showcase Ireland to our diaspora. I think all the Cabinet members except Deputy Brennan are going away. In the same week we are telling them we will charge them for information on their forefathers. It was the wrong message to send and even at this stage we should examine this. It should be public information. We have a long tradition of making archival material freely available and facilitating access to it. Charging for it is the wrong choice.

Deputy Séamus Brennan: I want to address a range of issues around the National Archives. In most countries the national archives are a major institution and are usually housed in an iconic building and looked on with pride by the citizenry. I do not say that is not the case here, but we tend to take a storage view of our archives rather than a view that we are proud of what we have managed to assemble. We saw it recently when we published the 1911 census on the Web. Already there have been 17 million hits. That shows the appetite that is there. Deputy

Olivia Mitchell has been concerned for some time about the quality and availability of storage space and because of that urging I have asked my Department to consider the views I am putting forward and to come back to me as quickly as possible. I will take a look at the fee situation, but it is a bigger issue than that. I would like to take a broader national view of these archives to see how we can bring them centre stage in our artistic world.

Deputy Olivia Mitchell: Can I take it from that response that we can look forward to an iconic building for the national archives? Is that a promise?

Deputy Séamus Brennan: Whether a building is iconic is a matter of opinion.

Deputy Olivia Mitchell: Indeed, but if it is the Minister's opinion I will be happy with that. Are we heading in that direction?

Deputy Séamus Brennan: There is approximately €20 million in the national development plan for the development of the archives. It does not specifically lay down that it is for a building, but I have come to the conclusion that the archives are unsung heroes that need to be brought centre stage. Just like our museum or our library, they need the same kind of national status. I will look at how I can move that forward.

Film Industry Development.

11. **Deputy Liz McManus** asked the Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism his views on the report by the Irish Film Board to his Department on studio facilities here; if a decision has been taken by him on progress in this area; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10830/08]

Deputy Séamus Brennan: The availability of adequate, fully equipped studio resources that can cater for the needs of indigenous and incoming film and television productions is essential to marketing Ireland as a film location. The Irish Film Board was asked to prepare a report on the future options available for film studios in Ireland. With the support of independent consultants, the Irish Film Board, which is our national film agency and which, *inter alia*, promotes Ireland as a location for international film production, submitted its proposals to me on how to ensure that Ireland has its own film studio. With the assistance of the Office of Public Works, my Department is working on assuring the future availability of film studios in Ireland. That process is currently at a sensitive point and I do not wish to be drawn on the state of play on discussions, but it is my intention to bring the matter to successful conclusion shortly.

Deputy Mary Upton: If the negotiations are at a delicate stage, I understand that it would not be appropriate to go into detail on the issue. It is very important that we have our film studio and the Minister might be able to comment on issues such as the economies of scale. I am looking for a much wider discussion on the Irish film industry. We need to be able to encourage people to come into this country to make films here. There has unfortunately been a drop-off in activity recently. We must make a serious effort to put in place the right kind of environment and incentives for the film makers to come to Ireland to support and sustain that studio.

Deputy Séamus Brennan: I have often said that we are only scratching the surface when it comes to the Irish film industry. There is great potential, but we need to roll up our sleeves and come at it from a fresh direction. There are almost 2,000 people employed full time in the industry, which is the highest number since 2000. We are doing very well in television and we have also had wonderful successes in the Oscars and with other awards. I am bit concerned that we have not managed to attract feature films in sufficient quantity. We were able to attract many such films years ago, but we have only done one or two in recent years. I have instructed

[Deputy Séamus Brennan.]

the Department and the Irish Film Board to figure out the problem and I will see what I can do to respond to it.

The Minister for Finance extended the tax concession in the budget, which was widely welcomed by the industry and which should help somewhat. We are only scratching the surface and we can do much more. I look forward to working with the film industry to making that happen.

Access to Sporting Facilities.

12. **Deputy Willie Penrose** asked the Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism the discussions with the Department of Education and Science that have taken place to promote and encourage the use of school halls and sports facilities for voluntary and community groups; the discussions he has had with the Department of Education and Science to enable barriers to be removed to allow access to facilities; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10852/08]

Deputy Séamus Brennan: The Department of Education and Science is represented on the inter-agency steering group established by my Department to oversee the development of a national sports facility strategy. The aim of the strategy is to provide high-level policy direction for future investment at national, regional and local level. Work on the development of the national sports facility strategy has included discussions with the Department of Education and Science on how its policy on the provision of sports hall facilities and my Department's policy for the provision of sports facilities might be complementary.

Under the sports capital programme, which is administered by my Department, funding is allocated to sporting and community organisations, and in certain circumstances to schools and colleges throughout the country. It is the main vehicle for development of sports facilities at local, regional and national level throughout the country. Under the programme, priority is given to the needs of disadvantaged areas in the provision of sports facilities

Primary and post-primary schools that wish to be considered for funding under the programme may apply for funding jointly with local sports clubs or community groups, and they must meet other conditions including a requirement that the local community will have significant access to the proposed facility. This access must be for at least 30 hours a week throughout the year when it is not being used by the school itself. Any sports facility proposed for funding by a sporting organisation and which would be located within school grounds would have to meet these same conditions. I think that is reasonable. Applications from primary and post-primary schools and colleges on their own are not considered under the programme, as responsibility for the provision of sports facilities in schools and colleges is a matter in the first instance for the Minister for Education and Science.

Deputy Mary Upton: There is a need for joined-up thinking on the interaction with the Department of Education and Science. All of the sporting groups that have recently come before the committee have spoken to us about the duplication of resources in a small town or a parish, where two or three halls might be available. There is a need to put in a place a system where people can find out why the school hall already in place cannot be used throughout the summer by sporting groups. It seems to be a huge waste of an available resource.

It may require some discussion, negotiation and possibly some financial exchanges of a modest variety. Community halls and school halls are publicly funded facilities and there is a need to open them up to the public.

Deputy Séamus Brennan: The Deputy previously raised this issue with me and the need for joined-up thinking. Primary and post-primary schools that want to be considered for funding can apply jointly with local sports clubs. This is a change because until now, the sports capital

programme was separate from the Department of Education and Science. We have formally agreed for the first time that we will work more closely with that Department and see whether joint applications for funds could be considered when awarding sports capital grants.

We are moving in the direction urged by the Deputy. We did not do that in the past, because there was sufficient demand for the sports capital programme on its own, without being drawn into the area of education.

Deputy Olivia Mitchell: I will not labour the point, but despite all the facilities that have been built, there is a problem with access. Many of the facilities that have a single owner, such as clubs composed largely of volunteers, find it extremely onerous to maintain a building. The financial burden and the workload would be significantly reduced if there was multi-ownership.

I wish to raise with the Minister a problem that was brought to my attention by my colleague, Deputy Olwyn Enright, in respect of the Birr Rugby Club. Apparently there is a rule that when an organisation receives a second grant under the scheme, it must obtain a document from the Chief State Solicitor's Office but there is enormous delay in obtaining said document. I understand that Birr Rugby Club has been forced to obtain a bank loan, which is costing it a fortune. It may have to carry that loan for up to one year. Perhaps something could be done to streamline that system.

I also wish to take this opportunity to wish the hurling team of my home town, Birr, the best of luck on Monday.

Deputy Mary Upton: I appreciate the points about the future programme of sports capital funding, the interaction between clubs and schools and so on. However, my key point is that facilities are already in existence that have been paid for by the taxpayer but access to them is not available. Very often they are closed at 6 p.m. when many clubs would love to avail of them. Basketball Ireland, for example, would love to have access to a number of facilities that are available for use, but not available to them. The facilities are in place, the buildings are there but access to them is not. We must examine ways in which to make such facilities more widely available.

Deputy Séamus Brennan: As the Deputy knows, that is an old issue, which comes up regularly. Many of the difficulties are related to insurance issues and so on.

Deputy Mary Upton: We must find ways to get over the insurance issues. There must be a way around them.

Deputy Olivia Mitchell: It is ridiculous.

Deputy Séamus Brennan: What I can offer is that if funding is jointly applied for by sports clubs, community groups and/or local schools, whether primary or post primary, that the mixture can be considered for a capital grant and in that connection, use of whatever public building is available could be part of that deal. That is all I can offer.

On the Chief State Solicitor's office issue, my Department informs me that there are two reasons why a lot of sports grants which are agreed do not get paid for a long time. One is planning applications and the other is legal issues tied up at the Chief State Solicitor's office. I urge those applying for funds to make sure that under the planning and legal headings, they have cleared those obstacles before they progress their application.

Arts Plan.

13. **Deputy Paul Kehoe** asked the Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism when he proposes

[Deputy Paul Kehoe.]

to act on the recommendations in the Arts in Education Report; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10963/08]

Deputy Séamus Brennan: I refer the Deputy to my reply of 12 February last. As I outlined then, meetings are taking place between officials from my Department, the Department of Education and Science and the Arts Council to consider the recommendations contained in the draft report. This inter-agency group has been examining the report and is identifying ways of implementing and giving effect to the practical recommendations that it contains.

These recommendations reflect the result of the wide-ranging and in-depth research that was conducted by the committee set up to consider this important issue. This is the first such study of its nature for some considerable time and it is important that a reasoned and practical approach be adopted to considering its recommendations.

The inter-agency group is now in the process of drawing up proposals that will effectively and efficiently put in place actions to progress the essential aspects of the draft report.

Deputy Olivia Mitchell: I know the Minister is keen to increase participation in the arts and made a speech to that effect at the launch of the NESF report, which went down well with the players in the arts. I reiterate the point that unless we increase participation in the arts through the schools, the arts will always be on the fringe. We must mainstream the arts. The Minister is probably too polite to say this, but I am not — if there is inertia here, it is coming from the Department of Education and Science. I know it is the Department that is most resistant to change. Therefore, it falls to the Minister to drive this. If it is to proceed, he will have to get behind it. It must be his initiative. I am sure he accepts that but I ask him to take that burden. Schools are the key in turning around participation in the arts but the arts should not just be an occasional experience for students. While the artists in residence programme, for example, is wonderful, it is not permanently in place in schools. It is available in a school one year, but not the next, meaning the next cohort of students do not get to enjoy it. It is tantalising and it is almost worse than nothing to give students something and then take it away.

Deputy Séamus Brennan: I have sent the report back to the Arts Council with a request that it come up with some practical recommendations. Some of the recommendations, in my view, are not very practical. They need to be fleshed out some more so I have returned the report to the Arts Council and asked it to do that.

Written Answers follow Adjournment Debate.

Message from Seanad.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Jack Wall): I wish to inform the House that Seanad Éireann has passed the Finance Bill 2008 without recommendation.

Adjournment Debate Matters.

Acting Chairman: I 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 Ruairí Quinn — the reply to Parliamentary Question No. 98 of 20 February 2008; (2) Deputy Michael D. Higgins — the urgent need for Galway Educate Together national school, which having undertaken a detailed process of planning for the next four years, to be allocated the full number of mainstream teachers required, namely, nine, as opposed to an allocation of less than nine, the school's number of pupils making the retention of all teachers necessary; (3) Deputy Thomas P. Broughan — the need to urgently provide the necessary funds to build a

much-needed youth and community resource centre in Foxfield, St. John Parish, Kilbarrack, Dublin 5; (4) Deputy Willie Penrose — the need to sanction the construction of a new school at Sonna, Slanemor, Mullingar, County Westmeath; (5) Deputy Mary Alexandra White — the need to undertake an audit of coarse fish in Irish rivers; (6) Deputy Joe Costello — the need to address the asylum applications of persons (details supplied); (7) Deputy Joan Burton — the failure to provide the promised gymnasium for Castleknock community college and the promised extension for St. Brigid's national school, Beechpark, Castleknock; (8) Deputy Joanna Tuffy — the steps to be taken to ensure the Rath Lugh monument is protected; and (9) Deputy Chris Andrews — to ask the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government to intervene to ensure the twin chimneys on the Poolbeg peninsula are provided with protected status as a matter of urgency and that he liaise with the local authority on the issue.

The matters raised by Deputies Quinn, Penrose, Tuffy and White have been selected for discussion.

Adjournment Debate.

School Accommodation.

Deputy Ruairí Quinn: I want to put on record my dissatisfaction with what I would describe as the Department of evasion and smoke, masquerading as the Department of Education and Science. This is but one example of a series of replies that deliberately set out to mislead Deputies; to either lie to us in factual terms or simply to avoid answering written questions.

I will give the House an example of what I mean. I asked the following two-line written question of the Minister for Education and Science:

To ask the Minister for Education and Science the number of primary schools using prefab classrooms; and if she will make a statement on the matter.

Her reply, which extends over two pages, states the following:

The information sought by the Deputy is not readily available.

While comprehensive information is held on individual school files, the Department does not yet have these details available in a format that provides readily accessible cumulative information on the overall position. It is, however, intended to address this issue as part of a general review of rental policy currently being undertaken.

In the short time available to me, I wish to make a brief statement. To double the capitation grant from its present level of €178 per primary school student over a five year period, which is in the programme for Government, would cost less than 1% of the current €9.3 billion budget of the Department of Education and Science. The Minister is incapable of responding to that request, made jointly in a letter from the patrons of the five institutions that are currently the patrons in our primary school system. She is incapable of making a response to meet the need for extra primary education resources because she simply does not know how much she is paying out by way of rental for prefabs.

The prefabs to which I refer are buildings that will have a life expectancy way in excess of what it says on the tin, so to speak. There are children going through our primary school system, in the second richest country in Europe, who will spend their entire educational life in

[Deputy Ruairí Quinn.]

prefabs. There are teachers who, when it rains, as it is doing now, wear wellingtons in school because they must move from one classroom to another. In the Educate Together school outside Drogheda, for example, the teachers must bring wellingtons to school because there are no corridors connecting the prefab classrooms. This is a crime against future generations.

The Minister's reply — this the third time I have sought to have it raised on the Adjournment — is a testimony to the skills of obfuscation, evasion and down-right deceit. It represents a refusal, ultimately, by those on the other side of the House to recognise that they operate in a republic in which not only are they a Government, but they are also accountable to the elected Deputies on this side of the House, to whom they must give straight answers to straight questions. The two page response to a two line question asking how many prefabs are in use begins with the words, "The information sought by the Deputy is not readily available". Is it any wonder the Department of Education and Science — what a contradiction in terms — is in utter chaos?

Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism (Deputy Séamus Brennan): I am replying on behalf of the Minister for Education and Science, Deputy Mary Hanafin. As the Deputy will be aware from the Minister's reply to his previous question, the position is that while comprehensive information is held on individual school files, the Department does not yet have these details available in a format that provides readily accessible cumulative information on the overall position on temporary accommodation. This issue is, however, being addressed as part of a general review of rental policy being undertaken. Information is being collated on schools which have received approval from the Department for temporary accommodation. It will be used to produce a database of information which will be maintained on an ongoing basis. The Minister will ensure the Deputy receives the information sought once it is available.

In addition to developing a database, the review of rental policy will involve the development of new procedures for both short-term rental and purchase and a draw-down contract for supply and installation of temporary accommodation on a regional basis. Existing rental contracts will also be investigated with a view to establishing if there is potential for better value for money. In the meantime, the Department is examining all applications for additional accommodation on an individual basis to determine if there is a need and what is the most appropriate solution.

The Deputy will be aware that demand for additional accommodation in schools has risen significantly in recent years, with the appointment of 6,000 extra teachers in the primary sector alone since 2002. Against this background, the Department has nonetheless managed to keep expenditure on temporary accommodation low. Last year rental costs only amounted to 5% of the total investment in school buildings. Where accommodation is needed at short notice, however, a temporary solution can be the only option. Such accommodation may also be used where the need is short term such as when a school requires a temporary building while it is awaiting the completion of construction of permanent facilities. However, the emphasis will continue to be on providing permanent accommodation, where possible.

This year more than €586 million will be invested in school buildings and construction work will take place which is expected to provide permanent accommodation for approximately 20,000 pupils when complete. In the past newly recognised schools have generally been required to open in temporary accommodation. As the Minister pointed out in her previous discussion of the issue with the Deputy, she has been anxious to move away from this approach in developing areas. This year the Department is working hard to open as many new schools as possible in permanent accommodation. Departmental officials have been working in partnership with local authority staff to acquire sites needed for new schools next September. The

aim, where possible, is to put permanent solutions in place on a phased basis to meet the immediate September 2008 needs, with a second phase to follow as required. Permanent solutions will be possible where a long-term site has been secured. The Deputy will be pleased to learn that this ambitious programme is on target. Not only has expenditure on temporary accommodation been kept to only about 5% of total investment in school buildings in recent years, the Department is also working hard to open new schools in permanent accommodation from the outset.

Schools Building Projects.

Deputy Willie Penrose: I thank the Ceann Comhairle for selecting this important matter for discussion on the Adjournment. Sonna is located in the parish of Ballynacarrigy, my own parish, near Mullingar. My wife and her family were educated in Sonna national school which was built in 1953 and caters for a large hinterland, including Slanemore, Mullingar, Walshestown, Monroe, Bunbrosna, Balgarrett and Kildallan.

To illustrate the enormity of the task facing the principal, teachers, board of management and parents' association, the two classes of 23 and 22 children, respectively, are accommodated in classrooms one third of the recommended size. From an environmental and health and safety perspective, this serious overcrowding is not acceptable and must be addressed. Pupil numbers have expanded as junior infants have been accepted on the basis that a new school will be completed on schedule. The school lacks accommodation for resource teachers who visit to assist children with academic difficulties and so forth. The space and facilities they require must be provided. The school must juggle the timetable to accommodate children with special needs. I commend the teachers, principal and everyone else involved for acting to ensure this vital resource facility is available.

Built in 1953, the school needs to be modernised. The building project entails upgrading and refurbishing the old school and constructing a new one with four proper size classrooms, a principal's office, secretarial room, resource room and staff room, which are necessities nowadays. The old building will be modernised to accommodate a small physical education hall and another resource room for teaching children with disabilities. It is important that the school is wheelchair accessible to ensure inclusivity at all levels.

The school was allocated a grant under the devolved schools scheme but withdrew from the scheme in February 2006 because it was not suitable on the grounds that inadequate funds had been provided to construct a new school building. In such a small rural area it is not feasible to ask schools to raise large sums of money to complete projects. In April 2006 the school was notified that it could proceed with the new school building and the Department would fund all but €63,000 of the cost of the work, still a significant sum for a rural school to raise.

In June 2006 the late Fr. Deegan and Mr. Daithí Ó Fiach, the school principal, met officials and the Department's architect to discuss changes needed to satisfy the Department's requirements, given that it was funding the full works. In April 2007 a project manager was appointed to speed up the project, as it was not progressing as quickly as it should. Plans were resubmitted to the Department in June 2007. The school was informed orally by an official in October 2007 that the Department's architect was still unhappy with aspects of the revised drawings and Mr. Ó Fiach was informed that a letter would be sent in due course outlining the areas requiring further attention in order that these could be modified to the satisfaction of the Department. Despite numerous telephone calls being made since October 2007, the school has not received a letter from the Department, as a result of which it has not been able to progress the project. Unless the school is notified of the Department's concerns regarding the revised plans, it cannot

[Deputy Willie Penrose.]

advance the project. The principal telephoned the Department and left his contact details but has not been contacted.

The Department has engaged in foot-dragging, obfuscation and procrastination to delay a worthy project. On behalf of the people of the rural area in question which I know well, I will not accept this approach. The parents of the pupils have sent me here to agitate and advocate their cause. The Department has failed to respond to the school authorities. The building project cannot proceed until a response is received. Too many phases are involved in the construction of new schools. A number of visitors from Gainstown are in the Visitors Gallery. Their school was also put through the mill and obstacles were erected when the school authorities were ready to proceed. The same problem occurs across the country. Ministers and Fianna Fáil councillors in County Westmeath have told me I am wrong in this regard. How could I be, given the disgraceful approach being taken?

Where better could one spend money than on the early stages of education? Giving young children entering primary school a happy environment, warm school, adequate space and accommodation and recreational facilities affords them an opportunity to develop. We would reap the benefits of such an approach when pupils progress into second and third level education, the cornerstones of the economy. I call on the Minister to contact the principal and board of management of Sonna national school, address problems which need to be solved and allow the school building project to proceed. The school serves the people of County Westmeath well and I intend to ensure it will continue to do so.

Deputy Séamus Brennan: On behalf of the Minister for Education and Science I thank the Deputy for giving me the opportunity to outline to the House the Department's position regarding the proposed provision of a new school building for Sonna national school, County Westmeath.

Sonna national school was originally included under the small schools initiative and the school was offered €440,000 to build and improve the accommodation in the school. Having examined all the options the school decided to build a new four classroom school but withdrew from the devolved scheme as they considered the allocation insufficient for such an undertaking. The school currently has two small permanent classrooms and two prefabs.

The current staffing in the school consists of the principal and three mainstream teachers together with a shared special education teacher. The proposed project will consist of the construction of a new four classroom school and is currently at stage 3 of architectural planning.

Under the lifetime of the national development plan almost €4.5 billion will be invested in schools. This is an unprecedented level of capital investment which reflects the commitment of the Government to continue its programme of sustained investment in primary and post-primary schools. This investment will facilitate the provision of new schools and extensions in developing areas and the improvement of existing schools through the provision of replacement schools, extensions or large scale refurbishments over the coming years.

The progression of all large scale building projects from initial design stage through to construction phase is considered on an ongoing basis in the context of the national development plan and the Department's multi-annual school building and modernisation programme. The project referred to by the Deputy will likewise be considered in that context.

I would like to give the assurance that the Minister and her Department are committed to providing a new school building for the national school referred to by the Deputy at the earliest possible date.

National Monuments.

Deputy Joanna Tuffy: As the Minister is aware, a situation arose today at the location of the Rath Lugh monument where, according to newspaper reports, a young woman has chained her neck to a jack in a tunnel and the fear is that if any attempt is made to remove her from the tunnel it could collapse putting her life in danger.

A dangerous situation has arisen at the site. I do not condone people putting their lives at risk in this way but statements from those protesting around the site would indicate that the tunnelling could put the monument at risk in addition to endangering the lives of the protestors and others around the site. I understand other protestors have chained themselves to various obstacles above the tunnels.

The Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government placed a permanent preservation order on the monument recently, the purpose of which is to preserve the monument. Concerns have been expressed by the protestors about the implementation of that preservation order. They are concerned about the works being carried out so close to the monument and whether the proper procedure is being followed in terms of ensuring that the preservation order is followed.

There are two sides to this issue. On the one side is the National Roads Authority and the workmen who are trying to do their job and on the other the protestors. The role of the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government is important in ensuring that the necessary steps are taken to preserve the monument and reassure the protestors, in so far as they can be reassured, that everything is being done to ensure the monument is protected in accordance with the preservation order. The Department must make certain there is ongoing monitoring of the works near the monument to ensure the monument is preserved.

In Opposition the Green Party was against the building of this motorway but its position has changed since going into Government. It is important that if preservation orders are made in respect of archaeological finds along the route they are strongly adhered to and that the Department and the Government does everything in their power to ensure that happens.

The way the M3 motorway project was carried out has been found to be at fault by the European Commission in terms of our monuments legislation and our archaeology. It has referred Ireland to the European Court of Justice because we did not carry out an environmental impact assessment of Lismullen, for example, and our National Monuments Act has been called into question. It is important that situation is rectified as quickly as possible.

What steps are being taken by the Government to ensure this monument is preserved, that there is ongoing monitoring in that regard and proper communicating with people who have concerns about what is being done by the Government and the Minister and his Department to ensure the preservation of this monument? There must be negotiation of some kind also and the Government should put that in place.

I realise we will never address everyone's concerns about this matter and the road is being built but in so far as it is possible we must try to solve the problem through negotiation. I am aware there was negotiation on the site today and an agreement reached that the woman would not be removed from the tunnel on foot of that negotiation.

There are people in the groups who are trying to protect the archaeology of this monument and other monuments along the route. I am sure if they were given the proper reassurances they could provide leadership in this dispute and be satisfied that as much as possible is being done in terms of protecting our archaeology under the current legislation, road orders and so on.

[Deputy Joanna Tuffy.]

It is important that whatever steps the Government and all the authorities can take to ensure life and health and safety is protected are taken. It is important also that anyone involved in these protests should ensure their fellow protestors do not put themselves at risk in the way that has been done today. There are people at the site who know it is wrong that people would put their lives at risk in this way and they should show leadership in that regard. The Government should work with the people concerned to reassure them in that regard. In that way they can reassure their fellow protestors and that this type of situation will not arise in the future.

Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The statutory responsibilities of the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government regarding the national monument at Rath Lugh, Lismullen, County Meath are those provided for under the National Monuments Acts 1930 to 2004.

The national monument at Rath Lugh is located on an esker which is a ridge of stones, sand and gravel in the townland of Lismullen, County Meath. The entire esker is heavily overgrown with trees and scrub. The overgrowth has been removed where the land take for the M3 motorway cuts the western edge of the ridge. The lands on which the monument is located are owned by Coillte, the semi-State forestry body. The national monuments service has been in contact with Coillte regarding the ongoing and future protection of the monument and has received its full co-operation.

Concern has been expressed about the condition of the monument and that the removal of the overgrowth might destabilise part of the esker with an attendant danger of injury or destruction to the national monument at Rath Lugh. On 28 September 2007, the Minister placed a temporary preservation order on the national monument at Rath Lugh. The temporary preservation order had a six month validity and was due to expire on 28 March 2008. Last week, the Minister made that temporary preservation order permanent.

Arrangements are being made to have the preservation order laid before the Houses and to notify relevant parties of the making of the order.

The area of the monument covered by the preservation order is adjacent to but does not encroach on the lands made available by the National Roads Authority to the company responsible for constructing the M3 motorway. The area of the monument is delineated by reference to national grid co-ordinates in an Ordnance Survey map attached to the order. The temporary preservation order and the preservation order cover the same area, that is, the monument itself and a 20 m buffer zone. Neither order encompasses the entire esker on which the monument is located.

To assess the stability of the esker on which the monument at Rath Lugh is located the Minister commissioned a report from an independent firm of consultants with relevant expertise in this matter. The report from the consultants recommended that a number of precautionary measures be put in place to ensure that the esker is not undermined during the nearby road construction works or in the longer term. The Department has asked the NRA to implement the measures outlined in the consultants' report.

Issues of safety in respect of the M3 construction work sites and adherence to health and safety requirements on these sites, including such works sites in the vicinity of Rath Lugh, are matters for the NRA and the contractors involved. I echo the concerns of Deputy Tuffy regarding the importance of safety at the site.

Deputy Joanna Tuffy: There was one question I raised that was not answered.

Acting Chairman: Supplementary questions are not allowed under Standing Orders.

Inland Fisheries.

Deputy Mary Alexandra White: I represent a great riverine constituency. The Nore, Barrow, Slaney rivers, among others, run through Carlow and Kilkenny. They are breathtaking in their beauty and length and a rich source of folklore. In the Elizabethan era, the poet Edmund Spenser said of the Barrow, “The goodly Barrow on whose bosom great salmon heape”.

Ireland has some of the cleanest and most lightly fished freshwaters in Europe. Our landscape is one of small fields and wild peat bogs, littered with loughs of all sizes and drained by many rivers. There are over 7,000 miles of riverbank for the coarse and pike angler. The scale of these waters varies dramatically.

For the past ten years, I have been campaigning to end drift-netting for salmon at sea to protect the species. Thankfully, this is now done. In the area of angling we have catch-and-release which allows sufficient number of salmon to be returned and allows salmon time to regenerate in a post drift-net era. However, we must look to the coarse fish, such as roach, bream, carp, pike and rudd, whose numbers are dwindling rapidly due to exploitation. I accept coarse anglers can catch a limited amount but there is now extensive fishing of coarse species which will lead to a collapse of these stocks.

Current by-laws introduced in recent years by the Department of Communications, Energy and Natural Resources impose a bag limit of four coarse fish in any one day and prohibit the killing of any coarse fish greater than 25 cm in length. They also prohibit the sale of any coarse fish in Ireland, excluding Northern Ireland. This provision will not apply to fishing tackle dealers and fish bait suppliers who have been granted an exemption. While these measures are in place, more needs to be done.

Anecdotal evidence from waterway keepers and others suggests large concerns about existing stocks. As one who treasures the biodiversity of our rivers, we must maintain it. The life cycle of flies, dragonflies, midges and water boatmen, a type of water beetle, depend on a delicate ecosystem of which coarse fish are part of the natural chain. These species are in imminent danger of stock collapse.

Will the Minister put in place adequate resources for the support of private waterkeepers? More tangible resources for inland waterways will ensure overfishing and over-exploitation of these stocks can come to an end. Coarse fishing also provides a valuable source of tourism for rural areas. Many fishermen use the Barrow riverbank from Carlow to Muine Beag, from Borris to the tidal waterways at St. Mullin's. Constituents have raised this matter with me and hope the Minister will implement measures to protect coarse fish stocks.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: Under the Fisheries Acts, primary responsibility for the management, conservation, protection and development of inland fisheries stocks rests with the central and regional fisheries boards in accordance with the Fisheries Acts 1959 to 2003. I rely on the advice of the boards in determining policy and legislative measure aimed at protecting these stocks.

I am advised by the boards they are aware that, due to changing population dynamics in recent years, some anglers may not have been respecting the practice of returning coarse fish catches live to the waters from which they were caught. Accordingly, localised fish stocks have been subjected to additional pressures in recent times.

Where the fish are particularly accessible, they are now being targeted as a food item. While the impact of this relatively new practice has not had a significant impact on coarse fish stocks nationally, some local problems have been recorded. The main problem appears to be percep-

[Deputy Eamon Ryan.]

tion. In Ireland, we are not used to seeing coarse fish killed and eaten and consequently domestic anglers are commonly angered when they witness this practice.

In 2005, on foot of concerns regarding the status of coarse fisheries in our rivers, a coarse fish review group was established under the chairmanship of the Central Fisheries Board. This group undertook a review of coarse fish policy with a view to developing an informed national policy for the management, development and protection of this resource.

On the advice of the review group, my Department introduced two by-laws, the Conservation of and Prohibition on Sale of Coarse Fish By-Law No. 806 2006 and the Conservation of Pike By-Law No. 809 2006, which control fishing for coarse fish. These by-laws provide several conservation measures, including that of limiting the number of fish that may be taken by anglers, and were introduced to prevent over-exploitation of coarse fish and pike in rivers, canals and lakes.

Details of these instruments were advertised as stipulated in the statute. The fisheries boards have undertaken several initiatives to publicise their content within the regions. These include multilingual signage erected at coarse fisheries and the printing of leaflets, in up to seven languages, setting out the content of the coarse and pike by-laws. These leaflets have been distributed by staff to all tackle shops and also to anglers on the riverbank. A considerable proportion of fisheries boards' resources and time is devoted to the protection of these stocks. The impact of these measures is being closely monitored by the boards.

For many years the fisheries boards and other State agencies have conducted surveys on coarse fish stocks and the relative health of the populations. Results from these quantitative and ongoing surveys indicate that coarse fish stocks in our main fishery rivers and lakes are healthy and sufficient to meet the needs of both domestic and tourist coarse fish anglers.

While the boards are always working to improve the coarse fisheries and their ecosystems, they are satisfied that our fisheries are not going through a period of serious decline due to overfishing.

The Dáil adjourned at 3.50 p.m. until 2.30 p.m. on Wednesday, 2 April 2008.

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 13, inclusive, answered orally.

Cultural Programmes.

14. **Deputy Joanna Tuffy** asked the Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism his views on offering departmental support in extending a scheme such as Dublin City Council's passport for leisure scheme nationwide in view of the report, *In the Frame or Out of the Picture*, by the National Economic and Social Forum which shows that persons over 45 are more likely to attend no arts events at all; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10835/08]

Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism (Deputy Séamus Brennan): I understand that the scheme referred to by the Deputy is a broad-based scheme aimed at encouraging the over 55's to avail of and participate in the various sports, art, culture and other facilities operated by or in conjunction with Dublin City Council. I commend Dublin City on this initiative and would hope to see other local authorities follow suit, particularly in the context of publicly funded and subsidised venues and facilities. There are no plans at present to introduce such a scheme within my Department's remit.

I should point out to the Deputy, however, that it is Government policy to provide free admission to the National Collections held by the National Cultural Institutions within my Department's remit, including the National Library of Ireland, National Museum of Ireland, National Gallery of Ireland, Irish Museum of Modern Art, the Chester Beatty Library, and the Crawford Art Gallery, Cork. I should also point out that outreach programmes are operated by some of these institutions in which those in the over 40s age bracket can participate. My Department is currently working on a plan for Culture Day in 2009 when access to cultural and arts events will be either free or reduced.

National Archives.

15. **Deputy Joe Carey** asked the Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism if he will report on progress towards constructing a new home for the National Archives; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10926/08]

Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism (Deputy Séamus Brennan): A capital provision of €20m is included in the National Development Plan 2007-2013 for the redevelopment of the National Archives headquarters. The Office of Public Works has carried out significant preliminary work on the accommodation brief and the likely cost of providing the National Archives with new storage and other accommodation.

My over-riding priority for the National Archives is the provision of new premises that are sufficiently large and meet internationally recognised standards. Its existing storage buildings at Bishop Street and the Four Courts must be replaced because the facilities there are either not large enough, have access difficulties or do not meet the international standards for archival storage. The new premises must accommodate the archives stored in those buildings and must enable the National Archives to accept transfers of Departmental records in accordance with the National Archives Act. The latter records include both the annual increments of 30-year old records due for transfer between now and the year 2030, and the larger quantities of older records overdue for transfer from some Departments and Offices.

The new premises must also accommodate the public and technical services of the National Archives, and its staff. Its public areas must include both improved provision for reader services and provision for public services that cannot be accommodated in the existing buildings, such as a lecture room, and specialised areas for exhibitions and education services. An “Outline Brief and Schedule of Requirements” for “A New Building for the National Archives” was commissioned by the OPW in 2003, and was prepared by Building Design Partnership in consultation with the National Archives. In the brief, the site area required was estimated to be 4,775 square meters, and the total floor area required was estimated to be just over 20,500 square meters.

My Department in conjunction with the OPW have been examining a number of options in relation to providing a new building for the Archives. I am advised that these have now resolved down to two options; the provision of a new bespoke building on the footprint of the Bishop Street site or a completely new building or adaptation of an existing building elsewhere. The logistics of developing on the Bishop Street site would be quite complex if, as seems likely, part of the current storage and office accommodation will have to be vacated for the duration of the development process at a temporary location. It is too early at the moment to say which of the options will be recommended by OPW and my Department as I understand that OPW are currently examining various issues in relation to cost.

For me the preferred option will be that which gives the Exchequer best value for money and delivers modern accommodation for the National Archives quickly. I would hope to have news of more progress on the matter later on in the year. The provision of €20 million in the National Development Plan for this project was based on its assumed viability as a PPP in its current location on the Bishop Street site.

Tourism Industry.

16. **Deputy Jan O’Sullivan** asked the Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism the way his Department has helped support and develop sustainable tourism here; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10820/08]

Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism (Deputy Séamus Brennan): The High Level Strategy of my Department in relation to Tourism includes a commitment to “support the sustainable growth of the tourism industry...”. In line with the national Sustainable Development Strategy, the principles of Sustainable Development are increasingly permeating public policy including policy on Tourism which is one of our main economic sectors. Sustainable Development incorporates three principles — Social Cohesion, Economic Prosperity and Environment. These

principles are incorporated in the current guiding Vision for Irish Tourism which is set out in the Report of the Tourism Policy Review Group, *New Horizons for Irish Tourism: An Agenda for Action*.

Geographically, Tourism is widely spread and, in some, otherwise undeveloped areas, is the main source of employment. The Government has a strong regional orientation which guides the activities of the Tourism Agencies in the promotion and development of tourism. Fáilte Ireland, works closely with the sector, to help improve the quality of training and also to encourage the industry to provide good conditions and career prospects to its employees. Tourism Ireland, in its international marketing role, promotes the island of Ireland along sustainable principles, with an emphasis on a wide geographical and seasonal spread of tourism business.

The physical environment is a core tourism resource and the tourism sector is becoming increasingly conscious of that. Under its Agreed Programme, the Government is committed to placing greater emphasis on the protection, conservation, interpretation and access to Ireland's natural and built heritage. The overarching challenge for the sector is to recognise that, in the long term, competitiveness depends on sustainability. Ultimately, of course, it is the industry itself that must meet the challenges and seize the opportunities generated by the sustainability agenda.

The introduction of more efficient use of resources such as energy, more recycling and better environmental management generally, provides an opportunity to significantly reduce the running costs of tourism businesses and, thus, enhance competitiveness. In conclusion, I would also note that my Department and the tourism Agencies take an active part in a wide range of groups and fora focusing on sustainability.

Departmental Programmes.

17. Deputy Bernard J. Durkan asked the Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism if he will favourably consider and commit grant aid from the proceeds of the national lottery through the programmes administered by his Department to communities attempting to combat anti-social behaviour and social or economic deprivation; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10998/08]

Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism (Deputy Séamus Brennan): A number of capital programmes administered by my Department are targeted at disadvantaged areas and play a significant role in combating anti social behaviour. 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. The 2008 programme was advertised on 13th and 14th of January and the deadline for receipt of applications was 29th February for paper-based applications and 7th March for on-line applications.

One of the stated aims and objectives of the sports capital programme is to prioritise the needs of disadvantaged areas in the provision of facilities. Since 2002, those areas that have been designated by Government for special support through the schemes administered by Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs, i.e. RAPID, Local Drugs Task Force (LDTF) and CLÁR areas are treated as disadvantaged under the programme. Projects identified as being located in areas designated as disadvantaged are targeted and prioritised in a number of ways during the assessment of applications. They are permitted to have a lower level of minimum own funding available towards their project and extra marks are also awarded to such projects during the assessment process by the application of socioeconomic disadvantage criterion. Indeed under the 2008 Sports Capital Programme, I was happy to reduce the level of own funding required by applicants from RAPID and Local Drugs Task Force areas to 10% from 20%. This is in line with the commitment in the Programme for Government.

[Deputy Séamus Brennan.]

Successful projects under the Sports Capital Programme in CLÁR and RAPID areas may also qualify to receive top-up funding, payable by the Department of Community Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs, in addition to their sports capital allocation. In the case of projects located in CLÁR areas, this top-up funding can be up to 20% of the sports capital grant amount; in the case of projects located in RAPID areas which are also endorsed by their local Area Implementation Team, the top-up funding can be up to 30%. For the Deputy's information, under the 2007 programme grants totalling €38,679,550 were allocated to 455 projects in disadvantaged areas. To date, my colleague the Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs has announced top-ups for qualifying grantees of €6,412,510.

Under the ACCESS scheme (arts and culture capital enhancement support scheme) my Department provides capital grants for the provision of arts and cultural infrastructure nationwide. One of the stated objectives of the Government's Arts Policy is to encourage and support the strategic development of the arts in local communities, both geographic and communities of interest, for the disadvantaged and for minority groups. In 2007 grants to the value of €32m were awarded to projects. Under the Local Authority Swimming Pool Programme my Department provides capital grants to Local Authorities for the construction of new swimming pools or for the refurbishment of existing ones. A total of €27.8m was expended under this programme in 2007. I am satisfied that through these capital programmes opportunities exist for the provision of a range of arts and sporting facilities, with special emphasis on areas of disadvantage, which can have a major impact in combating anti-social behaviour.

Arts Funding.

18. **Deputy Frank Feighan** asked the Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism if he will clarify and develop his proposals for additional business sponsorship of the arts; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10949/08]

32. **Deputy Joanna Tuffy** asked the Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism his views on the strategic policy development links that exist between his Department and statutory and informal bodies in the area of the arts; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10839/08]

Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism (Deputy Séamus Brennan): I propose to take Questions Nos. 18 and 32 together.

Government Policy on the Arts is set out in the Programme for Government and elaborated further in my Department's Statement of Strategy and my recently published Arts and Culture Plan, 2008. Since taking office I have met with and received submissions from a wide range of arts and culture organisations. This was done in the context of understanding the arts and culture sectors and to inform and enhance the policy framework. I am currently considering the relationships and opportunities of business, philanthropy and the Arts, with a view to producing a policy paper on the issue later this year.

Tourism Industry.

19. **Deputy Joan Burton** asked the Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism if his attention has been drawn to the fact that the Central Statistics Office does not identify tourism as a sector for classification for economic activity; his views on whether this hinders Ireland's ability to accurately assess the true value of tourism to the economy; if he will lobby the CSO to introduce a tourism satellite account classification; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10826/08]

Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism (Deputy Séamus Brennan): Identifying and communicating the extent of the real contribution of Tourism to the national economy is a considerable policy challenge which many other jurisdictions share with Ireland. Tourism does not, as the Deputy has noted, fit into one tidy economic classification. Because of that, there can, unfortunately, be a tendency to undervalue or downplay its economic contribution. That is why our current policy approach seeks to include an advocacy role at Government and official level in terms of highlighting the importance of a sector that is estimated to contribute a total of €6.5 billion annually to the economy and to provide close to a quarter of a million jobs.

A Satellite Account is a term developed by the United Nations to measure the economic sectors that are not defined as industries in national accounts. Tourism, for example, is made up of a range of industries such as transportation, accommodation, food and beverage services, recreation and entertainment and travel agencies. A Tourism Satellite Account, or “TSA” as it is commonly known, is a subset of the National Accounts which seeks to give a comprehensive picture of the contribution of Tourism to the national economy. The TSA model is now well established having been adopted by organisations such as the OECD, UNWTO and Eurostat.

Under the aegis of the British Irish Council and with some financial assistance from the EU, an initial “First Steps” TSA was produced in 2004 by a UCC/UL consortium. I believe that we should build on that experience and seek to produce a more comprehensive TSA for Ireland. I have, in fact, already been in touch with the CSO about this. My Department will be working with the CSO, the Tourism Agencies and others to progress this project in the future.

Sports Capital Programme.

20. **Deputy Tom Hayes** asked the Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism the thrust of changes in the guidelines for applications for the current round of sports capital grants and their intended effect; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10959/08]

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. For the 2008 Sports Capital Programme my Department has implemented a number of changes to improve the administration of the scheme and to implement key commitments contained in the Agreed Programme for Government. In this regard, I would point to a number of specific changes to this year’s guidelines.

Firstly, in line with the commitment contained in the Agreed Programme for Government, the level of own funding required from applicants in urban disadvantaged areas has been reduced from 20% to 10%. This covers applicants from RAPID and Local Drugs Task Force areas. This change is in keeping with the Government’s commitment to prioritise the needs of disadvantaged areas. Secondly, the Programme for Government also contains important commitments to promote greater sharing of sports facilities between schools and local sports clubs. Under the 2008 Sports Capital Programme, schools making joint applications with local sports clubs are required to provide evidence of formal agreements with local clubs that guarantees the clubs access to school facilities for at least 30 hours per week throughout the year.

Thirdly, in keeping with this Government’s commitment to the electronic delivery of public services, this year a decision was made to extend by one week the closing date for receipt of on-line applications. This has resulted in a very significant increase in on-line applications. While final statistics are not yet available, initial indications point to an increase of the order of 500%. In addition, some minor changes have been made to the administration of the scheme this year. These changes were designed to improve customer service, implement efficiencies

[Deputy Séamus Brennan.]

and to improve the operation of the scheme. These changes are implemented on the basis of suggestions from staff working in the area, feedback from customers, and input from key stakeholders such as the Office of Public Works, the Chief State Solicitors Office and the Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs. My Department will of course continue to review the administration of the Programme on an ongoing basis.

Legal Fees.

21. **Deputy Joe McHugh** asked the Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism the cost to the taxpayer of legal fees to date in respect of disputes regarding the National Aquatic Centre; the anticipated final cost; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10970/08]

Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism (Deputy Séamus Brennan): Legal fees paid by the National Sports Campus Development Authority (formerly CSID) from 2003 to date total €1.241 million in respect of cases involving the previous operator of the National Aquatic Centre. Due to the fact that all legal proceedings have yet to be finally resolved, it is not possible to provide an indication of the anticipated final costs involved.

Arts Plan.

22. **Deputy Joe Costello** asked the Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism the initiatives he has undertaken to provide spaces and funding for ethnic minority communities to develop their cultural expressions and participation; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10840/08]

23. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism his proposals for the development of the arts at local and community level, directly or through subsidiary agencies; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10999/08]

34. **Deputy Thomas P. Broughan** asked the Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism the funding available to support arts in disadvantaged and marginalised areas; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10833/08]

121. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism if he will take particular initiatives to promote interest and participation in the arts at community level notwithstanding the procedures and bodies already in place; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11166/08]

Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism (Deputy Séamus Brennan): I propose to take Questions Nos. 22, 23, 34 and 121 together.

Government Policy on the Arts is set out in the Programme for Government and elaborated further in my Department's Statement of Strategy and in my recently published Arts and Culture Plan, 2008. Government Policy on Sports is also set out in the Programme for Government and elaborated on in our Statement of Strategy. In 2008, almost €245m is available from my Department for arts and culture activities, and €41m of that is earmarked for regional arts and culture infrastructure. In the area of sports, this year's allocation is over €311m, of which €77.5m is allocated for arts facilities at regional and local level.

One of the stated objectives of the Government's Arts policy is to encourage and support the strategic development of the arts in local communities, both geographic and communities of interest, for the disadvantaged and for minority groups. That policy also aims to promote and strengthen the arts in all its forms, increase access to and participation in the arts, and to

make the arts an integral and valued part of our national life. Consequently, all funding allocated by my Department to the arts is aimed at, inter alia, addressing the issues of cultural participation, access and social inclusion. The Arts Council, which is the primary vehicle for the day to day funding of the arts, carries through that ethos.

The Irish Sports Council (ISC), which is funded by my Department, is the statutory body responsible for encouraging the promotion, development and co-ordination of competitive sport and for increasing participation in recreational sport. The ISC's basic philosophy is, therefore, one of inclusion and its Statement of Strategy recognises the potential of sport to be a driver for social change dealing with issues such as exclusion and social inequality. All sports organisations funded by the ISC, including National Governing Bodies (NGBs) and Local Sports Partnerships (LSPs), are encouraged to target all sections of society in seeking to increase participation in sport. Examples of LSP programmes which promote social and cultural inclusion are the Travteen Sports Programme in Donegal, the Increasing Traveller Participation in Sport initiative in Offaly and the Physical Activity For Women Of International Community in Kildare. In addition, the ISC is also involved, directly and indirectly, in a number of successful initiatives that seek to encourage cultural inclusion. Typically, these programmes are funded through the National Programme Against Racism (NPAR) administered by the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform.

One of the six key programmes for the Year of Intercultural dialogue is focusing on interaction and participation in the arts in Ireland as a tool to help stimulate interaction and dialogue including music, theatre, poetry and participation of arts institutions. The role of the arts in promoting intercultural dialogue is widely acknowledged as a key mechanism for promoting interaction, understanding and collaboration. In particular, during the Year a national intercultural arts strategy will be developed including a specific action plan by the Arts Council for the arts in Ireland. This action plan will include a range of strategic initiatives, including development of an intercultural dimension to some key mainstream arts funding initiatives.

Heritage Fund.

24. **Deputy Olivia Mitchell** asked the Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism if a decision has been taken on the desirability of creating a new heritage fund; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10973/08]

Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism (Deputy Séamus Brennan): I refer the Deputy to my reply to Parliamentary Question number 17 on the 29th November, 2007, in which I outlined the background to the Heritage Fund. Following a very positive review of the governance and operation of the Heritage Fund, which is now virtually depleted, I am seeking new funding for the Fund for the next five years. As the existing legislation does not allow for the replenishment of the Fund, new primary legislation will be necessary to enable a new Fund to be established. Preparatory work in relation to this legislation is underway in my Department.

Arts Plan.

25. **Deputy Brendan Howlin** asked the Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism the steps he has taken to increase the usage of publicly funded arts centres; if he will ensure that these centres will be opened up to local groups; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10832/08]

Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism (Deputy Séamus Brennan): Government Policy on Arts is set out in the Programme for Government and elaborated further in my Department's Statement of Strategy and my recently published Arts and Culture Plan, 2008. One of the stated

[Deputy Séamus Brennan.]

objectives of this policy is to encourage and support the strategic development of the arts in local communities, both geographic and communities of interest, for the disadvantaged and for minority groups. My policy on the arts is to promote and strengthen the arts in all its forms, increase access to and participation in the arts, and to make the arts an integral and valued part of our national life. Consequently, all funding allocated by my Department to the arts is aimed at, *inter alia*, addressing the issues of cultural participation, access and social inclusion.

My Department provides capital funding for arts and cultural venues under the ACCESS (Arts and Culture Capital Enhancement Support Scheme). Many local and community groups have received funding under this scheme. While we ensure, by means of a lien on the property, that the buildings are used for the purposes intended under the grant i.e. arts and cultural activities, the programming and usage of arts and cultural facilities is a matter for the owners and promoters of these venues and not a matter for my Department.

Arts Funding.

26. **Deputy Seán Sherlock** asked the Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism when he plans to launch the arts capital grants scheme; if the terms of reference regarding the division of funding will be similar to the ACCESS II scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter.

[10829/08]

Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism (Deputy Séamus Brennan): I hope to announce another round of Capital Arts funding shortly. At present I am considering the scope of the scheme and, therefore, the terms of reference and guidelines are not, as yet, finalised.

27. **Deputy Emmet Stagg** asked the Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism if his Department will consider any request to fund a large scale high quality quantitative research in the area of arts behaviour; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10836/08]

Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism (Deputy Séamus Brennan): My Department has received no such request. However, all requests for funding are considered by my Department, as appropriate. I would refer the Deputy to the recently published statistical analysis of public involvement in the arts conducted by the National Economic and Social Forum.

Sport and Recreational Development.

28. **Deputy Brian O'Shea** asked the Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism if his attention has been drawn to the findings of a report (details supplied) which show that rate of drop out from participation in sport is strongest when people leave full-time education and the rate of drop out is much higher for adults of low incomes; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10850/08]

29. **Deputy Joan Burton** asked the Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism if his attention has been drawn to the view of the reports on sport and art (details supplied) that have both come to the conclusion that public spending on sport and art are expected to be regressive, with the less well off subsidising the activities of the better off; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10845/08]

33. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism the action taken to implement the recommendations of the report, Fair Play? Sport and Social Disadvantage, from the ESRI in 2007; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10846/08]

Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism (Deputy Séamus Brennan): I propose to take Questions Nos. 28, 29 and 33 together.

The Irish Sports Council (ISC), which is funded by my Department, is the statutory body responsible for encouraging the promotion, development and co-ordination of competitive sport and for increasing participation in recreational sport. The ISC's basic philosophy is, therefore, one of inclusion and its Statement of Strategy recognises the potential of sport to be a driver for social change dealing with issues such as exclusion and social inequality. All sports organisations funded by the ISC, including National Governing Bodies (NGBs) and Local Sports Partnerships (LSPs), are encouraged to target all sections of society in seeking to increase participation in sport.

I am aware that the ISC, under its research remit, is striving to develop a profound understanding of sport in Ireland that can inform policy and investment over the coming years. The ISC has commissioned the Economic and Social Research Institute to undertake studies on its behalf. The fourth report in the series — “Fair Play? Sport and Social Disadvantage in Ireland” — set out to examine the impact of social disadvantage on various forms of participation in sport. The report concludes that the large majority of people who play sport in Ireland and who enjoy the health benefits arising from this physical activity are from higher income and better-educated social groups.

The report makes a clear case in support of substantial public expenditure to increase participation in sport, given the proven benefits of physical activity. This justifies the significant Government investment in sport in recent years. This increased investment has supported the promotion and development of Irish sport and the provision of a modern sporting infrastructure, with high quality facilities catering for the participation, coaching, training and competition needs of all levels and types of sport. The level of funding available for spending on sport in 2008 is €336 million, which will serve to further enhance and develop the sports sector. Furthermore the National Development Plan 2007-2013 includes a commitment to provide €991 million for sport infrastructure during the period up to 2013.

The increased funding provided to the ISC from €13 million in 2000 to more than €57 million this year has enabled a number of significant interventions for the benefit of disadvantaged areas. Examples include the Local Sports Partnerships (LSP) network and the Buntús programme for primary schools in LSP areas (involving children in sport from a very young age). In addition, with the support and cooperation of my Department and Pobal, additional funding has been allocated to the ISC to support various grant schemes including the funding programme “Sports for Disadvantaged Youth”. This programme, with funding amounting to almost €2 million, is administered by the ISC and delivered through the existing LSP structures and local authorities where an LSP is not in place. Its aim is to increase participation in sport among 12-19 year olds in disadvantaged areas. This age period, particularly the latter part from 16-19, is particularly important in terms of influencing trends towards long-term participation.

One of the stated objectives of the Sports Capital Programme, which is administered by my Department, is to prioritise the needs of disadvantaged areas in the provision of sports facilities. Projects identified as being located in areas designated as disadvantaged are targeted and prioritised in a number of ways during the assessment of applications. Indeed, under the 2008 Sports Capital Programme, I reduced the level of own funding required by applicants from RAPID and Local Drugs Task Force areas to 10% from 20%. This is in line with the commitment in the Programme for Government. Successful projects under the Sports Capital Programme in CLÁR and RAPID areas may also qualify to receive top-up funding, payable by the Department of Community Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs. In the case of projects located in CLÁR areas, this top-up funding can be up to 20% of the sports capital grant amount; in the case of

[Deputy Séamus Brennan.]

projects located in RAPID areas which are also endorsed by their local Area Implementation Team, the top-up funding can be up to 30%.

I welcomed and was very pleased to have been invited to launch “In the Frame or Out of the Picture?” a Statistical Analysis of Public Involvement in the Arts, on 25th February last. This study was undertaken by the Economic and Social Research Institute on behalf of the National Economic and Social Forum dealing with Public Involvement in the Arts. Government policy on the arts, as set out in the programme for Government and reflected in my recently published Arts and Culture Plan for 2008, is to promote and strengthen the arts in all its forms, increase access to and participation in the arts, and to make the arts an integral and valued part of our national life. The report cannot be treated in isolation. It has been informed primarily by, and adds to, two previous seminal reports in this area, completed in the past 18 months. The first of these reports was the nationwide survey of public attitudes to and behaviour in the arts carried out by the Arts Council in 2006 entitled “The Public and the Arts”. The second report was the major research and analysis undertaken by the NSEF itself in its report “The Arts, Cultural Inclusion and Social Cohesion” published last year.

The recent report contains a great deal of information regarding reasons for and attitudes towards participation in the arts and the messages which are being given should not be commented on without serious consideration. Accordingly, I intend to ask the relevant agencies and institutions within the remit of my Department to study this report and to comment on its findings and to make recommendations to me on how they can respond to its findings.

Drugs in Sport.

30. **Deputy Jack Wall** asked the Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism the support his Department is giving to the national anti-doping agency; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10821/08]

Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism (Deputy Séamus Brennan): Ireland’s national anti-doping programme is administered by the Irish Sports Council (ISC), which is the statutory body responsible for the promotion and development of sport in Ireland. My Department funds the ISC on an annual basis and has allocated over €57 million to the Council in 2008. This includes funding to enable the ISC to meet its statutory function to combat doping in sport. In supporting sport the Government insists that it must be based on fair and ethical principles. The ISC has put in place a comprehensive and effective Anti-Doping Programme, one that the Government strongly endorses and which is recognised internationally as an outstanding model of its type.

Tax Code.

31. **Deputy Andrew Doyle** asked the Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism if there have been consultations with the Department of Finance to secure the inclusion of choreographers in the artists tax exemption scheme and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10943/08]

Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism (Deputy Séamus Brennan): Taxation issues are a matter for the Minister for Finance, with whom I am in contact on taxation matters, as they apply to my brief, from time to time. There is no current proposal to have choreographers included in the scheme referred to by the Deputy. But I will keep the request under review.

Question No. 32 answered with Question No. 18.

Question No. 33 answered with Question No. 28.

Question No. 34 answered with Question No. 22.

National Cultural Institutions.

35. **Deputy Kathleen Lynch** asked the Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism the supports his Department is providing to ensure that national cultural institutions here reach their target of 3 million guests in 2008; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10827/08]

Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism (Deputy Séamus Brennan): Substantial increases in current funding, over 11% in some cases, have been secured for the national cultural institutions in 2008. This additional funding allows the institutions to enhance and develop their exhibition and event programmes, so as to attract the widest possible audience.

An element of this additional funding has been specifically targeted at extending the cultural institutions' opening hours, which is an essential innovation in developing access and attracting wider audiences. My Department has been in consultation with the National Cultural Institutions regarding this extended opening hours programme, which will be introduced on a gradual basis and will be the subject of a vigorous marketing campaign for which I am providing funding. In addition, Culture Night 2008 in September will see late opening of the National Cultural Institutions. Culture Night event has proven to be very successful in attracting new visitors to the national cultural institutions.

As the provision of good transport links to the institutions is key to developing access and increasing visitor numbers, I am discussing with the national cultural institutions the possibility of supporting a dedicated bus service this summer, on a pilot basis, linking the national cultural institutions in Dublin, during the extended opening-hours period, at weekends.

Sport and Recreational Development.

36. **Deputy Ruairí Quinn** asked the Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism the linkages he has established with other Government Departments regarding arts and sporting initiatives; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10842/08]

Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism (Deputy Séamus Brennan): My Department has established a number of linkages with other Government Departments in relation to the development of policy and implementation of initiatives in the areas of arts and sport. The nature of these linkages in the context of delivery of my Department's goals and objectives for the sectors in question is prescribed at Section 6 in my Department's Statement of Strategy 2008 to 2010 which is available on my Department's website and a copy of which has been placed in the Dáil Library.

Departmental Committees.

37. **Deputy Pat Rabbitte** asked the Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism if the high-level, independently chaired strategy committee established to consider the recommendations of the National Economic and Social Forum's report on the arts, cultural inclusion and social cohesion has reported back to him; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10834/08]

112. **Deputy Mary Upton** asked the Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism his views on the report by the National Economic and Social Forum, entitled *In the Frame or Out of the Picture*; his further views on the principal finding that people with lower educational attainment, social class and income are many times less likely than fellow citizens to attend a range of arts events; the steps his Department has taken or proposes to take to tackle this issue; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10990/08]

Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism (Deputy Séamus Brennan): I propose to take Questions Nos. 37 and 112 together.

The National Economic and Social Forum (NESF), The Arts, Cultural Inclusion and Social Cohesion report outlines priorities in addressing the complex and multifaceted nature of the arts and culture sector and the need for an equitable and socially inclusive delivery of a high level service in a strategic, appropriate, coordinated and open manner. This report's findings have been further analysed in a recent study commissioned from the ESRI by the NESF namely "In the Frame or Out of the Picture?" a Statistical Analysis of Public Involvement in the Arts, undertaken by the Economic and Social Research Institute on behalf of the National Economic and Social Forum dealing with Public Involvement in the Arts. The study contains much detailed statistics, the implications of which require serious analysis and consideration.

Accordingly, I intend to ask the relevant agencies and institutions within the remit of my Department to study this report, to comment on its findings, and to make recommendations to me on how they can respond to its findings. The Government's decision to establish a high-level independently chaired Strategy Committee to consider its recommendations will be implemented soon. I am finalising at present, the formation of this committee, bearing in mind the complex recommendations contained in the NESF report, and the findings also of the report late last month from the NESF — "In the Frame or Out of the Picture — a Statistical Analysis of Public Involvement in the Arts", referred to earlier.

Cultural Events.

38. **Deputy Michael D. Higgins** asked the Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism the progress on extending the culture night event to other cities for the event in September 2008; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10823/08]

Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism (Deputy Séamus Brennan): On Culture Night key artistic and cultural venues extend their opening hours until late in the evening, thus providing the public with increased access. In 2007, my Department provided €35,000 to Temple Bar Cultural Trust, the coordinators of the event in Dublin, for costs associated with the event. Arising from a request by my Department, the proposal by Temple Bar Culture Trust for the 2007 funding included an undertaking to investigate the possible extension of the culture night concept to areas outside Dublin.

Temple Bar Cultural Trust held preliminary discussions with local authorities in Cork, Galway and Limerick. The Trust also met representatives from the cultural community in Belfast with a view to launching a North-South Culture Night project for 2009. In view of the earlier contact with local authorities in Cork, Galway and Limerick, and as a key element for the success of a culture night event is the concentration of cultural organisations in an area and the ability to offer a range of cultural activities, my Department offered assistance to the City Managers of Cork, Limerick and Galway in the promotion of Culture Night in these cities. I am pleased to say that all three local authorities have indicated their interest in participating in Culture Night 2008 and work on organising the event is ongoing.

My Department has also written to the County and City Managers' Association highlighting the role of Culture Night. My Arts and Culture Plan 2008 highlights the possibility of a Culture Day in 2009 and work on that initiative has now commenced.

Tourism Promotion.

39. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism the steps he is taking to promote tourism in rural areas; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7474/08]

Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism (Deputy Séamus Brennan): The policy framework for the promotion and development of Irish tourism is set out in the Agreed Programme for Government, and reflects the investment plans in the National Development Plan 2007-2013 and the strategic drivers set out in the 2003 Report of the Tourism Policy Review Group, “New Horizons for Irish Tourism — An Agenda for Action”, as well as the subsequent reports of the Tourism Action Plan Implementation Group. These documents are available on my Department’s website, www.dast.gov.ie, and that of the Department of the Taoiseach, www.taoiseach.gov.ie.

Under section 8(1) of the National Tourism Development Authority Act 2003, individual actions and measures relating to tourism promotion or development, including promotion of particular areas such as rural tourism, are functions of the State tourism agencies. I have no function in regard to such operational matters.

Arts Funding.

40. **Deputy Thomas P. Broughan** asked the Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism the amount that has been acquired via the per cent for art scheme since its inception in 1997 to date in 2008; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10844/08]

Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism (Deputy Séamus Brennan): I refer the Deputy to my response to Priority question No 1 (10974/08) taken earlier today.

Sports and Recreational Development.

41. **Deputy Michael D. Higgins** asked the Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism the action he proposes to take to ensure that publicly-funded centres and buildings are made available to voluntary arts and sports groups; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10851/08]

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. In this regard, under the Guidelines, Terms, Conditions of the Programme, all grantees have to confirm that the local community can use the facility. In addition, depending on the level of the grant allocated, grantees have to sign a declaration or enter in a deed of covenant and charge committing to keeping the facility in sporting use for fifteen years.

My Department provides capital funding for arts and cultural venues under the ACCESS (Arts and Culture Capital Enhancement Support Scheme). Many local and community groups have received funding under this scheme. While we ensure, by means of a lien on the property, that the buildings are used for the purposes intended under the grant, i.e. arts and cultural activities, the programming and usage of arts and cultural facilities is a matter for the owners and promoters of these venues and not a matter for my Department.

42. **Deputy Ciarán Lynch** asked the Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism when he expects the national sports facility strategy report will be published; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10825/08]

Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism (Deputy Séamus Brennan): As I have previously informed the House, work on the National Sports Facility Strategy is currently underway in my Department. An inter-agency steering group was established to oversee the development of the strategy and consultants, involving both national and international experts in the area of sports facilities, were engaged to assist in the preparation of the strategy.

[Deputy Séamus Brennan.]

The consultants report is being finalised at present and will then be appraised by the steering group. The consultants remit included an audit of national and regional sports facilities which will feed into the national audit of sports facilities being undertaken by my Department. This audit is part of the wider exercise to put in place a more strategic approach to the provision of sports facilities in Ireland through the development of the National Sports Facility Strategy. The aim of the strategy is to provide high-level policy direction for future investment/grant assistance at national, regional and local level. It is intended to identify the facilities requirement for sport so that participation at reasonable cost is feasible for those who wish to engage in sport at either amateur or elite level.

National Cultural Institutions.

43. **Deputy Brian O'Shea** asked the Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism if his Department has initiated or facilitated contact with world leading institutions on behalf of national cultural institutions here; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10828/08]

Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism (Deputy Séamus Brennan): In the context of bilateral cultural agreements, my Department has sought to initiate and facilitate contact with world leading institutions on behalf of the national cultural institutions. These cultural agreements allow, inter alia, for promoting and developing the relations and understanding between Ireland and the other country in the areas of art, culture, etc. For example, in the context of the Cultural Agreement between Ireland and Ukraine, an official from my Department visited a number of cultural institutions in the Ukraine including the Museum of Historical Treasures of Ukraine and the National Art Museum of Ukraine, both in Kiev. A key element of this contact was to determine the prospect of some of the world-renowned Ukrainian artefacts and artworks being exhibited in Ireland. As a result of this contact and the positive response it received by the Ukrainian museum authorities, my Department has facilitated contact between these institutions and a number of the national cultural institutions in this country with a view to promoting cooperation between them. My Department has also met the Smithsonian and the US National Archives with a view to future work and partnerships.

Contacts between international institutions and their counterparts in Ireland are also facilitated through the Council of National Cultural Institutions and, on occasion, diplomatic and cultural missions have briefed the Council members on the potential for creating linkages. As the members of the Council are also Directors and Chief Executive Officers of the national cultural institutions, contacts of this nature are facilitated in a very targeted fashion.

The institutions also develop their own links with colleagues in similar international institutions for a variety of purposes relating to their collections, exhibitions and events. For instance, the National Gallery of Ireland recently organised the "Paintings from Poland" exhibition in collaboration with the National Museum, Warsaw, the Irish Museum of Modern Art hosted the Georgia O'Keeffe exhibition in 2007 in partnership with the Vancouver Art Gallery in Canada and the Chester Beatty Library has recently hosted a visit by the Director of the State Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg, and it is hoped to build on that contact in an exciting way in the coming years.

Sport and Recreational Development.

44. **Deputy Eamon Gilmore** asked the Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism the role his Department plays in encouraging sport in the education cycle, in particular to ensure children who are considered socially disadvantaged are involved in sports; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10849/08]

Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism (Deputy Séamus Brennan): The Deputy will appreciate that I have no official responsibility to the Dáil in relation to the education cycle, the school curriculum or sport in schools, which are matters for the Minister for Education and Science. I would however point out that the Irish Sports Council (ISC), which is funded by my Department, is the statutory body responsible for encouraging the promotion, development and co-ordination of competitive sport and for increasing participation in recreational sport. In 2008, my Department has allocated over €57 million to the Council. This significant level of funding has enabled a number of important interventions for the benefit of people residing in disadvantaged areas. Examples include the Local Sports Partnerships (LSP) network and the Buntús programme for primary schools in LSP areas.

The Buntús Programme is continuing to be rolled out by the ISC through the LSP network to primary schools and child day care centres and feedback through the LSP network for the programme has been extremely positive. The Programme aims to support the primary Physical Education curriculum by providing equipment, resource cards and training to primary school teachers and allows teachers and introductory level coaches to introduce sport to children in a safe and fun way. I am aware that the Irish Sports Council has also worked with the FAI, IRFU, Badminton Ireland, Junior Golf Ireland and Basketball Ireland to deliver Buntús Sports Specific Programmes to Primary and Special Needs Schools in the Local Sports Partnership areas.

In addition, one of the stated aims and objectives of the Sports Capital Programme, which is administered by my Department, is to prioritise the needs of disadvantaged areas in the provision of facilities. Projects identified as being located in areas designated as disadvantaged are targeted and prioritised in a number of ways during the assessment of applications. Indeed, under the 2008 Sports Capital Programme, I reduced the level of own funding required by applicants from RAPID and Local Drugs Task Force areas to 10% from 20%. This is in line with the commitment in the Programme for Government.

Successful projects under the Sports Capital Programme in CLÁR and RAPID areas may also qualify to receive top-up funding, payable by the Department of Community Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs. In the case of projects located in CLÁR areas, this top-up funding can be up to 20% of the sports capital grant amount; in the case of projects located in RAPID areas which are also endorsed by their local Area Implementation Team, the top-up funding can be up to 30%. Under the Sports Capital Programme, schools are eligible to apply for funding for the development of sports facilities as part of a joint application with local sporting organisations. In this regard, these joint applications must include evidence of a formal agreement with local sporting organisation that guarantees them access to school facilities for at least 30 hours per week throughout the year.

Furthermore, in 2007 funding of over almost €2 million was allocated from the dormant accounts funds through my Department for projects to increase participation in sports and recreation in disadvantaged areas. This funding was distributed through the LSPs and Local Authorities (where no LSP existed) whose knowledge and expertise were called upon in identifying worthy projects throughout the country. In the context of the development of a strategy for sports facilities a steering group, which is supporting my Department in its work, has a representative of the Department of Education and Science in its membership. Among the issues which will be considered by this group is how best to allocate public funds for sports facilities which serve the dual purpose of school and community usage.

National Cultural Institutions.

45. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism if he has received

[Deputy Róisín Shortall.]

reports from the national cultural institutions regarding the status of their obligations under the national action plan for social inclusion 2007 to 2013 to put in place policies to actively invite and encourage individuals, groups and schools from disadvantaged communities to visit, participate and benefit from educational programmes and exhibitions; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10838/08]

Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism (Deputy Séamus Brennan): All of the National Cultural Institutions are aware of their obligations to promote access for disadvantaged groups to their educational programmes and exhibitions. These Institutions actively pursue Education and Outreach Programmes. These programmes form part of their day-to-day activities and are the responsibility of the individual boards of these institutions.

National Lottery.

46. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Finance the anticipated receipts from the proceeds of the national lottery in 2008; the way this compares with previous years; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11164/08]

Tánaiste and Minister for Finance (Deputy Brian Cowen): The anticipated receipts from the proceeds of the National Lottery in 2008 are expected to be broadly in line with receipts in recent years. The annual surplus generated by the National Lottery in the past five years was as follows:

2003 — €186.702 million

2004 — €191.125 million

2005 — €203.205 million

2006 — €217.526 million

2007 — €245.480 million

Decentralisation Programme.

47. **Deputy Dinny McGinley** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Finance the position regarding decentralisation to Donegal town; if a site has been identified for the new offices; when it is expected that work will commence on the offices; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11020/08]

Minister of State at the Department of Finance (Deputy Noel Ahern): The Office of Public Works have received a number of proposals offering potentially suitable sites for the Department of Social and Family Affairs in Donegal Town, County Donegal. These proposals are currently being technically assessed. When this process is completed, negotiations will commence with the owners of the preferred site options. When a site has been acquired, tenders to build the new offices will be invited from interested parties.

48. **Deputy Jack Wall** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Finance the position regarding a permanent site for the decentralisation of personnel from the Revenue office to Athy, County Kildare; the amount of personnel located in Athy; the future plans for further decentralisation to Athy; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11076/08]

Tánaiste and Minister for Finance (Deputy Brian Cowen): I am advised by the Revenue Commissioners that the Commissioners of Public Works (OPW) have identified a number of potentially suitable options for permanent accommodation for the Revenue Commissioners in Athy. The viability of some of these options is, however, dependant on provision of infrastructure or re-zoning, and in this regard the OPW is awaiting developments.

In the meantime, temporary office space has been acquired in the town, capable of accommodating up to one hundred (100) staff, under a seven year lease with a break option at the end of five years. The lease commenced on 1 November 2007. To date forty-eight (48) staff have taken up duty in Athy. Further offers are being made through the Central Applications Facility (CAF) to make use of all the available accommodation.

National Monuments.

49. **Deputy Joanna Tuffy** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Finance if the Office of Public Works has plans to install flood lighting at Ballinacarriga Castle, Dunmanway, County Cork, to light up the exterior of the castle which would greatly enhance the castle at night; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11079/08]

Minister of State at the Department of Finance (Deputy Noel Ahern): The Office of Public Works have no plans at present to floodlight Ballinacarriga Castle. A review of the impact of floodlighting on National Monuments in State care is being undertaken at present which will inform future policy in relation to this matter.

Computerisation Programme.

50. **Deputy Thomas P. Broughan** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Finance if he has plans to assist freight and forwarding agents who use the customs AEP 2 service to adapt to a computerised new system after July 2009 in terms of retraining and equipment grants; and his views on whether the proposed new system is necessary and inevitable. [11088/08]

Tánaiste and Minister for Finance (Deputy Brian Cowen): I assume that the Deputy is referring to the electronic systems that are being introduced throughout the EU from 1 July 2009, under which pre-arrival and pre-departure information will, in certain circumstances, have to be sent electronically to Customs. I am advised by the Revenue Commissioners that these new systems, which are known as the Import Control System (in respect of pre-arrival information), and the Export Control System Phase 2 (in respect of pre-departure information), are legally required to be put in place in all 27 EU Member States by the July 2009 deadline. The legal instruments underpinning these systems are Council Regulation (EC) No 648/2005 and Commission Regulation (EC) No 1875/2006.

The primary purpose of these new systems is to enable goods to be risk analysed for safety and security purposes in advance of the arrival of those goods into the customs territory of the Community or their departure from it. These systems form part of the European Union's response to a worldwide move to enhance the security of the global supply chain and protect it from, inter alia, terrorist threats. The implementation of these systems is being co-ordinated at EU level and the European Commission, the Customs Authorities of the 27 Member States and Trade Representative Bodies all participate in regular meetings of the Electronic Customs Group, which is the main Working Group overseeing this process at EU level.

At national level, Revenue has already begun the process required for the implementation of these systems. A Communications Programme to explain the requirements to the trade is already underway and a series of seminars are scheduled for the latter half of April. These seminars aim to build upon the information that Revenue has already disseminated regarding

[Deputy Brian Cowen.]

the introduction of these systems. Revenue will of course continue to ensure that freight and forwarding agents and other relevant parties are kept fully informed in relation to these changes but it is not envisaged that retraining or equipment grants would be provided. In order to minimise costs for the trade it is Revenue's intention that the new systems will effectively be enhancements to the existing AEP 2 system.

Revenue is aware of the challenges that will be posed by the introduction of these new systems. It looks forward to working with the trade, including freight and forwarding agents, over the coming months to ensure that the necessary preparations are put in place to enable the changes to be successfully implemented in line with the timescale agreed at EU level.

Flood Relief.

51. **Deputy Emmet Stagg** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Finance, further to Parliamentary Question No. 253 of 30 January 2008, if there has been progress on the issue. [11107/08]

Minister of State at the Department of Finance (Deputy Noel Ahern): The Office of Public Works have been in contact with Kildare County Council in relation to their request to assist in identifying the cause and possible solutions to the flooding in Johnstown, Co. Kildare. OPW has arranged a meeting with Kildare County Council for Friday the 11th of April and this matter will be discussed.

Pension Provisions.

52. **Deputy Brian O'Shea** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Finance the proposals he has to meet the concerns of a person (details supplied) in County Waterford regarding the tax on imputed withdrawals from approved retirement funds from 2007 onwards; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11125/08]

Tánaiste and Minister for Finance (Deputy Brian Cowen): The 2006 Budget and Finance Act introduced an imputed or notional distribution of 3% of the value of the assets of an Approved Retirement Fund (ARF) on 31 December each year, where the notional amount will be taxed at the ARF owner's marginal income tax rate. Funds actually drawn down by ARF owners will be credited against the imputed distribution in that year to arrive at a net imputed amount, if any, for the year.

As a transitional measure, the 3% rate is being phased-in over the period 2007 to 2009, with 1% applying in 2007, 2% in 2008 and the full 3% in 2009 and each subsequent year. The new regime applies to ARFs created on or after 6 April 2000 where the ARF holder is 60 years of age or over for the whole of a tax year. The new provisions do not impact on Approved Minimum Retirement Funds (AMRFs), although funds drawn from an individual's AMRF can also be credited against the individual's imputed ARF distribution. This measure was introduced because the internal review of tax relief for pensions provision undertaken by my Department and the Revenue Commissioners in 2005 (which was published in early 2006) found that the ARF option was largely not being used as intended to fund an income stream in retirement, but instead was being used to build up funds in a tax-free environment over the long-term.

The imputed distribution measure is designed to encourage the use of ARFs as intended. The level of the imputed distribution at 3% is not excessive, especially since ARFs are supposed to provide an income stream in retirement for their owners and that actual drawdowns can be credited against the imputed amount. Given the rationale for the introduction of the measure,

I do not have any plans at this time to introduce a threshold on the value of an ARF below which the notional distribution arrangements would not apply.

Tax Code.

53. **Deputy James Bannon** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Finance the reason a nursing home (details supplied) in County Longford does not qualify for a tax rebate for those paying for an elderly relation, when others outside Ireland, including a number in Scotland, France and the US, along with numerous others listed on his Department's website are approved and that assurances were given that the particular nursing home was approved and did qualify; the reason so few nursing homes are approved in County Longford; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11140/08]

Tánaiste and Minister for Finance (Deputy Brian Cowen): I am advised by the Revenue Commissioners that the nursing home in question is not currently on the list of approved institution for the purposes of Section 469 of the Taxes Consolidation Act 1997 as no request has been received to have the institution added to the list. The list in question is maintained by the Revenue Commissioners and can be accessed at <http://www.revenue.ie/index.htm?/publications/lists/approved-hospitals.htm>. Section 469 of the Taxes Consolidation Act 1997 defines "hospital" as meaning:

- (a) any institution which is provided and maintained by the Health Service Executive for the provision of services pursuant to the Health Acts, 1947 to 2004.
- (b) any institution in which services are provided on behalf of the Health Service Executive pursuant to the Health Acts, 1947 to 2004
- (c) any hospital, nursing home, maternity home or other institution approved of for the purposes of this section by the Minister for Finance after consultation with the Minister for Health and Children;

In order for a nursing home to qualify for tax relief under section 469, an individual acting on behalf of the nursing home or, indeed, a person who wishes to claim for health expenses incurred in the nursing home, should request that it be approved. This can be done by contacting the Income Tax Policy Section, Department of Finance, Upper Merrion Street, Dublin 2, who will consult with the Department of Health and Children as required under Section 469. These rules apply equally in relation to all Counties.

54. **Deputy Michael McGrath** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Finance his views on a VAT exemption inquiry (details supplied). [11148/08]

Tánaiste and Minister for Finance (Deputy Brian Cowen): The position is that the VAT rating of goods and services is subject to the requirements of EU VAT law with which Irish VAT law must comply. In this regard, I would point out that the rate of VAT that applies to a particular good or service depends on the nature of the good or service and not on the status of the consumer. Accordingly, there is no provision in EU law that would permit the removal or reduction of VAT based on the social, medical or economic status of the consumer. In relation to the VAT rate that applies to wigs, the position is that under the EU VAT Directive Member States may retain the zero rates on goods and services that were in place on 1 January 1991, but cannot extend zero-rating to other goods and services. The zero VAT rate cannot therefore be applied to wigs in general. The supply of wigs for children under 11 years of age would qualify for zero rating as an item of children's clothing.

[Deputy Brian Cowen.]

In addition, Member States may only apply a reduced VAT rate to those goods and services that are listed under Annex III of the VAT Directive. While Annex III does include the supply of medical equipment, aids and other appliances normally intended to alleviate or treat disability, for the exclusive personal use of a disabled person, it does not include wigs. Thus, the reduced rate cannot be applied to the supply of wigs. Therefore, apart from wigs for children under 11 years of age, the only rate of VAT that can apply to the supply of wigs is the standard VAT rate, which in Ireland is 21%.

However, I am advised by the Revenue Commissioners that, in the case of persons suffering from cancer, the full VAT-inclusive cost of a wig qualifies for income tax relief at the individual's marginal rate of tax under the heading of health expenses.

55. Deputy Bernard J. Durkan asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Finance the tax free allowance in the case of a person (details supplied) in County Kildare; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11168/08]

Tánaiste and Minister for Finance (Deputy Brian Cowen): I have been advised by the Revenue Commissioners that a certificate of tax credits and standard rate cut-off point issued to the taxpayer on 31 January 2008, which incorporated tax credits amounting to €5,490 per annum and standard rate band of €39,400 per annum. However, the taxpayer's income from the Department of Social and Family Affairs had not previously been declared to the Revenue Commissioners. Therefore, the taxpayer's tax credits and standard rate band will require to be adjusted accordingly. A revised certificate of tax credits and standard rate cut-off point will issue to the taxpayer in the coming days, which will reduce the taxpayer's tax credits to €2,742.32 per annum and the standard rate band to €25,661.60.

The taxpayer's employment income has not been subject to income tax in 2008, as her tax credits have been sufficient to offset any liability to tax. Based on her current level of employment income, the revised amounts of tax credits and standard rate band will not alter that position.

Tax Yield.

56. Deputy Leo Varadkar asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Finance if he will provide a county breakdown of income tax, VAT, stamp duty and corporation profit tax for 2007; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11186/08]

Tánaiste and Minister for Finance (Deputy Brian Cowen): In response to previous similar Parliamentary Questions answered on 4 December 2007 estimated data for the years 2002-2006 was supplied by the Revenue Commissioners. The information furnished on tax returns does not generally require the yield relating to a county to be identified and as such certain assumptions had to be made in supplying the information. As regards data for 2007, I am further advised by the Revenue Commissioners that the necessary detailed information which would provide a basis for estimating the breakdown of yields in 2007 from Income Tax, VAT, and Corporation Tax is not as yet sufficiently complete or reliable to enable such an estimate to be provided at this time. Furthermore, it will be some time before Revenue will be able to supply information similar to that supplied for the previous years.

Transport 21.

57. Deputy Fergus O'Dowd asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Finance if he expects the Government to borrow to adequately fund the completion of Transport 21; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11193/08]

Tánaiste and Minister for Finance (Deputy Brian Cowen): As I said at the time of the launch of Transport 21, the unprecedented levels of investment envisaged under that investment framework depend on our continued prudent management of the public finances and compliance with the Stability and Growth Pact. Therefore the level of borrowing that is appropriate will be determined by Government in light of the range of economic and budgetary circumstances that obtain each year. I remain strongly of the view that the provision of quality infrastructure is vital to our future competitiveness, and I consider the programme of investment set out under the Transport 21 plan will be a key feature in securing sustainable, long-term social and economic prosperity.

58. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Finance if he has had contact in 2008 with the Department of Transport regarding the cost of Transport 21; if there have been communications regarding concerns over public transport investment financing; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11194/08]

Tánaiste and Minister for Finance (Deputy Brian Cowen): As part of our normal duties of Government, I and my Cabinet colleagues regularly discuss and monitor Government expenditure across all of our key sectors, including transport. This is part of providing strong and prudent management of the public finances. Transport 21 is an unprecedented and ambitious programme for investing over €34 billion in projects that will transform our national transport infrastructure. My colleague, the Minister for Transport, together with his Department and the relevant transport agencies, is managing the delivery of his programme of transport projects within this framework.

Health Service Staff.

59. **Deputy Joanna Tuffy** asked the Minister for Health and Children if her attention has been drawn to the long waiting list for speech and language assessment in north Clondalkin, Dublin 22 and the adverse effect this is having on pupils in national schools in the area with speech and language difficulties and the need to fill the vacancy for a full-time speech and language therapist at a centre (details supplied) as soon as possible; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11068/08]

Minister of State at the Department of Health and Children (Deputy Jimmy Devins): The recruitment pause put in place in September 2007 was initiated as part of the HSE financial break-even plan to facilitate the delivery of services on budget in accordance with the provisions of the 2007 National Service Plan. This temporary pause in recruitment ended on 31st December 2007 and any posts falling vacant from 1st January 2008 can be filled subject to the provisions of a detailed employment control circular issued by the HSE on January 8th. During this recruitment pause, the HSE put in place a derogation process to deal with the filling of essential posts to protect front-line services and close to 900 posts were approved under this process.

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 the 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 to the Deputy. With regard to the Deputy's previous Parliamentary Question on this matter, I understand that the HSE has issued a reply to the Deputy.

Drugs Payment Scheme.

60. **Deputy Michael McGrath** asked the Minister for Health and Children her views on including a medical condition (details supplied) as a long-term illness under the drugs payment scheme. [11030/08]

Minister for Health and Children (Deputy Mary Harney): Under the 1970 Health Act, the Health Service Executive may arrange for the supply, without charge, of drugs, medicines and medical and surgical appliances to people with a specified condition, for the treatment of that condition, through the Long Term Illness Scheme (LTI). The LTI does not cover GP fees or hospital co-payments. The conditions are: mental handicap, mental illness (for people under 16 only), phenylketonuria, cystic fibrosis, spina bifida, hydrocephalus, diabetes mellitus, diabetes insipidus, haemophilia, cerebral palsy, epilepsy, multiple sclerosis, muscular dystrophies, parkinsonism, conditions arising from thalidomide and acute leukaemia. There are currently no plans to extend the list of eligible conditions.

Products which are necessary for the management of the specified illness are available to LTI patients. Other products are available according to the patient's eligibility. People who cannot, without undue hardship, arrange for the provision of medical services for themselves and their dependants may be entitled to a medical card. In the assessment process, the Health Service Executive can take into account medical costs incurred by an individual or a family. Those who are not eligible for a medical card may still be able to avail of a GP visit card, which covers the cost of general practice consultations.

Non-medical card holders and people whose illness is not covered by the LTI can use the Drug Payment Scheme, which protects against excessive medicines costs. Under this scheme, no individual or family unit pays more than €90 per calendar month towards the cost of approved prescribed medicines. The scheme is easy to use and significantly reduces the cost burden for families and individuals incurring ongoing expenditure on medicines. In addition, non-reimbursed medical expenses above a set threshold may be offset against tax.

National Lottery Funding.

61. **Deputy Michael Ring** asked the Minister for Health and Children the reason it took from 23 February 2007 to 27 February 2008 for a decision on an application for grant assistance under national lottery funding to be issued (details supplied). [11033/08]

Minister for Health and Children (Deputy Mary Harney): The application referred to by the Deputy was received in my Department on the 26th of February 2007. Following registration, the application was acknowledged to both the Deputy and the organisation in question. The application was then issued for assessment by the appropriate line division. As the Deputy will be aware lottery applications are generally awarded in two tranches, in July and in December. Any applications which are not successful in the first tranche are considered again in the context of the funds remaining for the second tranche. Unfortunately, the applications for funding in 2007 greatly exceeded the available resources and it was not possible to assist this organisation on this occasion. Officials, from my Department wrote to the applicant on 21st December advising them of this decision and suggesting that they consider re-applying in 2008. To date, no further application has been received.

Health Services.

62. **Deputy Jack Wall** asked the Minister for Health and Children the funding for home care packages allocated in the Health Service Executive budget for the Kildare-west Wicklow area of the HSE for 2008; the number of applications received for the home care package to date

in 2008; if the number of applications is greater than the funds permit, if extra funding will be made available through her Department to meet the shortfall of funding; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11035/08]

73. **Deputy Jack Wall** asked the Minister for Health and Children if there have been changes in the amount of funding allocated to home care packages for 2008; if the amount paid to those that qualify under this scheme will remain the same as in previous years; if there have been changes in the amount of hours offered to those that qualify; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11077/08]

74. **Deputy Emmet Stagg** asked the Minister for Health and Children the amount of moneys allocated in the Health Service Executive budget for Kildare-west Wicklow for 2008; the number of applications received for home care packages for this area to date in 2008; if she is confident that a shortfall between the amount of money allocated and the number of applications received will be made available from her Department; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11078/08]

Minister of State at the Department of Health and Children (Deputy Máire Hctor): I propose to take Questions Nos. 62, 73 and 74 together.

Home Care Packages are an additional support over and above existing mainstream community services and are used to maintain an older person at home via additional supports and therapy services. They are designed to be flexible and are particularly targeted at those at risk of admission to long-term care, inappropriate admission to acute hospital or requiring discharge home from acute hospital. The initiative formally commenced in 2006, following a pilot programme in 2005. Very significant funding of €110 million was provided over the years 2006 and 2007 to develop the new Home Care Package Initiative. In 2007, the Health Service Executive had put in place 4,350 packages, which benefitted in excess of 10,500 clients.

Budget 2008 provided an additional €10m for further expansion in the Home Care Package area. For 2008, the total amount allocated for Home Care Packages therefore will be €120m. This will result in a total of just over 4,700 packages, benefitting an estimated 11,500 people.

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. The allocation of resources is a matter for the Executive in accordance with the overall priorities for particular services as set out in its Service Plan. This includes the provision of Home Care Packages at local level. Therefore, the Executive is the appropriate body to consider the particular matters raised by the Deputy. The 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.

63. **Deputy Pádraic McCormack** asked the Minister for Health and Children if her attention has been drawn to the fact that there is an 18 month to two-year waiting time to have clients seeking wheelchairs or other medical aids to be assessed by an occupational therapist in the Health Service Executive west area, and that this is due to a lack of staff in the occupational therapy area; the steps she will take to alleviate this serious situation; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11044/08]

Minister of State at the Department of Health and Children (Deputy Jimmy Devins): The Deputy's question relates to the management and delivery of health and personal social services, which are the responsibility of the Health Service Executive under the Health Act 2004. Accordingly, my Department has requested the Parliamentary Affairs Division of the

[Deputy Jimmy Devins.]

Executive to arrange to have this matter investigated and to have a reply issued directly to the Deputy.

Nursing Homes Repayment Scheme.

64. **Deputy Michael Ring** asked the Minister for Health and Children when a person (detail supplied) in County Mayo will receive their payment under the health repayment scheme. [11058/08]

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.

Suicide Incidence.

65. **Deputy Joanna Tuffy** asked the Minister for Health and Children the number of suicides recorded in the Cork and Kerry area in each of the past five years; the number of mental health resource officers dealing specifically with suicide prevention in the Cork and Kerry area; the amount of funding provided to the mental health resource officers in these areas in each of the past five years; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11061/08]

Minister of State at the Department of Health and Children (Deputy Jimmy Devins): Data on mortality is compiled by the Central Statistics Office and published in the Annual and Quarterly Reports on Vital Statistics. The information in relation to suicides in 2007 is not yet available. The number of deaths by suicide in Cork and Kerry for the years 2002 to 2006 is shown below.

	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006
Cork	62	80	60	53	73
Kerry	13	19	17	12	15

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. The Executive, therefore, 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.

Hospital Services.

66. **Deputy Olwyn Enright** asked the Minister for Health and Children the reason all the women who had mammograms carried out at Midlands Regional Hospital, Portlaoise, have not been formally written to, informing them of the results, even if these results were negative; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11062/08]

67. **Deputy Olwyn Enright** asked the Minister for Health and Children the reason a person (details supplied) in County Laois who had a mammogram carried out at Midlands Regional Hospital, Portlaoise, has not been formally written to informing them of the result; when they will be contacted; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11063/08]

Minister for Health and Children (Deputy Mary Harney): I propose to take Questions Nos. 66 and 67 together.

The HSE has advised my Department that 3,037 mammograms of patients who attended the Midland Regional Hospital Portlaoise were reviewed by Dr. Ann O'Doherty and her team in St. Vincent's University Hospital, Dublin. A number of these patients were called for further assessment in St. Vincent's. All patients who attended for assessment had their imaging reported during the clinic and patients with normal results were given these results orally prior to leaving the clinic. A small number were identified as requiring biopsy. These biopsies were carried out at the initial visit and arrangements were made with the patients to receive their biopsy results following discussion of these results by the consultant team at a multidisciplinary meeting. The issue of writing to patients who did not require any follow up following initial review of their mammogram was discussed between the HSE and my officials. Following this it was agreed by the HSE not to issue individual letters to those patients who did not require reassessment.

A number of press releases which issued during August and September 2007 also stated that patients affected would be contacted directly by the HSE or any patient requiring reassessment would be contacted. The same press releases issued to national, local, broadcast and print media carried the details of a helpline in operation at the hospital for people who needed further information.

The Deputy's specific question in relation to the named individual relates to the management and delivery of health and personal social services, which are the responsibility of the HSE under the Health Act 2004. Accordingly, my Department has requested the Parliamentary Affairs Division of the Executive to respond directly to the Deputy in this regard.

68. **Deputy Dan Neville** asked the Minister for Health and Children if St. Martins ward, St. Joseph's Hospital, Limerick, has been relocated to a ward in the main building as was planned for March 2007. [11070/08]

Minister of State at the Department of Health and Children (Deputy Jimmy Devins): 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. The Executive, therefore, 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.

Hospitals Building Programme.

69. **Deputy Dan Neville** asked the Minister for Health and Children if the high observation area 5B, Mid-Western Regional Hospital will commence construction in March 2008. [11071/08]

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 issue raised by the Deputy. My Department has requested the Parliamentary Affairs Division of the Executive to arrange to have the matter investigated and to have a reply issued directly to the Deputy.

Hospital Staff.

70. **Deputy Dan Neville** asked the Minister for Health and Children if a consultant psychiatry position is being filled to act as a clinical director of St. Martins ward, St. Joseph's Hospital, Limerick. [11072/08]

Minister of State at the Department of Health and Children (Deputy Jimmy Devins): 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. The Executive, therefore, 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.

Nursing Homes Repayment Scheme.

71. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Health and Children, further to Parliamentary Question No. 101 of 14 February 2008, the position regarding the issue of interest owing to long-stay patients and the recommendations and conclusion as a result of these meetings; the estimate of the value of interest which is owed to patients; when repayment will commence; the cost of the administration of this repayment programme; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11074/08]

Minister for Health and Children (Deputy Mary Harney): The Department has been advised by the Health Service Executive (HSE) that it is progressing with the task of transferring past interest retained on invested Patient Private Property Accounts. A process to undertake this transfer, initially for the period 2005-2006, has been agreed and the HSE is now making final arrangements to commence repayments.

The HSE is currently in discussion with the Revenue Commissioners to seek agreement that any interest owed to clients will not have a tax implication for either individual clients or for the HSE. The Department has been advised by the HSE that it is working on proposals to refund interest retained on the investment of PPP funds prior to 2005. Until these proposals are agreed, the HSE has indicated that it will not be in a position to provide estimates of the cost of administering these refunds. The overall estimate for total refund of interest remains as previously advised, approximately €31m or approximately €48m when adjusted for inflation by reference to the Consumer Price Index.

Proposed Legislation.

72. **Deputy Jack Wall** asked the Minister for Health and Children the position of the new nursing home scheme, A Fair Deal; when she will introduce same; when she envisages the scheme becoming available to the public; if there are problems with its introduction; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11075/08]

Minister of State at the Department of Health and Children (Deputy Máire Hackett): The Bill providing for the Fair Deal Scheme is being finalised by the Office of the Attorney General at present. The legislation is complex, demanding careful consideration in the course of drafting. My colleague, the Minister for Health and Children, intends to publish the Bill as soon as possible following finalisation by the Attorney General and Government approval, and to bring the legislation through the Houses of the Oireachtas thereafter. Finally, it is envisaged that the scheme will be made available to the public as soon as all the necessary legal and administrative arrangements are in place.

Questions Nos. 73 to 74 answered with Question No. 62.

Services for People with Disabilities.

75. **Deputy Finian McGrath** asked the Minister for Health and Children the position regarding a matter (details supplied). [11082/08]

Minister of State at the Department of Health and Children (Deputy Jimmy Devins): The Government is committed to providing a high quality service to all people with a disability as illustrated by the substantial investment in the disability sector over the last number of years. An integral part of the National Disability Strategy is the Multi-Annual Investment Programme, published in December 2004, which contains details of specific commitments in relation to the provision of high priority disability services over the period 2006 to 2009. These commitments include the development of new residential, respite and day places for persons with intellectual disability and autism in each of the years covered by the programme. Additional funding was also provided to enhance the level and range of multi-disciplinary support services, available to adults and children with intellectual, physical and sensory disabilities and those with autism.

Prior to the establishment of the HSE, different approaches had emerged throughout the country in relation to service delivery for individuals with autism. Early intervention services exist in many parts of the country, some of which are run by the Health Service Executive and others are run by the non-statutory agencies, but there are inconsistencies in their approach and delivery. The HSE is committed to redesigning these services in line with its Transformation Programme and current best practice.

My Department is currently preparing legislation to clarify and update existing legislation on eligibility for health and personal social services (which would incorporate autism services). The Eligibility for Health and Personal Social Services Bill will define specific health and personal services more clearly; define who should be eligible for what services; set out clear criteria for eligibility; establish when and in what circumstances charges may be made and provide for an appeals framework. It is expected that proposals will be submitted to Government in the first half of 2008.

At present, representatives of the Department of Health and Children, Department of Education and Science, the Health Service Executive and the National Council for Special Education meet on a monthly basis to address issues arising in relation to the implementation of the Disability Act, 2005 for children under 5 years, which commenced on 1 June last. The group is also planning for the roll out of Part 2 of the Disability Act, 2005 and the Education for Persons with Special Needs Act, 2004 to children between 5 and 18 years and to adults. Issues in relation to the timely and appropriate provision of health and education supports to children with a range of disabilities including autism are being considered in the context of these discussions.

The recently-established Office for Disability and Mental Health will focus in particular on facilitating the delivery of integrated health and education support services for children with special needs, by further developing these existing mechanisms for co-operation and co-ordination between the health and education sectors.

76. **Deputy Finian McGrath** asked the Minister for Health and Children if she will respond to a query (details supplied). [11083/08]

Minister of State at the Department of Health and Children (Deputy Jimmy Devins): Throughout the country different approaches have emerged in relation to service delivery for

[Deputy Jimmy Devins.]

individuals with autism. Early Intervention Services exist in many parts of the country. Some are run by the Health Service Executive and others are run by the non-statutory agencies. At present there are inconsistencies in approach and delivery of early services. The Health Service Executive is committed to redesigning these services in line with the transformation programme and best practice.

The Deputy's specific question in relation to the national review of autism services relates to the management and delivery of health and personal social services, which are the responsibility of the Health Service Executive under the Health Act 2004. Accordingly, my Department has requested the Parliamentary Affairs Division of the Executive to arrange to have these matters investigated and to have a reply issued directly to the Deputy.

Ambulance Service.

77. **Deputy Thomas P. Broughan** asked the Minister for Health and Children if she will arrange for five additional ambulances to be provided for Dublin Fire Brigade as an urgent priority. [11089/08]

Minister for Health and Children (Deputy Mary Harney): Operational responsibility for the management and delivery of health and personal social services is a matter for the Health Service Executive and funding for all health services has been provided as part of its overall Vote. Therefore, the Executive is the appropriate body to consider the particular issue raised by the Deputy. My Department has requested the Parliamentary Affairs Division of the Executive to arrange to have the matter investigated and to have a reply issued directly to the Deputy.

Hospital Waiting Lists.

78. **Deputy Thomas P. Broughan** asked the Minister for Health and Children the number of patients awaiting orthopaedic appointments at Beaumont Hospital; the consultant rheumatologist/patient ratio nationally; and the number of patients on waiting lists nationally for neurology/urology, ophthalmology and plastic surgery. [11090/08]

Minister for Health and Children (Deputy Mary Harney): Operational responsibility for the management and delivery of health and personal social services is a matter for the Health Service Executive (HSE) and funding for all health services has been provided as part of its overall Vote. The management of waiting lists for non-surgical procedures is an operational matter for the HSE and the hospitals involved. My Department has therefore requested the Parliamentary Affairs Division of the Executive to arrange for a reply directly to the Deputy on the issues raised.

Statutory responsibility for the collation, management and publication of data on waiting times and numbers of persons waiting for surgical procedures rests with the National Treatment Purchase Fund (NTPF). My Department has, therefore, asked the Chief Executive of the NTPF to reply directly to the Deputy in relation to the information requested.

Health Services.

79. **Deputy Emmet Stagg** asked the Minister for Health and Children, further to the response received from the Health Service Executive in relation to Parliamentary Question No. 155 of 28 November 2007, if solutions to reduce the waiting times have been found following the review of service provision. [11102/08]

Minister for Health and Children (Deputy Mary Harney): Child health examinations are provided by the Health Service Executive (HSE) to children under 6 years of age and all primary level pupils in accordance with Section 66 of the Health Act, 1970. Under Section 67 of that Act, such children are eligible for HSE ophthalmic services in respect of problems noted at child health examinations. As the Health Service Executive has the operational and funding responsibility for Primary Care services, it is the appropriate body to consider the particular matter raised by the Deputy. My Department requested the Parliamentary Affairs Division of the Executive to arrange to have the matter raised in his earlier questions (155 of 28 November 2007 and 486 of 30 January 2008) investigated and I understand that replies issued directly to the Deputy on 17th January and 29th January 2008 respectively.

My Department has again requested the Parliamentary Affairs Division of the Executive to arrange to have this matter investigated and to have an update issued directly to the Deputy on the outcome of the review of the provision of child optical services for the Maynooth and Naas areas.

Care of the Elderly.

80. **Deputy Emmet Stagg** asked the Minister for Health and Children if she will ensure that the provision of additional public nursing homes in County Kildare is included in the Health Service Executive draft capital plan for 2008 which is presently with her for approval. [11110/08]

Minister of State at the Department of Health and Children (Deputy Máire Hackett): As the Deputy will appreciate, 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. This includes prioritising projects at local level to be progressed each year, in line with its overall funding resources. A draft Capital Plan 2008 has recently been completed by the Executive. This is at present being considered in detail by my Department, in conjunction with the Department of Finance. It is my intention that this process should be completed as quickly as possible. The Plan will be published as a whole upon its approval. In the circumstances, it would not be appropriate to indicate at this stage what additional public nursing home provision will be approved for specific areas of the country.

Health Services.

81. **Deputy Emmet Stagg** asked the Minister for Health and Children the number of children and adults awaiting assessment for occupational therapy in Kildare and west Wicklow; and the number of vacant posts filled since the announcement that they were 8.5 posts vacant in the service. [11113/08]

Minister of State at the Department of Health and Children (Deputy Jimmy Devins): The Deputy's question relates to the management and delivery of health and personal social services, which are the responsibility of the Health Service Executive under the Health Act 2004. Accordingly, my Department has requested the Parliamentary Affairs Division of the Executive to arrange to have this matter investigated and to have a reply issued directly to the Deputy.

82. **Deputy Emmet Stagg** asked the Minister for Health and Children when a response will issue in relation to Parliamentary Question No. 490 of 30 January 2008. [11118/08]

Minister for Health and Children (Deputy Mary Harney): My Department has been informed by the Parliamentary Affairs Division of the Health Service Executive that a reply issued to the Deputy on the 18th February last.

Medical Cards.

83. **Deputy John Curran** asked the Minister for Health and Children her views on making an amendment to the medical card scheme whereby people in receipt of a medical card or general practitioner visit card when reaching age 66 will be entitled to keep the card permanently without any further reviews. [11120/08]

Minister for Health and Children (Deputy Mary Harney): The assessment of eligibility to medical cards and GP visit cards is statutorily a matter for the Health Service Executive (HSE) and, with the exception of persons aged over 70 who have an automatic entitlement to a medical card, is determined following an examination of the means of the applicant and his/her dependants. Under Section 45 of the Health Act 1970, medical cards are provided for persons who, in the opinion of the HSE, are unable without undue hardship to arrange general practitioner medical and surgical services for themselves and their dependants.

Section 58 of the Health Act, 1970, as amended, provided for GP visit cards for adult persons with limited eligibility for whom, in the opinion of the HSE, and notwithstanding that they do not qualify for a medical card, it would be unduly burdensome to arrange GP medical and surgical services for themselves and their dependants. The HSE assesses people's entitlement to these benefits on the basis of means. The assessment process also takes account of other factors which may impact on a person's ability to meet the cost of GP services. The HSE has informed me that it has detailed operational guidelines in place for the assessment and review of people's entitlement to a medical card or GP visit card. The purpose of these guidelines is to ensure that every person entitled to a medical card or GP visit card is given the opportunity to avail of their entitlement and that there is a consistency of approach to means-testing nationally.

I consider it appropriate that as a matter of prudent management and governance, the Executive carries out periodic reviews of medical card and GP visit card holders in order to establish whether they continue to be eligible for these benefits. The HSE has indicated that such reviews are conducted in a manner which takes due account of the personal circumstances of the card holder and that arrangements are in place to limit the need for frequent reviews where a review would normally result in the renewal of the medical card or GP visit card, as appropriate.

84. **Deputy John Curran** asked the Minister for Health and Children if she will make changes to the income guidelines governing the issue of medical cards and general practitioner visit cards, bearing in mind that increases in social welfare payments and general pay increases have resulted in people who previously met the criteria for a particular card now exceeding the income guidelines and not having their cards renewed. [11121/08]

Minister for Health and Children (Deputy Mary Harney): The assessment of eligibility to medical cards is statutorily a matter for the HSE and is determined following an examination of the means of the applicant and his/her dependants. Under Section 45 of the Health Act 1970, medical cards are provided for persons who, in the opinion of the HSE, are unable without undue hardship to arrange general practitioner medical and surgical services for themselves and their dependants. Section 58 of the Health Act 1970, as amended, provides for GP visit cards for adult persons with limited eligibility for whom, in the opinion of the HSE, and notwithstanding that they do not qualify for a medical card, it would be unduly burdensome to

arrange GP medical and surgical services for themselves and their dependants. Persons aged 70 and over are statutorily entitled to a medical card, regardless of income. In all other cases an assessment of means is undertaken.

In recent years there have been significant improvements to the way in which people's eligibility for medical cards and GP visit cards is assessed. Since the beginning of 2005, the qualifying guidelines have increased by a cumulative 29%. Assessment is now based on an applicant's and, where relevant, his/her spouse's income after tax and PRSI, and takes account of reasonable expenses incurred in respect of rent or mortgage payments, child care and travel to work. In June 2006, there was a further increase in the qualifying threshold for the GP visit card to 50% above that for a medical card. Furthermore, under the assessment guidelines, persons whose weekly incomes are derived solely from Social and Family Affairs payments or HSE payments, even if these exceed the stated thresholds, qualify for a medical card.

The Programme for Government commits to the following:

- Indexing the income thresholds for medical cards to increases in the average industrial wage;
- Doubling of the income limit eligibility of parents of children under 6 years of age, and trebling them for parents of children under 18 years of age with an intellectual disability.

My Department is currently reviewing all legislation relating to eligibility for health and personal social services with a view to making the system as fair and transparent as possible. As part of this exercise, a review of the eligibility criteria for medical cards in the context of financial, medical and social need is being undertaken and is expected to be completed by autumn 2008. When that review is completed, it is my intention to consider how best to progress the commitments in the Programme for Government in relation to medical card eligibility.

Hospital Staff.

85. **Deputy Charlie O'Connor** asked the Minister for Health and Children if the long promised suicide nurse will be appointed at Tallaght Hospital. [11124/08]

Minister of State at the Department of Health and Children (Deputy Jimmy Devins): 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. The Executive, therefore, 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.

Hospital Waiting Lists.

86. **Deputy Edward O'Keeffe** asked the Minister for Health and Children if a hospital bed will be approved for a person (detail supplied) in County Cork. [11126/08]

Minister for Health and Children (Deputy Mary Harney): Operational responsibility for the management and delivery of health and personal social services is a matter for the Health Service Executive and funding for all health services has been provided as part of its overall Vote. Therefore, the Executive is the appropriate body to consider the particular case raised by the Deputy. My Department has requested the Parliamentary Affairs Division of the Executive to arrange to have the matter investigated and to have a reply issued directly to the Deputy.

Health Services.

87. **Deputy Pat Breen** asked the Minister for Health and Children the reason occupational therapy is not available at a school for a person (details supplied) in County Clare; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11141/08]

Minister of State at the Department of Health and Children (Deputy Jimmy Devins): The recruitment pause put in place in September 2007 was initiated as part of the HSE financial break-even plan to facilitate the delivery of services on budget in accordance with the provisions of the 2007 National Service Plan. This temporary pause in recruitment ended on 31st December 2007 and any posts falling vacant from 1st January 2008 can be filled subject to the provisions of a detailed employment control circular issued by the HSE on January 8th. During this recruitment pause, the HSE put in place a derogation process to deal with the filling of essential posts to protect front-line services and close to 900 posts were approved under this process.

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 the 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. The Deputy's specific question relates to the management and delivery of health and personal social services, which are the responsibility of the Health Service Executive under the Health Act 2004. Accordingly, my Department has requested the Parliamentary Affairs Division of the Executive to arrange to have these matters investigated and to have a reply issued directly to the Deputy.

88. **Deputy Pat Breen** asked the Minister for Health and Children when orthodontic treatment will be provided for a person (details supplied) in County Clare; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11142/08]

Minister for Health and Children (Deputy Mary Harney): The Deputy's question relates to the funding, management and delivery of health and personal social services, which are the responsibility of the Health Service Executive under the Health Act 2004. Accordingly, my Department has requested the Parliamentary Affairs Division of the Executive to arrange to have this matter investigated and to have a reply issued directly to the Deputy.

Hospital Waiting Lists.

89. **Deputy Frank Feighan** asked the Minister for Health and Children the reason a person (details supplied) in County Leitrim who is an inpatient in St. Patrick's Hospital, Carrick-on-Shannon has not succeeded in getting transferred to a Health Service Executive home in Mohill despite the fact they are at the top of the waiting list since mid-2007. [11145/08]

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. 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.

National Health Strategy.

90. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Health and Children the actions which

have been taken to date by her Department to implement the council on stroke of the Irish Heart Foundation recommendations in 2000 to address the lack of adequate supports to address stroke victims and those prone to a stroke; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11152/08]

91. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Health and Children the actions she will take to provide an overall national and regional policy on stroke within the Irish health service; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11153/08]

95. **Deputy David Stanton** asked the Minister for Health and Children the availability of community based stroke services across the country; the services on offer and locations of same; her plans for the development of an integrated, community based, multidisciplinary stroke rehabilitation services network; the targets that have been set in relation to same; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11196/08]

97. **Deputy David Stanton** asked the Minister for Health and Children the number, with regard to the recommendations made in 2000 by the Irish Heart Foundation's council on stroke, of these that have been adopted and implemented, in particular in relation to prevention and health promotion, acute treatment and rehabilitation, community rehabilitation and establishment of a stroke register; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11198/08]

Minister of State at the Department of Health and Children (Deputy Pat The Cope Gallagher): I propose to take Questions Nos. 90, 91, 95 and 97 together.

In September last year Minister Harney established a Cardiovascular Health Policy Group to draw up a new policy framework for the development of all aspects of cardiovascular health, including stroke. The Group is scheduled to report in May 2008. The work of the Group will, inter alia, be informed by the report of the Irish Heart Foundation's Council on Stroke and a national audit of stroke services carried out by the Irish Heart Foundation with funding from my Department. The results of this audit will be published shortly.

Current service availability and plans for development of stroke services are matters which relate to the funding, management and delivery of health and personal social services, which are the responsibility of the Health Service Executive under the Health Act 2004. Accordingly, my Department has requested the Parliamentary Affairs Division of the Executive to arrange to have these matters investigated and to have replies issued directly to the Deputies.

Hospital Waiting Lists.

92. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Health and Children when a person (details supplied) in County Roscommon will be called for a procedure; the reason for the delay in same; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11154/08]

Minister for Health and Children (Deputy Mary Harney): Operational responsibility for the management and delivery of health and personal social services is a matter for the Health Service Executive and funding for all health services has been provided as part of its overall Vote. Therefore, the Executive is the appropriate body to consider the particular case raised by the Deputy. My Department has requested the Parliamentary Affairs Division of the Executive to arrange to have the matter investigated and to have a reply issued directly to the Deputy.

Patients waiting more than three months on a surgical waiting list may qualify for treatment under the National Treatment Purchase Fund. It is open to the person in question or anyone acting on their behalf to contact the Fund directly in relation to their case.

Hospital Services.

93. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Health and Children when post mortem results will issue in the case of a person (details supplied); if a death certificate will issue in this case; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11171/08]

Minister for Health and Children (Deputy Mary Harney): The provision of post mortem examinations in public hospitals is a matter for the hospital concerned in the first instance. Operational responsibility for the management and delivery of public hospital services was assigned to the Health Service Executive under the Health Act 2004. Accordingly my Department has requested the Parliamentary Affairs Division of the Executive to arrange to have this matter investigated and to have a reply issued directly to the Deputy. The Civil Registration Act 2004, which provides for the registration of deaths, is within the remit of my colleague the Minister for Social and Family Affairs.

Medical Cards.

94. **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 Kildare; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11172/08]

Minister for Health and Children (Deputy Mary Harney): Persons and their dependants who would otherwise experience undue hardship in meeting the cost of General Practitioner (GP) services qualify for a medical card, which entitles them to a range of health services free of charge. 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 did not qualify for a medical card, would not be deterred on cost grounds from visiting their GP. The assessment of eligibility for medical cards and GP visit cards is statutorily a matter for the Health Service Executive (HSE) and, with the exception of persons aged 70 and over, who have an automatic statutory entitlement to a medical card, is determined following an examination of the means of the applicant and his/her dependants (income and relevant outgoings). The GP visit card assessment threshold is 50% higher than the medical card threshold.

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.

Question No. 95 answered with Question No. 90.

Health Services.

96. **Deputy David Stanton** asked the Minister for Health and Children the number, with regard to community based primary care services, of multidisciplinary teams established on a pilot basis in 2001; the locations of same; if this model of service delivery has been proven to be effective; if it has since been expanded; the targets set in relation to same; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11197/08]

Minister for Health and Children (Deputy Mary Harney): The Primary Care Strategy aims to develop services in the community to give people direct access to integrated multi-disciplinary teams of general practitioners, nurses, home helps, physiotherapists, occupational therapists and others. It has been estimated that up to 95% of people's health and social

services needs can be properly met within a primary care setting and the establishment of new Primary Care Teams can contribute greatly to enhancing community based health services.

In October 2002 my Department approved the establishment of ten primary care implementation projects — one in each of the former health board areas, with funding to enable existing staff resources within the public system to be augmented. These initial 10 fully-fledged Primary Care Teams were established from 2003 onwards and enabled the primary care model to be demonstrated in action. The teams were located at Arklow, Ballymun, Cashel, Erris, the Liberties, Lifford, Portarlinton, Virginia, West Kerry and West Limerick. The Health Service Executive has indicated that a review of the ten implementation primary care projects was undertaken in the second quarter of 2006 and that significant points of learning have been taken from these teams and used to inform the process of primary care team development generally. The HSE received additional funding of €40m over the period 2006 to 2008 for the establishment of some 200 primary care teams involving 600 front line professionals.

The Government has committed under the Towards 2016 agreement to the establishment of 300 Primary Care teams by 2008; 400 by 2009 and 500 by 2011. A review of these targets is due to be undertaken in 2008. I have emphasised to the Health Service Executive the importance which I attach to the continued development and roll-out of primary care teams and my Department will monitor progress in this regard throughout the year.

Question No. 97. answered with Question No. 90

Rail Network.

98. **Deputy Emmet Stagg** asked the Minister for Transport, further to Parliamentary Question No. 567 of 30 January 2008, if there has been a successful conclusion to the discussions between Iarnród Éireann and the local authorities regarding the removal of level crossings.
[11108/08]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Noel Dempsey): I am informed by Iarnród Éireann that the position on this project is unchanged from that set out in my reply to PQ No. 567 on 30th January 2008.

Vehicle Registration.

99. **Deputy Richard Bruton** asked the Minister for Transport the number of vehicles registered for use on roads in Dublin, Wicklow, Meath and Kildare in 2007, distinguishing cars, motorcycles and goods vehicles and classifying them by broad engine capacity categories.
[11119/08]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Noel Dempsey): The tabular statements below sets out the details requested by the Deputy.

Table 1: Number of Private Cars by Engine Capacity in Counties Dublin, Wicklow, Meath and Kildare in 2007.

Year	County	Number of Private Cars by Engine Capacity														
		ENGINE CAPACITY (CUBIC CENTIMETRES)														
		Up to 900	901 – 1000	1001 – 1100	1101 – 1200	1201 – 1300	1301 – 1400	1401 – 1500	1501 – 1600	1601 – 1700	1701 – 1800	1801 – 1900	1901 – 2000	2001 – 2500	2501 and over	Total
2007	Kildare	311	7,231	393	6,454	6,561	21,981	2,698	12,896	314	5,505	5,852	9,286	3,376	2,785	85,643
	Meath	214	5,663	303	5,272	5,275	18,987	2,662	10,966	293	4,615	6,379	8,722	3,033	2,327	74,711
	Wicklow	406	5,312	314	3,914	5,197	14,897	1,948	8,553	181	3,889	3,827	6,857	2,520	2,341	60,156
	Dublin	2,700	47,215	2,850	33,395	46,627	122,682	17,471	77,926	1,259	39,713	20,357	51,126	17,620	17,898	498,839
	All Counties	7,811	164,667	9,402	121,563	158,318	506,102	62,901	286,834	8,192	117,465	132,152	198,687	61,020	47,787	1,882,901

Table 2: Number of Goods Vehicles by Unladen Weight in Counties Dublin, Wicklow, Meath and Kildare in 2007.

Number of Goods Vehicles by Unladen Weight in each Licensing Authority Area																
Year	County	Electric:		Unladen Weight Expressed in Kilograms												
		Up to 1270	Exc. 1270	814 – 1016	1017 – 1270	1271 – 1524	1525 – 2032	2033 – 4064	4065 – 8128	8129 – 9144	9145 – 10160	10161 – 11176	11177 – 12192	12193 and over	Total	
2007	Kildare	1	0		160	2,734	1,738	6,240	2,512	525	107	121	198	266	576	15,261
	Meath	0	0	58	208	2,812	1,840	6,366	2,286	585	112	115	243	261	596	15,482
	Wicklow	0	0	63	137	1,520	1,369	4,042	2,071	290	60	55	105	110	263	10,085
	Dublin	2	0	667	417	10,947	8,648	27,084	9,681	2,730	740	697	746	661	2,088	65,108
	All Counties	5	0	2,362	5,115	65,447	46,164	141,488	46,846	12,058	2,771	2,755	3,872	4,931	12,060	345,874

[Deputy Noel Dempsey.]

Table 3: Number of Motor Cycles by Engine Capacity in Counties Dublin, Wicklow, Meath and Kildare in 2007.

Number of Motor Cycles by Engine Capacity in each Licensing Authority						
Year	County	Up to 75 c.c.	76 c.c. up to 150 c.c.	151 c.c. up to 250 c.c.	Over 250 c.c.	Total
2007	Kildare	109	204	114	1,572	1,999
	Meath	76	127	71	1,261	1,535
	Wicklow	102	171	116	1,301	1,690
	Dublin	2,261	2,696	925	7,655	13,537
	All Counties	4,211	5,601	2,343	25,023	37,178

Public Transport.

100. **Deputy Richard Bruton** asked the Minister for Transport the details of the Exchequer subvention towards the cost of transport services in each year 2000 to 2007 inclusive, distinguishing the subvention to Dublin Bus, DART, LUAS, other Dublin suburban rail, Irish Rail and to Bus Éireann, and indicating the passengers carried by each service in each year. [11187/08]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Noel Dempsey): The information sought by the Deputy is set out below:

Year	Bus Éireann		Dublin Bus		Iarnród Éireann		Luas	
	Subvention	Pax Nos.	Subvention	Pax Nos.	Subvention	Pax Nos.	Subvention	Pax Nos.
	€m.		€m.		€m.		€m.	
2000	15,757	84.3	41,189	134.2	133,236	31.72	—	—
2001	23,808	87.3	52,377	142.9	146,020	34.21	—	—
2002	21,766	89.3	56,063	146.6	155,483	35.4	—	—
2003	22,856	91.9	53,867	149.8	168,257	35.56	—	—
2004	23,998	90.1	61,810	149.8	171,421	34.55	3,842*	6.6
2005	25,199	92.6	64,900	145.7	179,991	37.65	Nil	22.2
2006	26,459	90.0	69,845	146.3	188,716	43.4	Nil	25.8
2007	31,595	95.7	80,078	147.0	194,911	45.5	Nil	28.4

*€557,545 of this Subvention was paid in 2005.

A breakdown of the subvention across suburban, commuter and intercity rail services is not available to my Department.

101. **Deputy Richard Bruton** asked the Minister for Transport the details of the investment in bus priority measures in Dublin in each of the past five years; and the length of route with bus priority at the end of each year. [11188/08]

My Department is funding the development of bus priority measures in the Greater Dublin Area (GDA) through the Traffic Management Grants (TMG) scheme managed by the Dublin Transportation Office. The expenditure on developing the network of bus priority in the GDA in the past five years was as follows:

2003 — €18.5 million

2004 — €27.99 million

2005 — €29.52 million

2006 — €21.91 million

2007 — €32.58 million

The DTO undertook an audit at the end of 2007 of the bus priority network and established that the length of route with bus priority in the GDA is around 190km. At the start of 2003, the equivalent figure was 98kms. Figures for intervening years are not available from the DTO.

Traffic Management.

102. **Deputy Richard Bruton** asked the Minister for Transport the details of the canal cordon counts of journeys by different travel modes in each year since 2000 to date in 2008. [11189/08]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Noel Dempsey): I have been in contact with the Dublin Transportation Office (DTO), and I understand that all available data for the years 2000 to 2005 is published on their website (www.dto.ie) as part of the QBN Monitoring Reports. In the case of 2006, I understand that some data additional to that on the DTO website is available and I have asked the DTO to pass this directly to the Deputy. The data from the 2007 cordon count (conducted last November) is not yet available.'

Public Transport.

103. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Transport the nature of a recent meeting between himself, local authorities, business organisations, An Garda Síochána, CIÉ and the Railway Procurement Agency; if the outcome of this meeting was to postpone public transport investment projects; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11190/08]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Noel Dempsey): A number of major Transport 21 projects are planned for the period up to 2015, which will have a major impact on Dublin city centre. These include Metro North, the rail Interconnector and the cross-city and Lucan Luas lines. There will also be other major construction activity during the same period, including the renewal of water and electricity services and a number of large private developments. I met the principal implementing agencies, An Garda Síochána and business representatives on 6 March to get an update on the major Transport 21 projects in Dublin, to identify the principal concerns of the business community and to review progress on traffic planning for the construction phase. I intend that this will be the first in a regular series of meetings to review progress.

It is clear from earlier consultations with Dublin City Council and the Railway Procurement Agency that construction of both Metro North and the cross-city Luas line at the same time would be too disruptive for traffic in Dublin City Centre. I am therefore minded to approve a revised strategy for the construction of the cross-city Luas line which, subject to an enforceable railway order, would involve carrying out works for this line at the same time as the Metro works where the sites for both overlap and the completion of the remaining on-street Luas works after the completion of the on-street Metro works. Off-street Luas works (such as on the old Broadstone railway line) should be able to proceed at the same time as Metro construction. I will make a final decision on this revised strategy when I have considered the views of the relevant agencies and business interests.

104. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Transport the proposed completion dates and starts dates for public transport investment projects as detailed in Transport 21; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11191/08]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Noel Dempsey): The construction start dates of projects are determined by the outcome of public consultation, the planning approval process and contract negotiations. Indicative completion dates for major projects can be found on the Transport 21 website.

Rail Network.

105. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Transport the preparatory work and planning that has been done in advance of the massive excavation and construction work due to take place at St. Stephen's Green; when he expects work on site to commence; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11192/08]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Noel Dempsey): In October 2006 the Railway Procurement Agency (RPA) announced the preferred route for Metro North which includes the St. Stephen's Green underground station. The planned station is to be situated predominantly beneath the North West corner of St. Stephen's Green park. This station will provide for interchange with the proposed Iarnród Éireann Interconnector station located to the east of the Metro station and at a deeper level. It will also provide for interchange with the existing and proposed Luas lines. An extensive combined concourse is planned to serve both the Interconnector and Metro stations and provide for convenient interchange between both Metro and suburban rail services.

Iarnród Éireann and the Railway Procurement Agency are working closely together in designing the station for both Metro North and the Interconnector at St. Stephen's Green and in planning works on the site. The RPA has agreed to undertake advance works for Iarnród Éireann to ensure a timely transition in the work programme for both Metro North and the Interconnector. In addition, Dublin City Council is developing a traffic management strategy to minimise the disruption caused to traffic from works at St. Stephen's Green. The design of the Metro and Interconnector stations was developed within constraints agreed with the Office of Public Works and in consultation with the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government, Dublin City Council, and other key stakeholders. RPA hopes to be in a position to lodge an application for a railway order to An Bord Pleanála later this year in respect of Metro North. Works on Metro North will commence following the grant of a railway order.

To facilitate the sensitive heritage and environmental aspects in this area, specialists including conservation architects, archeologists, and arboriculturists are currently being taken on board to advise on these significant matters. RPA has agreed with OPW to carry out advance works including the protection and temporary removal of some existing features which will be reinstated post construction. A detailed landscaping plan to reinstate the park will also be agreed with the OPW. Prior to any work being carried out detailed surveys, reports and photographic records will be commissioned and agreed with OPW.

Human Rights Issues.

106. **Deputy Leo Varadkar** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if he will raise the case of a person (detail supplied) with the Chinese Government to seek their release on humanitarian grounds; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11199/08]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Dermot Ahern): I am very concerned by the situation of the individual referred to. This case has been repeatedly raised with the Chinese authorities through the EU-China Human Rights Dialogue, including at the most recent round held in Beijing in October 2007. This Dialogue is the agreed formal framework through which the EU raises human rights issues and concerns, as well as individual cases of concern. Cases raised during the Dialogue are then followed up in subsequent contacts with the Chinese authorities. My Department has also raised this case directly with the Chinese Embassy here. Human rights are a constant and important subject of dialogue with the Chinese authorities at a bilateral level, where we continually stress the importance the Government attaches to issues such as freedom of expression and freedom of religion.

107. **Deputy Leo Varadkar** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if he will protest to the Egyptian Government about its refusal to allow citizens who have converted to Christianity to have this noted on their state identity papers; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11200/08]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Dermot Ahern): As is required in many countries, Egyptian citizens carry identity cards, which are particularly important for their interaction with the institutions of the State. Egyptian identity cards include an entry denoting the religion of the holder. The question of conversion from Islam to any other faith is a very sensitive one in almost all Islamic countries. In the case of Egypt, the general legal position regarding conversion is that citizens can have the entry on their identity card changed, on the provision of proof from the appropriate authorities. However, in practice this process often proves difficult and complex.

Most reported cases of difficulty appear to relate to Coptic Christians who convert to Islam, sometimes because there is no provision for divorce under their religion, and who subsequent to obtaining a divorce then reconvert to Christianity. An important judgment by a higher court in Egypt last month stated that converts from Christianity who decide to return to their original faith can have the entry on their identity cards changed back to reflect this. There is a possibility that this judgement will be appealed, but the general expectation at this stage is that it may represent a resolution of the problem for many people in this category. It is important also to note that the National Council for Human Rights, an official body appointed by the Egyptian Government, has proposed that the entry on religion be removed from identity cards.

We will continue to monitor developments on this issue and on the broader human rights situation through our Embassy in Cairo, and in consultation with a range of Egyptian NGOs. The Government and our EU partners will also continue to raise our concerns about human rights issues in the dialogue with the Egyptian Government, which was enhanced by the adoption last year of the Action Plan under the European Neighbourhood Policy. One of the priorities of the Action Plan is to “promote efforts, in Egypt and the EU, towards increasing tolerance, understanding and respect of all religions and cultures”. I hope that the first meeting of a specific subcommittee on political dialogue and human rights, under the Action Plan, will be held in the near future. Human Rights issues will also be addressed at the forthcoming annual meeting of the EU-Egypt Association Council in Luxembourg next month.

Interdepartmental Committees.

108. **Deputy Brian Hayes** asked the Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment if members have been appointed to the interdepartmental committee charged with the co-ordinated implementation of the national skills strategy; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11069/08]

Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Seán Haughey): The interdepartmental Committee will be chaired by myself and will comprise senior officials from the Departments of Enterprise, Trade and Employment, Education and Science and Finance.

Community Employment Schemes.

109. **Deputy David Stanton** asked the Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the numbers of persons currently participating in the FÁS community employment scheme: if there is a cap on the number employed; if so, if the cap is applied in the same way in each region; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11023/08]

Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Micheál Martin): Community Employment (CE) 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. CE helps unemployed people to re-enter the open labour market by breaking their experience of unemployment through a return to a work routine and to assist them to enhance/develop both their technical and personal skills. The overall Community Employment numbers have been maintained at a constant level of around 22,500 since 2002. Currently, there are approximately 22,600 individuals availing of CE nationally.

The aim of CE still remains as an active labour market programme with the emphasis on progression into employment. The programme is managed within this context, with consideration to the availability of resources and the needs of participants and the community. However, it should be remembered that, in so far as participants remain on CE, they are precluding someone else from benefiting from the programme. 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.

In conclusion then, I would say that this Government will continue to support the positive role of CE 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.

Retail Sector.

110. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the increase or decrease in the price of beer, wine and spirits at supermarkets or off-licences since the abolition of the Groceries (Minimum Prices) Order; and the increase or decrease in a corresponding period prior to the abolition of the order; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11167/08]

Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Micheál Martin): Since the abolition of the Groceries Order, the Consumer Price Index shows that the price of alcohol decreased initially by 4.1% during the period March 2006 to December 2006. During this period the price of spirits decreased by 8.1%, wine and cider by 3.3% and beer by 1.3%. Since December 2006, CSO price statistics use that month as a base. The previous base was December 2001. Between January 2007 and January 2008, the price of alcohol has increased by 0.5%, spirits by 1.1%, wine and cider by 0.6% and beer by 0.1%.

In the 12 months prior to the abolition of the Groceries Order, the price of alcohol decreased by 0.3%, spirits — no change, wine and cider by 0.1% and beer by 1.0%, while in the 12 months

prior to March 2005, the price of alcohol overall increased by 0.4%, spirits by 0.1%, wine and cider decreased by 0.4% and beer increased by 1.8%. I would like to draw the Deputy's attention to statistics published by the World Health Organisation (WHO) which indicate that, apart from a slight dip in 1983, alcohol consumption in Ireland, measured in litres per capita, increased from 4.83 to 11.23 between the period 1970 and 2001. Since 2002, consumption has decreased very slightly from 11.22 to 10.61 in 2005, the last year for which WHO figures are available.

CSO figures indicate increases in the price of alcohol during the period 1976 to 2006. Combined, this WHO and CSO data clearly shows year on year increases in alcohol consumption during a time when price control mechanisms were in place and during which the price of alcohol also increased.

Proposed Legislation.

111. **Deputy Mary Upton** asked the Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism if he will amend the relevant legislation regarding arts and sports organisations to ensure that these are required to allocate funding to programmes to promote social and cultural inclusion; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10989/08]

Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism (Deputy Séamus Brennan): Government Policy on the Arts is set out in the Programme for Government and elaborated further in my Department's Statement of Strategy and my recently published Arts and Culture Plan, 2008. One of the stated objectives of this policy is to encourage and support the strategic development of the arts in local communities, both geographic and communities of interest, for the disadvantaged and for minority groups.

My policy on the arts is to promote and strengthen the arts in all its forms, increase access to and participation in the arts, and to make the arts an integral and valued part of our national life. Consequently, all funding allocated by my Department to the arts is aimed at, inter alia, addressing the issues of cultural participation, access and social inclusion. The Irish Sports Council (ISC), which is funded by my Department, is the statutory body responsible for encouraging the promotion, development and co-ordination of competitive sport and for increasing participation in recreational sport. The ISC's basic philosophy is, therefore, one of inclusion and its Statement of Strategy recognises the potential of sport to be a driver for social change dealing with issues such as exclusion and social inequality.

All sports organisations funded by the ISC, including National Governing Bodies (NGBs) and Local Sports Partnerships (LSPs), are encouraged to target all sections of society in seeking to increase participation in sport. In addition, with the support and cooperation of my Department and Pobal, additional funding has been allocated to the ISC to support various grant schemes including the funding programme "Sports for Disadvantaged Youth". This programme, with funding amounting to almost €2 million, is administered by the ISC and delivered through the existing LSP structures and local authorities where an LSP is not in place. In addition, the ISC is also involved, directly and indirectly, in a number of successful initiatives that seek to encourage cultural inclusion. Typically, these programmes are funded through the National Programme Against Racism (NPAR) administered by the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform.

With regard to the NGBs of sport, the Football Association of Ireland (FAI) has taken the lead with regard to cultural inclusion. In 2006, the FAI was the first NGB to appoint an Intercultural Programme Coordinator and, in 2007, launched its Intercultural Football Plan. In addition, in line with a commitment contained in the Agreed Programme for Government, the

[Deputy Séamus Brennan.]

level of own funding required from applicants under the 2008 Sports Capital Programme in urban disadvantaged areas has been reduced from 20% to 10%. This covers applicants from RAPID and Local Drugs Task Force areas. It is the view of my Department that amending legislation governing the arts and sport is not the most appropriate way to promote social and cultural inclusion and there are no plans to amend legislation in this regard.

Question No. 112 answered with Question No. 37.

Sports Capital Programme.

113. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism if he will approve funding for a golf project (details supplied) in County Roscommon under the sports capital programme 2008; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11029/08]

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. The Programme is advertised on an annual basis. Applications for funding under the 2008 Programme were invited through advertisements in the Press on January 13th and 14th last. The closing date for receipt of applications was 29th February for paper-based applications and 7th March for on-line applications. Applications received before the deadline are currently being evaluated against the Programme's assessment criteria, which are outlined in the guidelines, terms and conditions of the Programme. I intend to announce the allocations under this year's Programme after the assessment period is completed.

114. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism if he will offer a programme of enhanced grant aid for the provision of local and community based indoor sporting and recreational facilities to meet the ongoing and increasing requirements of youths with the objective of providing for recreational needs in competition with competing and sometimes not constructive demands; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11157/08]

117. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism the number of sporting bodies to which his Department awarded grant aid from the proceeds of the national lottery in 2007; the extent to which funding is expected to be available in 2008 from such organisations for ongoing or other requirements or development works; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11160/08]

119. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism the extent to which he proposes to assist community and youth organisations in 2008 having particular regard to their requirements as set out in the applications for grant aid already submitted to his Department; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11162/08]

Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism (Deputy Séamus Brennan): I propose to take Questions Nos. 114, 117 and 119 together.

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. The 2008 programme was advertised on 13th and 14th of January and the deadline for receipt of applications was 29th February for paper-based applications and 7th March for on-line applications. All applications received before the deadline will be evaluated against the programme's assessment criteria, which are outlined in the guidelines, terms and conditions of the programme. Under the 2007 sports capital programme, 935 organisations

were allocated funding to the value of €85m. No decision has yet been made regarding the level of allocations to be made under this year's programme.

Decentralisation Programme.

115. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism the extent to which decentralisation proposals in respect of his Department are completed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11158/08]

Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism (Deputy Séamus Brennan): Following the announcement of the Government's decentralisation programme in the 2004 budget, my Department, which has a staff of 130, excluding the National Archives which is part of my Department, was designated an "early mover" by the Decentralisation Implementation Group. (DIG). To expedite the decentralisation process, temporary premises were secured by the OPW (Office of Public Works) in Fossa in 2006 from which the decentralised sections of my Department currently operate. To date, 70 staff have relocated to the temporary accommodation, in two tranches, 45 staff in September 2006 and 25 staff in July 2007.

I understand that the new permanent building is on target for completion, and it is expected to be furnished, equipped and ready for occupation by the end of the year. The objective is to complete the decentralisation process by the end of 2008 by which time the Department expects to be operating from the Department's new purpose built offices in Killarney.

Tourism Industry.

116. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism his proposals to ensure the future and competitiveness of the tourism industry here; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11159/08]

Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism (Deputy Séamus Brennan): In considering the competitiveness of any industry, a key measure is the extent to which it can maintain and increase market share. We have been fortunate in recent years to enjoy record growth in numbers of overseas visitors and associated revenue. The Central Statistics Office, CSO, figures for 2007 show that we welcomed over 8 million overseas visitors to the Republic of Ireland, with associated foreign revenue earnings of almost €5 billion. While the international tourism market is becoming increasingly competitive, Ireland has consistently outperformed its key competitors in terms of growing the number of overseas visitors to our shores.

With regard to the future, I am pleased that the tourism agencies are forecasting that the Irish tourism industry will show further growth. At a tourism sectoral meeting of the North-South Ministerial Council last November, Minister Nigel Dodds and I approved Tourism Ireland's corporate plan for 2008-10. This plan contains ambitious and challenging targets for tourism for the island of Ireland over the next three years. It aims to increase overseas visitor numbers by between 4.2% and 5.1%, which, if achieved, would mean total overseas visitors to the island of Ireland of over 10.5 million in 2010.

The plan also sets tourism revenue growth targets of between 6.6% and 7.1%, which, if achieved, would mean that overseas tourism would generate up to €16 billion in tourism revenues for the island of Ireland in the three-year period. While the targets are ambitious, there is little doubt that global economic factors such as currency and oil prices are likely to impact on the number of outward travellers from some of our most important markets such as North America and Great Britain. Whereas we have little influence in relation to such global economic factors, our agencies monitor market performance during the year and adjust their marketing campaigns as appropriate.

[Deputy Séamus Brennan.]

Among Tourism Ireland's priorities for this year are an even greater focus on e-marketing, continued attention to the car touring market in Great Britain and targeted marketing activity around key access hubs in mainland Europe and North America. In terms of domestic tourism, Fáilte Ireland will continue to focus on key issues relating to product development, enterprise development, regional development, environment, education and training, and advocacy. In terms of targets, Fáilte Ireland has a target of achieving annual average growth of 3.7% in domestic holidays for the period to 2012.

Maintaining and enhancing competitiveness is a major issue for Irish tourism as it is for the economy as a whole. In addressing that issue, it is important to bear in mind that competitiveness is about more than price and costs. It is generally agreed that Ireland cannot and, indeed, should not attempt to compete on the basis of costs with mass tourism destinations. The tourism agencies continue to monitor Ireland's competitiveness as a tourism destination and I am encouraging them to assist the industry in responding to changing conditions through a variety of programmes in marketing, human resource development, quality enhancement, product development and productivity. By doing this I am confident that the ambitious targets I outlined for the island of Ireland can be met.

Question No. 117 answered with Question No. 114.

Arts Funding.

118. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism the extent to which he will fund the promotion of the arts in 2008 as compared with previous years; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11161/08]

Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism (Deputy Séamus Brennan): Funding for the Arts in 2008 is set out in the Revised Estimates for the Public Services 2008, and in particular, Vote 33 on pages 154 — 155 and Vote 35 on pages 164 — 167. I also refer the Deputy to the Arts and Culture Plan 2008, published by me some weeks ago, and available on my Department's website www.dast.gov.ie, and in particular Section 2 and Appendix II of that plan.

Question No. 119 answered with Question No. 114.

Stadium Projects.

120. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism the position in regard to the National Stadium; when the project is expected to proceed to conclusion; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11163/08]

Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism (Deputy Séamus Brennan): The redevelopment of Croke Park has been completed and work on the redevelopment of Lansdowne Road is ongoing with a completion date of 2010. These facilities will meet the stadium needs of our three main field sports. The Government approved, in November 2005, the commencement of Phase One of the development of the National Sports Campus on the basis of a Development Control Plan prepared by Campus and Stadium Ireland Development Company Ltd (CSID) — the predecessor of the National Sports Campus Development Authority (NSCDA). These facilities will be designed to meet the indoor and outdoor training needs of Irish elite sportspersons who compete at national and international levels and will also provide for the needs of the local community.

The Government decision for this stage of development included agreement to move the HQ of the FAI to the former State Laboratory building at Abbotstown. Work on the building was completed and the FAI took possession of the building in December last year. It is also intended to provide a headquarters for the Institute for Sport by refurbishing an existing building on the site. The NSCDA expects to be in a position to finalise the appointment of the Design and Project Management teams for the project shortly. It is then the intention of the Authority to have detailed plans prepared, for the implementation of Phase One, and it is estimated that planning permission will be sought later this year.

The Abbotstown facilities, when completed will provide a much needed range of training and competitive facilities for our finest sportspersons. Through the National Aquatic Centre a top world class sports facility has already been provided. Now being progressed is the development of a state of the art complex of quality facilities to serve a wide spectrum of sport activities and disciplines which will benefit elite sports persons and the local community alike. The first phase of the project will comprise a National Field Sports Training Centre catering for rugby, soccer, Gaelic games and hockey; a National Indoor Training Centre which will provide world class training facilities for over 20 National Governing Bodies of Sport; accommodation for sports men and women; sports science and medical facilities, and all-weather synthetic pitches for community use.

Question No. 121 answered with Question No. 22.

Social Welfare Benefits.

122. **Deputy Michael Ring** asked the Minister for Social and Family Affairs further to a previous parliamentary question reply (details supplied), the further evidence he requires from the person referred to in the reply. [11026/08]

Minister for Social and Family Affairs (Deputy Martin Cullen): Following receipt of further information from the person concerned on 7 March 2008 regarding his self-employment status, a Deciding Officer re-assessed his weekly means as nil from 28 January 2008. This assessment entitles him to a jobseeker's allowance payment at the maximum weekly rate, which in his case, is €425.10 from that date. A first payment, including arrears, will issue to him on 19 March 2008.

123. **Deputy Charles Flanagan** asked the Minister for Social and Family Affairs the reason it takes on average six months to process applications in respect of family income supplement; his views on whether this time is appropriate, having regard to the circumstances of applicants for this payment; and if he will make a statement on the way he will speed up the process. [11040/08]

Minister for Social and Family Affairs (Deputy Martin Cullen): My Department has consistently publicised the FIS scheme in order to maximise uptake by qualified families. Significant improvements in the qualifying income limits and ongoing awareness campaigns have resulted in a strong upward trend in the level of new claims and, consequently, in claims for renewals. Entitlement to FIS is based on an applicant satisfying a means test and on certification of employment by the employer, which adds to the time taken to process claims.

There are currently some 23,400 people in receipt of a weekly FIS payment. In 2007, my Department received 36,900 new and renewal FIS claims compared to 33,000 in 2006 and 23,000 in 2005 — an increase of over 60% on 2005 and 11% on 2006. In the first 10 weeks of 2008 over 9,000 new and renewal claims were received compared to some 7,900 in the same period in 2007 — an increase of 14%. However almost all renewal claims are still in payment. The

[Deputy Martin Cullen.]

average time taken to award a FIS claim or renewal in 2007 was just under 12 weeks. The average time in 2006 was just under 8 weeks.

The Department introduced a number of measures to address the efficiency of claim processing for FIS as follows: a review of existing processes and procedures has been undertaken with the explicit objective of reducing delays in claim processing; priority is being given to claims where a claim is being renewed to ensure continuity of payment; the ongoing staffing requirement was recently reviewed in light of the increased volumes of claims; overtime working is being judiciously applied; and 5 extra temporary staff started this week in an effort to eliminate the backlog. These measures will, over time, lead to more efficient processing and reduce the number of claims on hand. The position is being closely monitored and kept under review by my Department.

Decentralisation Programme.

124. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Social and Family Affairs the progress to date in the proposed decentralisation of the 262 information and communications technology posts to Drogheda; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11053/08]

Minister for Social and Family Affairs (Deputy Martin Cullen): Under the current decentralisation programme, the Department's Information and Communications Technology Division (ICT) is designated to relocate to Drogheda. The Office of Public Works (OPW) is charged with securing accommodation in Drogheda for this Department. That Office have advised that they have purchased sites in Drogheda to accommodate the Department's Headquarters Staff, a new Social Welfare Local Office, the Social Welfare Appeals Office and the Citizens Information Board. At this time, there is no indicative timeframe from the OPW regarding the availability of accommodation for the ICT Division. The Department will ensure that plans are in place to facilitate the decentralisation at the appropriate time.

Social Welfare Benefits.

125. **Deputy Willie Penrose** asked the Minister for Social and Family Affairs the position in relation to an application by a person (details supplied) in County Westmeath for mortgage allowance under the supplementary welfare scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11138/08]

Minister for Social and Family Affairs (Deputy Martin Cullen): The Health Service Executive has advised that the person concerned made an application for a mortgage interest supplement in January 2008. Documentation indicating current employment status was requested from him but has not been provided to date. The person concerned should contact the community welfare officer dealing with the application in question and provide the relevant documentation so that entitlement to mortgage interest supplement can be determined.

126. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Social and Family Affairs if an exceptional needs payment will be made in the case of persons (details supplied) in County Kildare; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11174/08]

Minister for Social and Family Affairs (Deputy Martin Cullen): The Health Service Executive has advised that the persons concerned were refused a mortgage interest supplement on the grounds that their means were in excess of the limits prescribed having regard to their personal circumstances. It is open to them to appeal this decision to the Executive's Appeals Office. The Executive has further advised that it has not received an application from the persons

concerned for an exceptional needs payment under the supplementary welfare allowance scheme to assist with mortgage arrears. The persons concerned should contact the community welfare office in their area so that any entitlement they may have can be determined.

Social Welfare Appeals.

127. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Social and Family Affairs the number of appeals made to the director of customer services information and appeals arising from a refusal in respect of supplementary welfare and rent in each of the past five years to date; the number granted, refused or pending; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11178/08]

Minister for Social and Family Affairs (Deputy Martin Cullen): The supplementary welfare allowance scheme (SWA), including rent supplement, is administered on my behalf by the Community Welfare division of the Health Service Executive (HSE). Under existing arrangements, an appeal against a decision for entitlement to SWA is made in the first instance to the designated appeals office in the HSE. A person may, if they so wish, make a subsequent appeal to the Social Welfare Appeals Office, if they are dissatisfied with the decision of the HSE appeals office. Details of the number of supplementary welfare allowance appeals to the HSE Appeals Office in 2006 are provided in Table 1 in the following tabular statement. The HSE has advised that complete records for the years 2003, 2004, 2005 and 2007 are currently being compiled and will be forwarded to the Deputy in the near future.

Statistics on the number of supplementary welfare allowance decisions appealed to the Social Welfare Appeals Office are provided in Table 2 of the following tabular statement.

Table 1: Supplementary Welfare Allowance Appeals to Health Service Executive's Appeals Office — 2006

Year	Received	Granted	Refused
2006	6,214	1,640	3,469

Table 2: Supplementary Welfare Allowance Appeals to the Social Welfare Appeals Office: 2002 to 2006

Year	Received	Granted	Disallowed	Pending
2002	289	70	202	42
2003	433	80	334	38
2004	370	97	228	65
2005	327	92	214	54
2006	329	116	205	43

*Statistics for 2007 are unavailable at this time.

National Drugs Strategy.

128. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs if he will take particular steps to address the needs of community based groups involved in the fight against drugs or other crime with particular reference to the use of grant aid from the proceeds of the national lottery to assist such groups in the provision of facilities at local level to meet community and youth needs; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11165/08]

Minister of State at the Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs (Deputy Pat Carey): The majority of capital expenditure allocated to community groups through my

[Deputy Pat Carey.]

Department for drugs initiatives is channelled through the Local and Regional Drugs Task Forces and the Young People's Facilities and Services Fund (YPFSF). In this context, the Deputy should note that funding for these programmes is met from the Exchequer, not the National Lottery. Drugs Task Force projects normally originate at community level and are submitted to the National Drugs Strategy Team, who then make recommendations to me on funding. Under the YPFSF, projects are submitted for consideration to the Fund's National Assessment Committee, chaired by my Department and recommendations to me arise from there.

The combined capital expenditure on these in 2007 was €8.125m and I happy to advise the Deputy that the allocation of €9m in 2008 represents an increase of over 12.5% on the 2007 allocation. I recently announced an additional capital investment of €4m under the YPFSF this year. This is additional to the overall funding of €147m approved under the YPFSF since it was established in 1998. In addition, I have also announced the expansion of the Fund to four new towns — Athlone, Dundalk, Wexford and Arklow. I hope that the inclusion of these four towns is the first step on the way to further coverage under the Fund over the next few years.

Care of the Elderly.

129. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs if and when an alarm system for older people will be provided in the case of a person (details supplied) in County Meath; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11176/08]

Minister of State at the Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs (Deputy Pat Carey): My Department operates the Scheme of Community Support for Older People. This Scheme encourages and assists the community's support for older people by means of community-based grants to improve the security of vulnerable older people in their own homes. The Scheme is open to people aged 65 and over who have a genuine need for assistance and is administered by local community and voluntary organisations throughout the country with support provided by my Department.

Maximum individual grants provided under the scheme are as follows: €300 in respect of the once-off installation cost of socially monitored alarms; €200 in respect of physical security equipment; €200 in respect of security lighting; €50 in respect of smoke alarms; and €150 in respect of interior emergency lighting for qualifying older people living on our offshore islands. My Department has received no application for funding for — or on behalf of — the named individual under this Scheme. To apply for assistance, individuals should contact a local community and voluntary group and request that they make an application on their behalf to the Department. Should the individual referred to by the Deputy need assistance in contacting a local group, officials in my Department can be contacted at 071-9186761/2/3 and further information in respect of the Scheme is available at my Department's website *www.pobail.ie*.

Departmental Programmes.

130. **Deputy Willie Penrose** asked the Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs the geographical areas in County Westmeath that are designated for inclusion in the CLÁR areas; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11129/08]

Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs (Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív): The following table lists the District Electoral Divisions (DEDs) within CLÁR in County Westmeath:

DED ID	DED NAME	DED ID	DED NAME	DED ID	DED NAME	DED ID	DED NAME
13010	Kilcumreragh	13026	Boherquill	13044	Fore West	13078	Jamestown
13015	Muckanagh	13027	Coole	13045	Hilltown	13079	Kilbeggan
13017	Umma	13029	Finnea	13046	Kilcumny	13081	Killare
13019	Ballymore	13030	Glore	13048	Killulagh	13085	Lackan
13020	Doonis	13031	Knockarrow	13051	Riverdale	13086	Lauree
13021	Drumraney	13032	Rathowen	13053	Ardnaglew	13092	Multyfarnham
13022	Noughaval	13033	Street	13056	Ballymorin	13093	Newtown
13023	Piercetown	13034	Ballinlough	13067	Derrymore	13097	Rahugh
13024	Templepatrick	13036	Ballynaskeagh	13069	Emper	13100	Skeagh
13025	Winetown	13043	Fore East	13072	Glenlough	13103	Streamstown

Shaded areas within the table indicate areas included in CLÁR in 2006.

Information in relation to the areas covered by the CLÁR programme is available on my Department's website www.pobail.ie.

Departmental Reports.

131. **Deputy David Stanton** asked the Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs, further to Parliamentary Question No. 135 of 27 February 2008 and No. 188 of 4 March 2008, if his Department is responsible for the co-ordination of the enterprise audit to review the uses of existing and redundant agricultural buildings and manufacturing plants in rural areas; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11195/08]

Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs (Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív): Arrangements for an enterprise audit to review the use of existing and redundant agricultural buildings and manufacturing plants in rural areas are currently being made. My Department will coordinate with the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment and Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food being the Departments with the lead functions in these areas.

Foreshore Development.

132. **Deputy Joanna Tuffy** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if decisions regarding the future development of the foreshore will be delayed pending review of the foreshore legislation; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11054/08]

Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Deputy Mary Coughlan): The Government decided on 2 October 2007 that responsibility for foreshore licensing functions under the Foreshore Act 1933 in respect of port companies and harbour authorities governed by the Harbours Acts 1946, 1996 and 2000 and any other harbour or harbour related developments intended for commercial trade, and for all energy developments (including oil, gas, wave, wind and tidal energy) and aggregate and mineral extraction developments on the foreshore would transfer to the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government.

My Department is currently putting in place the necessary arrangements to ensure the efficient and effective transfer of the appropriate legislation and associated functions. In the interim, all foreshore functions under the Foreshore Acts 1933 to 2005 rest with my Depart-

[Deputy Mary Coughlan.]

ment. My Department will carry forward responsibility for all other foreshore licensing functions under the Foreshore Act 1933, including in respect of all aquaculture developments and piers and harbours, other than in respect of port companies and harbour authorities governed by the Harbours Acts 1946, 1996 and 2000 and any other harbour or harbour related developments intended for commercial trade. It is not expected that there will be any undue delays in relation to decisions being taken in respect of the future development of the foreshore having regard to the wide ranging and complex nature of the issues involved.

Coastal Protection.

133. **Deputy Joanna Tuffy** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if Ireland is required to carry out a strategic environmental assessment of the Irish coast under European Union law; the steps she has taken in relation to carrying out such an assessment; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11055/08]

Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Deputy Mary Coughlan): Strategic Environmental Assessments (SEA's) are not required to be carried out in respect of any particular area such as the Irish Coast. However, they can be required in relation to specific plans and/or programmes. Where this is the case it is the intention of my Department to meet its obligations under European legislation.

Food Safety.

134. **Deputy Michael Creed** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food the legal regulations with regard to the disposal of out of date food products; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11056/08]

Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Deputy Mary Coughlan): Out of date food products of animal origin such as meat, meat products and eggs are classified as animal by-products (ABP) when they are no longer intended for human consumption. The control of the disposal of out-of-date food products of animal origin is important as they can pose a danger to public and animal health. The main Regulation in this area is Regulation (EC) No. 1774 of 2002, which is given legal effect by the European Communities (Transmissible Spongiform Encephalopathies and Animal By-Products) Regulations, S.I. No. 612 of 2006. This Regulation sets out animal and public health rules for the collection, transport, storage, processing and use or disposal of ABP. Under the Regulation out-of-date food products of animal origin may be disposed of by a number of methods including rendering, composting, transformation in a biogas plant or a technical plant, use as raw material in a petfood plant or landfill when it is considered that the material concerned can be safely disposed of in this manner.

World Trade Negotiations.

135. **Deputy Willie Penrose** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food her views on the Mandelson proposals at the World Trade Organisation talks; her further views, in this context, on whether the said proposals, if implemented, would represent a serious attack upon the structure of agriculture here with particular adverse and devastating consequences for the beef industry in so far as there would be a trebling of tonnage of beef being imported into the EU; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11128/08]

Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Deputy Mary Coughlan): I have already said to this House that I am not happy with the current direction of the negotiations, and that important aspects of the latest draft texts from the Chairs of the Agriculture and NAMA (non

agricultural market access) committees have done nothing to allay my concerns. I presume these texts are the proposals to which the Deputy is referring. I am deeply concerned with suggestions that the EU should provide further concessions on a range of agricultural issues, including tariff reductions, treatment of sensitive products and related tariff quota expansion. I have a particular concern regarding the potential impact of some of these proposals on the beef sector and I have articulated this clearly at every opportunity. I am also concerned at threats to the Green Box and in turn to EU direct payments to farmers which are classified under the Green Box. At the same time, the text on industrial goods (NAMA) does not provide the foreseen additional market access for EU goods. In my view, this creates an even greater imbalance in the negotiations.

I believe it is time for realism to prevail as to what is attainable and acceptable in regard to agriculture in these negotiations. We must achieve genuine balance in any final agreement and it is critical that the European agri-food sector is not sacrificed for the sake of a deal. This is the position consistently taken by the Irish Government and which has been and will continue to be reflected strongly in a variety of EU and WTO meetings and in our bilateral contacts with the Commission and other EU Member States.

Grant Payments.

136. **Deputy Paul Kehoe** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, further to Parliamentary Question No. 148 of 6 March 2008, if the person (detail supplied) in County Wexford will receive grant aid under the farm improvement scheme in 2008; when the person will receive confirmation of same; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11131/08]

Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Deputy Mary Coughlan): The person named is an applicant under the Farm Improvement Scheme. Applications received under this Scheme prior to its suspension on 31 October 2007 are being processed by my Department up to the level of funding provided for the Scheme in the 2006 partnership agreement, Towards 2016. The application concerned is, therefore, eligible for consideration and will be processed subject to funding still being available at that time.

Direct Payment Schemes.

137. **Deputy Seymour Crawford** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if her attention has been drawn to the fact that files and applications for the new farm modernisation scheme have been withdrawn from the local inspectors so that no further approvals can be made despite the fact that on many farms this scheme and the farm waste management scheme have close links and need to be carried out in tandem; if she will ensure that this system is changed back in order that progressive young farmers get the encouragement they deserve; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11135/08]

Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Deputy Mary Coughlan): Applications received under the Farm Improvement Scheme prior to its suspension on 31 October 2007 are being processed by my Department up to the level of funding provided for the Scheme in the 2006 partnership agreement, Towards 2016. No decision has been taken to cease issuing approvals to farmers who submitted applications prior to the date of suspension of the Scheme.

Grant Payments.

138. **Deputy Bobby Aylward** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food the progress to date on the application by a person (details supplied) in County Kilkenny for grant aid under the farm improvement scheme. [11136/08]

Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Deputy Mary Coughlan): The person named is an applicant under the Farm Improvement Scheme. Applications under this Scheme are being processed by my Department up to the level of funding provided for the Scheme in the 2006 partnership agreement, Towards 2016. The application concerned is, therefore, eligible for consideration and will be processed subject to funding still being available at that time.

139. **Deputy Paul Kehoe** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if there is more funding available under the scheme of investment aid for the development of the commercial horticulture sector, especially for applicants who have already and will continue to invest heavily in their business and the industry; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11147/08]

Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Deputy Mary Coughlan): My Department operates the Scheme of Investment Aid for the development of commercial horticulture. Under the new National Development Plan 2007-2013, circa €50m, has been earmarked for the Scheme. Under the first phase of this Scheme for 2008 a total of 208 applications were received. Approvals of grant aid of some €9m to support investments of some €22m were issued to 189 applicants in early February. It is anticipated that applications for the second phase of this Scheme in 2009 will be invited towards the end of 2008.

Under the previous National Development Plan 2000-2006 grant aid of some €20m was paid out to producers to support investments of €57m in the commercial horticulture industry. This Scheme has been a catalyst for investment and growth and has assisted producers to upgrade and develop new production facilities and improve quality.

Schools Building Projects.

140. **Deputy Olwyn Enright** asked the Minister for Education and Science when approval will be given by the National Development Finance Agency to a school (details supplied) in County Offaly to proceed with this post-primary school; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11132/08]

141. **Deputy Olwyn Enright** asked the Minister for Education and Science when approval will be given by the National Development Finance Agency to a school (details supplied) in County Offaly to proceed with this post-primary school; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11133/08]

166. **Deputy Olwyn Enright** asked the Minister for Education and Science when consent will be given to a school (details supplied) in County Offaly to proceed to apply for full planning permission in order that it can proceed with this post-primary school; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11122/08]

167. **Deputy Olwyn Enright** asked the Minister for Education and Science when consent will be given to a school (details supplied) in County Offaly to proceed to apply for full planning permission in order that it can proceed with this post-primary school; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11123/08]

Minister for Education and Science (Deputy Mary Hanafin): I propose to take Questions Nos. 140, 141, 166 and 167 together.

My Department operates the Scheme of Investment Aid for the development of commercial horticulture. Under the new National Development Plan 2007-2013, circa €50m, has been earmarked for the Scheme. Under the first phase of this Scheme for 2008 a total of 208 applications

were received. Approvals of grant aid of some €9m to support investments of some €22m were issued to 189 applicants in early February. It is anticipated that applications for the second phase of this Scheme in 2009 will be invited towards the end of 2008. Under the previous National Development Plan 2000-2006 grant aid of some €20m was paid out to producers to support investments of €57m in the commercial horticulture industry. This Scheme has been a catalyst for investment and growth and has assisted producers to upgrade and develop new production facilities and improve quality.

142. **Deputy Brian Hayes** asked the Minister for Education and Science the number of the sites designated for new schools under the Fingal model agreement that have been handed over to her Department for the purposes of new school buildings; the number of planning applications that have been submitted to the local authority concerned in respect of the new school building programme under this agreement; her views on whether the commitment given in September 2007 in respect of new schools under this agreement to be up and running by September 2008 will be in place; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11018/08]

Minister for Education and Science (Deputy Mary Hanafin): As the Deputy will be aware, the Programme for Government commits my Department to establishing a Developing Areas Unit to liaise with Local Authorities, to identify where new schools are needed and to ensure that these schools are delivered in the fastest possible timeframe. Initial work on establishing and assigning dedicated staff to the Unit began in the latter part of 2007 and it is now fully operational.

In terms of its work programme for 2008 in Fingal, the Developing Areas Unit is advancing the delivery of 9 new primary school projects which are planned to be in place for September 2008. Planning permission has been submitted in all cases. A notification of intention to grant has been received in all cases except Phoenix Park and Porterstown, where notifications are expected shortly. I announced the details of the individual projects on 1st February 2008 and the projects relating to the Fingal area specifically are: Skerries — Kelly's Bay — New 8 Classroom School; Swords — Applewood — New 8 Classroom School; Balbriggan — Castlelands — 2 New Schools — an 8 classroom & a 16 classroom; Phoenix Park — New Community Primary School — VEC, 8 classroom; Diswellstown — Porterstown — Relocation of Scoil Choilm — 16 classroom school; Lusk — Relocation of Rush/Lusk ET — 16 Classroom school; Tyrellstown — New 8 Classroom School; and Phibblestown — New Community Primary School — VEC, 8 classroom school.

A joint project steering group has been established with Fingal County Council to coordinate the acquisition of sites and to resolve any pre-planning issues. The focus at present is on finalising arrangements for sites needed for the 2008 school year. Due to commercial sensitivity I do not as a general rule provide specific details in advance of the conclusion of a purchase. Of course, once the sales have closed, this information can be released in the normal way.

143. **Deputy Billy Timmins** asked the Minister for Education and Science the position in relation to a school (detail supplied) in County Wicklow; the position in relation to the €800,000 allocated to the school; if an acknowledgment will be given from her Department that the work on this project was conducted within its guidelines and confirmation that the board of management and the pupils of the school will not be penalised as a result of the time involved in the planning process; if she will provide a firm commitment to proceed with funding for the new school within an agreed timetable; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11027/08]

Minister for Education and Science (Deputy Mary Hanafin): The project referred to by the Deputy is at an advanced stage of architectural planning. The further progression of the project through to construction phase, will be considered on an on-going basis in the context of my Department's multi-annual School Building and Modernisation Programme.

School Placement.

144. **Deputy Brendan Howlin** asked the Minister for Education and Science if her attention has been drawn to the fact that a person (details supplied) in County Wexford who resides in the catchment area of a school, has been unable to secure a placement for 2008 due to the fact that the number of applicants exceeds available places by 15; if she will take steps to ensure that this child can attend the school of their parents' choice. [11034/08]

Minister for Education and Science (Deputy Mary Hanafin): A review of post primary school provision in the Enniscorthy area is currently at an advanced stage and, when completed, decisions will be taken regarding the future development of post-primary education facilities in the area and officials will be in contact with the relevant schools, as appropriate. My Department is satisfied that, between them, the existing post-primary schools in the centre have adequate accommodation to cater for the demand for places next September.

Schools Refurbishment.

145. **Deputy Brian Hayes** asked the Minister for Education and Science the level of funding provided to primary and secondary schools by means of the furniture grant, administered under the schools building programme; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11041/08]

146. **Deputy Brian Hayes** asked the Minister for Education and Science the number of schools that will be allocated a furniture grant under the 2008 schools building programme; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11042/08]

147. **Deputy Brian Hayes** asked the Minister for Education and Science the number of schools that received a furniture grant in the period 2000 to 2008; the level of funding that was provided; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11043/08]

Minister for Education and Science (Deputy Mary Hanafin): I propose to take questions 145 to 147, inclusive, together.

My Departments School Building and Modernisation Programme provides for funding for schools in relation to new/replacement furniture and equipment. Details of applications for funding for 2008 will not be available until the end of the year. The following funding was approved in the years 2005 to 2007: 2005- 1180 applications- €10.7m; 2006- 1240 applications- €8.9m; and 2007- 1900 applications- €12.7m. Detailed information regarding previous years is not readily available in my Department.

Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme.

148. **Deputy Jack Wall** asked the Minister for Education and Science if a person (details supplied) in County Kildare has been paid the correct payment for the VTOS course they are attending; if there are arrears due to the student; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11049/08]

Minister for Education and Science (Deputy Mary Hanafin): The Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme (VTOS) provides full-time second chance education and training opportunities for unemployed adults in receipt of specified social welfare payments for at least six months. The scheme is funded by my Department and delivered and managed locally by Vocational Educational Committees (VECs). VTOS Students who received jobseekers' assistance/benefit payments prior to enrolling on VTOS are paid a training allowance in lieu by the local VEC. Students in receipt of other welfare payments continue to be paid directly by the Department of Social and Family Affairs.

In response to my Department's enquiries, the VEC in question has advised that the VTOS participant referred to in the question is currently in receipt of the correct rate of payment. The VEC is aware of the issues with this particular case and is addressing them. The participant should contact the VEC which will deal with the matter of arrears.

School Transport.

149. **Deputy Joanna Tuffy** asked the Minister for Education and Science when the present primary school transport scheme was established; when it was last reviewed; if she has plans to conduct a review of the scheme; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11060/08]

150. **Deputy Joanna Tuffy** asked the Minister for Education and Science the distance a person has to live from a school in order to be eligible for school transport under the primary school transport scheme; if she has plans to reduce this distance in an effort to fill buses and thus reduce congestion in towns and villages at school time; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11065/08]

151. **Deputy Joanna Tuffy** asked the Minister for Education and Science when the present catchment boundaries for the secondary school transport system were established; when they were last reviewed; if she has plans to conduct a review of the system; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11066/08]

Minister of State at the Department of Education and Science (Deputy Seán Haughey): I propose to take Questions Nos. 149 to 151, inclusive, together.

The school transport scheme was established in the late 1960s. From the outset, the purpose of the scheme was to ensure access to primary and post-primary education for children who, because of where they live, might have difficulty in attending school regularly. At primary level, pupils who reside 3.2 kilometres or more from, and are attending, their nearest suitable school, as determined by my Department, are eligible for free school transport. At post-primary level, eligibility is based on both distance and residence in a particular catchment area. These areas have their origin in the establishment of free post-primary education in the late 1960s. The relevant minimum distance is 4.8 kilometres. Transport services for both primary and post-primary children are co-ordinated and transport routes are planned and shared in such a way as to provide the most efficient and cost-effective service. In addition to mainstream services, my Department endeavours to provide suitable transport for pupils with special needs attending special schools and special classes and those in integrated settings.

School transport, or aspects of the school transport service, have been the subject of a number of reviews, including a Report carried out by the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Education and Science in 1999. The Programme for Government includes a commitment to review the school transport system, including catchment boundaries. My Department is cur-

[Deputy Seán Haughey.]

rently developing proposals for progressing this commitment and the intention is to make substantial progress during the current year.

152. **Deputy Joanna Tuffy** asked the Minister for Education and Science the charge levied per term for secondary school transport for students in both the junior and senior cycles; if she has plans to reduce these charges; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11067/08]

Minister of State at the Department of Education and Science (Deputy Seán Haughey): The charges payable by post-primary pupils availing of school transport services are €33 per term at junior cycle and €51 per term at senior cycle. These charges have not been increased since 1998. In view of the significant increase in the cost of providing school transport in the interim, it has been decided that revised charges will be introduced with effect from the final term of the current school year, which begins after Easter 2008. The revised term charges at junior and senior cycle will be €46 and €71, respectively, which equate to about 83 cent and €1.28 per day. A maximum family contribution of €150 per term will apply. I should point out that the term charge may be waived in the case of eligible post-primary children where the family is in possession of a valid medical card.

Schools Building Projects.

153. **Deputy David Stanton** asked the Minister for Education and Science if her Department has recently received letters from schools (details supplied) in County Cork regarding the need to provide an extension to both schools in the immediate term and to provide new buildings for both schools in the not too distant future; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11073/08]

Minister for Education and Science (Deputy Mary Hanafin): My Department has received correspondence from the schools to which the Deputy refers in regard to the need for additional accommodation. Progress on all applications for major capital works is being considered in the context of the Department's multi-annual School Building and Modernisation Programme.

Teachers' Remuneration.

154. **Deputy Jimmy Deenihan** asked the Minister for Education and Science if the Teachers Conciliation Council has made a recommendation on the claim for improvements in the arrangements for the award of incremental credit as outlined in her reply to Parliamentary Question No. 561 of 3 April 2007; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11098/08]

Minister for Education and Science (Deputy Mary Hanafin): The criteria for the award of incremental credit at primary level are outlined in primary circular 10/01 — Amendments to the Scheme for the Award of Incremental Credit. These arrangements provide for a maximum of 2 years incremental credit for a permanent teacher appointed or reappointed after 1st September 1998, and who have given service as substitute teachers in primary schools within the Republic of Ireland since 1st September 1985. Only Substitute service given after the date of probation is considered. The matter was discussed at the Teachers Conciliation Council. There is no agreement to make any improvements to these arrangements.

Site Acquisitions.

155. **Deputy Emmet Stagg** asked the Minister for Education and Science if a site has been identified for a permanent school for a school (details supplied) in County Kildare; if nego-

tiations on the purchase of same are ongoing or have concluded; and if agreement has been reached on the purchase of the site. [11100/08]

Minister for Education and Science (Deputy Mary Hanafin): I wish to advise the Deputy that a suitable site has been identified for school in question and negotiations are ongoing regarding its acquisition.

Schools Building Projects.

156. **Deputy Emmet Stagg** asked the Minister for Education and Science if, further to Parliamentary Question No. 1057 of 30 January 2008 and in view of the overcrowding in a school (details supplied) in County Kildare, she will sanction the appointment of a design team for the project. [11101/08]

Minister for Education and Science (Deputy Mary Hanafin): The progression of all large-scale building projects into architectural planning, including that referred to by the Deputy, is considered on an on-going basis in the context of my Department's multi-annual School Building and Modernisation Programme.

School Enrolments.

157. **Deputy Emmet Stagg** asked the Minister for Education and Science, further to Parliamentary Question No. 235 of 28 November 2007, the county breakdown of the 71 pupils enrolled in the school for first year in September 2007; and the number of sixth class pupils who completed their education in the eight gaelscoileanna feeding into the school in July 2007 by county. [11105/08]

Minister for Education and Science (Deputy Mary Hanafin): Actual enrolment figures have now been confirmed to the Department by the school to which the Deputy refers. The first year intake figure is 69 pupils plus 1 repeat first year student. The county breakdown is Meath 1, Waterford 1, Kildare 31 and Dublin 37. The approx number of sixth class pupils who completed their education in the eight gaelscoileanna feeding into the school in July 2007, by county, is Meath 5, Kildare 72 and Dublin 131.

Psychological Service.

158. **Deputy Emmet Stagg** asked the Minister for Education and Science, further to Parliamentary Question No. 1062 of 30 January 2008, the schools to which the two additional educational psychologists have been assigned in County Kildare. [11106/08]

Minister for Education and Science (Deputy Mary Hanafin): As the Deputy will be aware all primary and post-primary schools have access to psychological assessments either directly through the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) or through the Scheme for Commissioning Psychological Assessments (SCPA). Schools that do not currently have NEPS psychologists assigned to them may avail of the SCPA, whereby the school can have an assessment carried out by a member of the panel of private psychologists approved by NEPS, and NEPS will pay the psychologist the fees for this assessment directly. I can inform the Deputy that the coverage by NEPS psychologists of primary and primary schools in Co. Kildare has increased from 54% in 2006/07 to 79% in the current academic year. This increase has taken place in the context, inter alia, of the appointment of two new psychologists to the NEPS Naas office. There follows for the Deputy's information a list of the schools so covered.

[Deputy Mary Hanafin.]

Since May 2007 the number of psychologists employed within the NEPS service nationally has increased from 128 to 138 and during 2008 this complement will increase to 169. In this regard, following a national recruitment process put in place in late 2007 by the Public Appointments Service, interviews in this regard have recently been completed and regional panels are currently being formed from which recruits will be drawn for appointment to priority regions. As I have previously stated, and in line with Government commitments under the T2016 Agreement, it is further my intention to increase NEPS psychologist personnel to 200 during 2009.

Name	Address 1	Additional To Coverage 07/08
Presentation Convent	Maynooth	Yes
Athy Model School	Dublin Road	
Sallins N S	Sallins	Yes
St Davids Ns	Dublin Road	
Monasterevan 2 N S	Monasterevan	
Kildare Monastery N S	Kildare	
S N Cianog Naofa	Tigh Mochua	Yes
Kilberry N S	Athy	
St. Patrick's N.S.	Newbridge	
Scoil Bride	Athgarvan N S	
Primrose Hill Ns	Hazelhatch Rd	Yes
Hewetsons N S	Clane	Yes
Mercy Convent Primary School	Naas	
Ballyshannon N S	Ballyshannon	
St Brigids Primary School	Kildare	
Monasterevan Convent	Monasterevan	
Scoil Chonnla Phadraig	Newbridge	
Rathangan B N S	Rathangan	
St Brigids N S	Ballysax	
Scoil Brid	Main Street	Yes
Curragh Camp B N S	Curragh Camp	
Curragh Camp G N S	Curragh Camp	
Scoil Phadraig Naofa	Lana Eoin Naofa	
St Josephs Bns	Kilcock	Yes
Scoil Naisiunta Naomh Pheadar	Monasterevan	
S N Nmh Mhuire	Donadea	Yes
Allenwood B N S	Allenwood	
Rathcoffey N S	Rathcoffey	Yes
Scoil Chorbain	Naas	
Maynooth B N S	Maynooth	Yes
Almhaine N S	Kilmeague	Yes
S N Brighde	Kill	Yes
S N Aine Naofa	Ard Cloc	Yes
St Conleths And Marys N S	Newbridge	
S N Connlaodh Naofa N	Newbridge	
S N Brighde	Ticknevin	Yes
S N Oilibhear Plunglead	Killina	Yes
Scoil Bhride N S	Rathangan	

Name	Address 1	Additional To Coverage 07/08
S N Bride	Crochta Greine	
S N Mhuire C	Allenwood	
S N Baile Mhic Adaim	Baile Mhic Adaim	Yes
S N Cloch Rinnce	Cloch Rinnce	Yes
S N Coill Dubh	Naas	
S N Padraig	Droichead Baile Sean	Yes
S N Na Maighdine Mhuire	Gearr Eiscir	Yes
Scoil Mhichil Naofa	Athy	
S N Baile Roibeaird	Baile Roibeaird	
S N Scoil Treasa	Kilshanroe	Yes
St Conleths N S	Derrinturn	
Prosperous N S	Naas	
Scoil Na Mainistreach	Oldtown Road,	Yes
Straffan N S	Straffan	Yes
Newtown Ns	Enfield	Yes
Caragh N S	Naas	Yes
S N Tir Mochain	Donadea	Yes
Scoil Bhride	Leixlip	
Ballyroe Central N S	Athy	
Scoil Mhuire	Newbridge,	
Leixlip Girls Ns	Leixlip	
Ballymany Junior Ns	Newbridge	
An Linbh Iosa	Ballycane	
San Carlo Junior Ns	Leixlip	
St Brigids N S	Kilcullen	
Scoil C.Ui Dhalaigh	Leim An Bhradain	
Scoil Eoin Phoil	Green Lane,	
Aghards N S	Celbridge	Yes
St Patricks Bns	Clane	Yes
Scoil Naisiunta Bhride	Prosperous Road	Yes
San Carlo Senior N S	Confey	
Scoil Uí Riada	Cill Choca	Yes
North Kildare Educate Together Sch	Celbridge	Yes
Gaelscoil Chill Dara	Loiste Herbert	
Creag Aran Special School	Athgarret	
Scoil Ui Fhiaich	Achadh Aoibhinn	Yes
Killashee Multi-Denominational Ns	Kilcullen Road	
Scoil Brid	Oldtown	Yes
Gaelscoil Nas Na Riogh	Nas	Yes
Newbridge Educate Together	C/O Old Kilcullen Rugby Club	
Scoil Naomh Padraig	Hazelhatch Road	
Ardscoil Na Trionoide	Athy	
Salesian College	Celbridge	
Patrician Secondary School	Newbridge	
Holy Family Secondary School	Newbridge	
Cross And Passion College	Kilcullen	
Scoil Dara	Church St	

[Deputy Mary Hanafin.]

Name	Address 1	Additional To Coverage 07/08
St Joseph's Academy	Kildare Town	
Presentation Secondary School	Kildare Town	
St Pauls Secondary School	Monasterevin	
Meánscoil Iognáid Ris	Naas	
Coláiste Naomh Mhuire	Convent Of Mercy	
Athy Community College	Athy	
Curragh Post-Primary School	McSwiney Road	
Colaiste Lorcain	Castledermot	
St Conleth's Vocational School	Station Road	
Vocational School	Kildare College Of Further Studies	
Confey Community College	Confey	
Maynooth Post Primary School	Moyglare Rd	
St Patrick's Community College	Limerick Road	
St Farnan's Post Primary School	Prosperous	
Ardcoil Rath Iomgháin	Rathangan	
Leixlip Community School	Celbridge Road	
Scoil Mhuire Community School	Clane	
St Wolstan's Community School	Ballymakeely	

Schools Building Programme.

159. **Deputy Emmet Stagg** asked the Minister for Education and Science if she has received the developed sketch scheme in relation to the new school for a school (details supplied) in County Kildare. [11109/08]

Minister for Education and Science (Deputy Mary Hanafin): My Department is awaiting the return of the Stage 2 (i.e. Developed Sketch Scheme) submission from the school to which the Deputy refers.

160. **Deputy Emmet Stagg** asked the Minister for Education and Science if a design team has been appointed for the permanent school for a school (detail supplied) in County Kildare. [11111/08]

Minister for Education and Science (Deputy Mary Hanafin): I am pleased to inform the Deputy that a Design Team has now been appointed and the process of architectural planning has commenced.

161. **Deputy Emmet Stagg** asked the Minister for Education and Science if she has received the stage one documentation in respect of a new school for a school (detail supplied) in County Kildare. [11112/08]

Minister for Education and Science (Deputy Mary Hanafin): The project to which the Deputy refers to is at early architectural planning. Officials from my Department have requested a Stage 2(a) submission; Developed Sketch Design, on receipt of a date for receipt of this submission a date for a review meeting will be arranged. The progression of all large scale building projects from initial design stage through to tender and construction, including this project, will be considered on an on-going basis in the context of my Department's Multi-Annual School Building and Modernisation Programme.

162. **Deputy Emmet Stagg** asked the Minister for Education and Science if she will sanction the proposed extension to a school (detail supplied) in County Kildare. [11114/08]

Minister for Education and Science (Deputy Mary Hanafin): The progression of all large scale building projects from initial design stage through to construction phase is considered on an on-going basis in the context of my Department's Multi-Annual School Building and Modernisation Programme in which the main focus is to deliver school places within rapidly developing areas. The progression of all school building projects will be considered in this context.

Pupil-Teacher Ratio.

163. **Deputy Emmet Stagg** asked the Minister for Education and Science if the information sought in Parliamentary Question No. 240 of 28 November 2007 is available; and if not when it will be. [11115/08]

Minister for Education and Science (Deputy Mary Hanafin): Class size data for primary schools for 2007/2008 is currently being compiled by my Department, and is not yet available. The source of this data is the Annual Census of Primary Schools. Data will become available when returns for all schools have been processed. As the Deputy will be aware, major improvements have been made in staffing at primary level in recent years. There are now 6,000 more primary teachers than there were in 2002. By the 2006/07 school year, we had reduced the average class size in our primary schools to 24, while the pupil teacher ratio was 16.4:1, including resource teachers etc. In that year, schools were staffed on the basis of a general rule of at least one classroom teacher for every 28 children. Given that the national average was 24, many schools benefited from much more favourable staffing ratios than this.

Extra teachers were provided by the Government for the 2007/08 school year to improve primary school staffing so that schools would generally get at least one classroom teacher for every 27 children. Posts allocated on the basis of this staffing schedule are specifically for mainstream classes and should be deployed accordingly. School authorities are requested to ensure that the number of pupils in any class is kept as low as possible, taking all relevant contextual factors into account (e.g. classroom accommodation, fluctuating enrolment). In particular, school authorities should ensure that there is an equitable distribution of pupils in mainstream classes and that the differential between the largest and smallest classes is kept to a minimum.

A further initiative in recent years that has been of direct benefit to primary schools has been the change in the criteria for developing schools. For the current school year the threshold for getting a developing school post was reduced specifically to help schools that are seeing large increases in enrolments each year. Over 350 such posts have been sanctioned in the 2007/08 school year compared to 280 in 2006/07. The improvements we have made in school staffing in recent years are absolutely unparalleled. The Government is committed to providing more teachers to our primary schools over the next five years. We will also continue our focus on measures to improve the quality of education in our primary schools to ensure that increased resources lead to better outcomes for our children.

Schools Building Projects.

164. **Deputy Emmet Stagg** asked the Minister for Education and Science if a design team has been appointed for the required extension to a school (detail supplied) in County Kildare. [11116/08]

Minister for Education and Science (Deputy Mary Hanafin): The appointment of a design team for the project at the school referred to by the Deputy while at an advanced stage is not yet completed. The further progression of the project will be considered in the context of my Department's multi-annual School Building and Modernisation Programme.

165. **Deputy Emmet Stagg** asked the Minister for Education and Science if the stage three submission has been received in regard to the required extension to a school (detail supplied) in County Kildare. [11117/08]

Minister for Education and Science (Deputy Mary Hanafin): Officials from my Department are currently awaiting a date for receipt of the Stage 3 submission (i.e. Developed Sketch Scheme) from the school's Design Team. On receipt of this date a review meeting will be organised between the Board of Management, it's Design Team and the Department to assess the submission.

Questions Nos. 166 and 167 answered with Question No. 140.

Higher Education Grants.

168. **Deputy Charles Flanagan** asked the Minister for Education and Science if arrangements can be made for non-EU students, resident in Ireland, qualifying for higher education grants, whose applications for certificates of naturalisation are still pending, in view of the fact that such applications may take longer to process than the actual course to which the student has been admitted; and if in view of the hardship involved for non-EU families consideration might be given towards finding a solution to the problem in respect of a person (details supplied) in County Laois. [11146/08]

Minister for Education and Science (Deputy Mary Hanafin): Under the terms of my Department's four maintenance Grants Schemes, grant assistance is awarded to eligible students who satisfy prescribed conditions including those relating to residence, means, age, nationality and previous academic attainment. The decision on eligibility for third level grants is a matter for the relevant assessing authority — i.e. the local authority or VEC. These bodies do not refer individual applications to my Department except, in exceptional cases, where, for example, advice or instruction regarding a particular clause in the relevant scheme is required. If an individual applicant considers that she/he has been unjustly refused a maintenance grant, or that the rate of grant awarded is not the correct one, she/he may appeal, in the first instance, to the relevant local authority or VEC.

Where an individual applicant has had an appeal turned down, in writing, by the relevant local authority or VEC, and remains of the view that the body has not interpreted the schemes correctly in his/her case, an appeal form outlining the position may be submitted by the applicant to my Department. Students must meet the nationality requirement at the time of entry or re-entry to an approved course. However the Grants Schemes contain a 'change in circumstances' clause which provides that a candidate's eligibility may be assessed or re-assessed in the event of a change in circumstances in relation to, inter alia, reckonable income, the number of dependant children, normal residence and nationality, where the candidate becomes an Irish national or the national of another EU member State.

The 'change in circumstances' provision allows candidates who acquire nationality through the naturalisation process, during the course of their studies, to apply to be assessed or re-assessed for grant assistance with effect from the academic term when the change occurs. You will appreciate that the terms of my Department's Schemes of Student Support must be applied

impartially and it is not possible to make exceptions in individual cases, regardless of the circumstances.

Schools Building Projects.

169. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Education and Science when she will announce the next group of post-primary schools to proceed to design stage; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11151/08]

Minister for Education and Science (Deputy Mary Hanafin): The progression of all large scale building projects from initial design stage through to construction phase is considered on an on-going basis in the context of my Department's Multi-Annual School Building and Modernisation Programme in which the main focus is to deliver school places within rapidly developing areas. The progression of all school building projects will be considered in this context. I announced recently a list of schools which are due to go to construction in 2008. The next announcement regarding projects to proceed to construction will occur after Easter. I intend to make further announcements regarding projects that will be advanced through the architectural planning process during the course of the year as the school building programme is rolled out.

In addition 27 new schools are to be provided under my Department's Public Private Partnership Programme (PPP) 2006 to 2010. I have already announced the first two bundles of school projects comprising of 4 schools in bundle 1 and 6 schools in Bundle 2. The first bundle consists of four post-primary, two in Co. Laois and two in Co. Offaly is in procurement and will go to construction this year. The second bundle consisting of six schools, 5 post-primary and 1 primary school in counties Cork, Limerick, Kildare, Meath and Wicklow are in pre procurement and will be offered to the market shortly. The make up of further school bundles in my Department's PPP school building programme will be determined on such issues as geographic spread and site availability for each school. I intend announcing further PPP project bundles during the year.

Pension Provisions.

170. **Deputy Tom Hayes** asked the Minister for Education and Science if consideration will be given to a teacher who retired in 2000 and who held a third class honours degree, to qualify them for the honours allowance in their pension. [11179/08]

Minister for Education and Science (Deputy Mary Hanafin): A teacher who had obtained a third class honours degrees may be paid an allowance in respect of that qualification as part of pay. Prior to 1 September 2001 the rate of payment in respect of this allowance was the same as the rate payable to the holder of a pass degree. On foot of an agreement at the Teachers Conciliation Council the rate of allowance payable in respect of a third class honours degree was changed to that which applies to a first or second class honours degree. The higher rate of payment only become effective in teachers' pay from 1 September 2001. In order to benefit in pension from the higher rate of the allowance, the teacher would have had to have received the higher rate in pay over the final three years of service. Since this teacher had retired prior to the effective date for payment, the higher rate of allowance would not apply in the calculation of his pension.

Schools Building Projects.

171. **Deputy Michael Ring** asked the Minister for Education and Science if she will provide a complete breakdown of the accommodation needs of a school (details supplied) in County

[Deputy Michael Ring.]

Mayo; when this school applied for a new building; the stages this application has progressed through; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11180/08]

172. **Deputy Michael Ring** asked the Minister for Education and Science the stage of an application by a primary school (details supplied) in County Mayo. [11181/08]

173. **Deputy Michael Ring** asked the Minister for Education and Science when she will authorise the board of management of a school to proceed with advertising to tenders for a new school building (details supplied) in County Mayo. [11182/08]

Minister for Education and Science (Deputy Mary Hanafin): I propose to take Questions Nos. 171 to 173, inclusive, together.

I can confirm to the Deputy that an application for new accommodation was first received from the school in question in 1999. The building project to provide three general classrooms and associated ancillary accommodation is at an advanced stage of the architectural planning process. The further progression of the project through to construction phase will be considered on an ongoing basis in the context of my Department's multi-annual School Building and Modernisation Programme.

School Enrolments.

174. **Deputy Leo Varadkar** asked the Minister for Education and Science if she has received a request from a school (details supplied) in Dublin 15 for resources to accept a second class of junior infants in 2008; the response she has given to the school; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11185/08]

Minister for Education and Science (Deputy Mary Hanafin): My Department has no record of an application from the school in question to expand its pupil provision. If the intention is to expand the school from September 2008 the management should contact the Modernisation and Policy Unit of my Department in the matter at an early date.

Departmental Staff.

175. **Deputy Leo Varadkar** asked the Minister for Defence the number of civil servants in his Department; the reason so many civil servants are needed in view of the fact that the Defence Forces are self-regulating; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11184/08]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Willie O'Dea): The number of civil servants currently serving in my Department is 391 (in whole time equivalents). This is a significant reduction on the numbers serving in previous years; about 700 in 1981 and about 450 in 1990. My Department has civil and military elements and was established by the Ministers and Secretaries Act, 1924. The Defence Acts 1954 to 2007 provide the legislative basis for the Defence Forces. The Ministers and Secretaries Act 1924 assigned to the Department "the business of raising, training, organisation, maintenance, equipment, management, discipline, regulation and control according to law of the military defence forces". The Act provides that the Minister is head of the Department and is assisted in discharging his functions by the Secretary General who is the "principal officer" of the Department. The Secretary General is also the statutory Accounting Officer for all Defence expenditure.

The primary role of the civil element of the Department is the support of the Minister in his policy development and control functions. It discharges the audit and financial control tasks in connection with the Secretary General's role as Accounting Officer. It provides administrative

support services to the Defence Forces including payroll, payment of accounts and administration of military pensions. Whilst routine procurement is delegated to the Defence Forces, the civil element of the Department has responsibility for major procurement such as aircraft, defensive equipment and Naval Service vessels.

Notwithstanding the overall reduction in numbers, the Department has, in recent years, taken on significant responsibilities in the context of the evolution of the European Security and Defence Policy. In addition, the Office of Emergency Planning was established as a joint civil/military office in 2001 to take the lead role in supporting and coordinating emergency planning.

Road Safety.

176. **Deputy Finian McGrath** asked the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform the reason section 17 of the Rules of the Road which states the obligations of cyclists towards pedestrians, particularly in Talbot Street and Mary Street where cyclists wind their way through pedestrians, is not enforced. [11025/08]

Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform (Deputy Brian Lenihan): I am informed by the Garda authorities that all Garda members as part of their normal duties enforce breaches of the road traffic law by cyclists.

Garda Operations.

177. **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** asked the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform the reason gardaí were threatening protestors and protectors on the Rath Lugh, Lismullen site, County Meath with the Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act with arrest despite the ownership of the land in question being questionable and the fact protestors were trying to prevent the law being broken by private developers working on behalf of the State in the attempted destruction of a national monument as per the National Monuments Act 1930; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11037/08]

178. **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** asked the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform the cost of Garda operations relating to the ongoing dispute regarding the M3 construction works at Lismullen, County Meath; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11038/08]

Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform (Deputy Brian Lenihan): I propose to take Questions Nos. 177 and 178 together.

I am informed by the Garda authorities that a policing plan has been prepared in respect of the obligations of An Garda Síochána to prevent any breaches of the criminal law occurring during the construction of the M3 motorway. The policing measures in place are deemed necessary by local Garda management who are satisfied that sufficient Garda resources are available to prevent any such breaches. I am informed that the cost of Garda operations in this matter from 1 July, 2007 to 10 February, 2008 is approximately €160,600. The allocation of resources for this operation are closely monitored and kept under review. I am further informed that part of the area referred to, where the protestors are currently encamped, is owned by Coillte, and the remainder is owned by the National Roads Authority. This area is fenced off for construction purposes. In preventing breaches of the criminal law, An Garda Síochána enforce all relevant legislative provisions.

Córais Chomhuainigh Aistriúcháin.

179. **D'fhiafraigh Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** den Aire Dlí agus Cirt, Comhionannais agus

[Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh.]

Athchóirithe Dlí cad iad na himpleachtaí atá ann don tSeirbhís Chúirteanna as cinneadh na mbreithiúna sa Chúirt Uachtarach i gcás duine (sonraí tugtha) i gcoinne an Stáit i dtaobh córais chomhuainigh aistriúcháin; agus an bhfuil gá le reachtaíocht úr, nó le buiséad úr, chun déileáil leis an gcinneadh. [11039/08]

Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform (Deputy Brian Lenihan): Ós rud é go bhfuil an cás dá dtagraíonn an Teachta os comhair na gcúirteanna i gcónaí, bheadh sé míchuí domsa aon ní a rá faoin ábhar.

Residency Permits.

180. **Deputy Jack Wall** asked the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform the position regarding an application for residency by a person (details supplied) in County Kildare who is seeking to reside with her mother here; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11047/08]

Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform (Deputy Brian Lenihan): I am informed by the Immigration Division of my Department that the person concerned was recently granted permission to remain on student conditions. She should now attend at her local Immigration Office to have the appropriate permission to remain endorsed in her passport.

Vetting of Personnel.

181. **Deputy Dan Neville** asked the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform if he will ensure that the processing of Garda clearances for prospective staff at a foundation (detail supplied) in County Cork will be expedited. [11048/08]

Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform (Deputy Brian Lenihan): The Garda Central Vetting Unit (GCVU) makes criminal history vetting disclosures to registered organisations in respect of prospective employees, volunteers and students on placement who would have substantive, unsupervised access to children and vulnerable adults. The GCVU's normal, prevailing processing time in respect of valid vetting applications is approximately four weeks, although this time frame is occasionally subject to variation according to demand. I can assure the Deputy that the GCVU processes all valid vetting applications it receives as quickly as possible, and the Deputy's question has been brought to the attention of the Garda authorities.

Asylum Applications.

182. **Deputy Arthur Morgan** asked the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform the position of an appeal by a person (detail supplied) in County Louth; and when a decision might be expected in this case. [11057/08]

Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform (Deputy Brian Lenihan): The person concerned arrived in the State on 3 June 2002 and applied for asylum on 6 June 2002. Her application was refused following consideration of her case by the Office of the Refugee Applications Commissioner and, on appeal, by the Refugee Appeals Tribunal. Subsequently, in accordance with Section 3 of the Immigration Act, 1999 (as amended), the person concerned was informed, by letter dated 5 April 2005, that the Minister proposed to make a deportation order in respect of her. She was given the options, to be exercised within 15 working days, of leaving the State voluntarily, of consenting to the making of a deportation order or of submitting written representations to the Minister setting out the reasons why she should be allowed

to remain temporarily in the State. Representations were received on behalf of the person concerned.

On 1 June 2007 the person concerned made an application for residency in the State under the provisions of the European Communities (Free Movement of Persons) (No.2) Regulation, 2006 on the basis that she was the spouse of an EU Citizen. However, following the consideration of this application, the application was refused on the basis that the person concerned had not produced evidence showing lawful residence in another EU State prior to her arrival in this State. The refusal decision was conveyed to the person concerned by letter dated 3 December 2007. The case file of the person concerned, including all representations submitted, will now be considered under Section 3 (6) of the Immigration Act 1999 (as amended) and Section 5 of the Refugee Act 1996 (as amended) on the prohibition of refoulement. When this consideration has been completed, the case file of the person concerned will be passed to me for decision.

Court Procedures.

183. **Deputy Tom Hayes** asked the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform the number of days before a court appearance a summons is meant to be delivered according to law; the person who is responsible for delivering that summons; and if there is quality control with regard to the delivery of same. [11081/08]

Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform (Deputy Brian Lenihan): The rules relating to the service of summons depend on various factors such as the court involved (e.g., District Court etc) and the type of summons. The functions of the Courts Service, established under the Courts Service Act 1998, are to manage the courts and to provide information on the courts system to the public. Detailed information in relation to the service of all types of summons may be found on the websites of the Courts Service (www.courts.ie) and the Citizens Information Board (www.citizensinformation.ie).

Crime Levels.

184. **Deputy Thomas P. Broughan** asked the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform the number and location of successful closures obtained under section 4 of the Criminal Justice (Public Order) Act 2003 for each year from 2003 to 2008. [11091/08]

185. **Deputy Thomas P. Broughan** asked the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform the amount of cash stolen during 2007; the amount recovered; and the number of persons prosecuted arising therefrom. [11092/08]

Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform (Deputy Brian Lenihan): Following the submission in 2004 of a report and recommendations by an expert group on crime statistics, it was decided that the compilation and publication of crime statistics should be taken over by the Central Statistics Office, as the national statistical agency, from the Garda Síochána. The Garda Síochána Act 2005 consequently makes provision for this and the CSO has established a dedicated unit for this purpose. Following the setting up of the necessary technical systems and auditing of the data from which the statistics are compiled, the CSO is now compiling and publishing criminal statistics and has published provisional headline crime statistics since the third quarter of 2006. I have requested the CSO to provide the statistics sought by the Deputy directly to him.

Residency Permits.

186. **Deputy Brian O'Shea** asked the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform when decisions will be made on the residency application and family reunification application of a person (details supplied) in County Waterford; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11097/08]

Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform (Deputy Brian Lenihan): The person in question made an application for Family Reunification in March 2006. The application was forwarded to the Refugee Applications Commissioner for investigation as required under Section 18 of the Refugee Act 1996. This investigation is completed and the Commissioner has forwarded a report to my Department. This application will be considered by my Department and a decision will issue in due course.

Liquor Licensing Laws.

187. **Deputy Emmet Stagg** asked the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform, further to Parliamentary Question No. 1280 of 30 January 2008, if he will answer the question fully; and if he will provide the breakdown of 2006 figures for each town. [11103/08]

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.

Residency Permits.

188. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform the status of an application for family reunification for a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11155/08]

Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform (Deputy Brian Lenihan): The wife of the person referred to by the Deputy was admitted to the State in November 2004 as a programme refugee. The person in question is the subject of a Family Reunification application made by his wife in April 2006. This application will be considered by my Department and a decision will issue in due course. At the present time Family Reunification applications are taking up to 24 months to process.

189. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform if he will clarify the residency status of a person (details supplied); if he will furnish a response to the correspondence concerned; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11156/08]

Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform (Deputy Brian Lenihan): Records held by the Immigration Division of my Department indicate that the person in question has been unlawfully resident in the State since 1988. Correspondence was received from the person in question's legal representatives in 2007 regarding their client's status in the State. The legal representatives were requested to furnish particular information and documentation in order to investigate their client's case. While a response was received from the legal representatives on the 4 March 2008, the supporting documentation was not furnished. A further request to the legal representatives will be made.

190. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform the procedure to be followed to ensure a successful application for stamp four, a short or long-

term residency or citizenship in the case of a person (details supplied) in County Kildare; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11169/08]

Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform (Deputy Brian Lenihan): The position in relation to long term residency is as follows: Persons who have been legally resident in the State for over five years on the basis of work permit/work authorisation/work visa conditions may apply to the Immigration Division of my Department for a five year residency extension. In that context they may also apply to be exempt from employment permit requirements.

In the context of long term residency, certain periods of residence in the State are excluded. These include: periods of residence in respect of which an applicant does not have permission to remain in the State; periods granted for the purposes of study.

The Irish Nationality and Citizenship Act, 1956, as amended, provides that the Minister may, in his absolute discretion, grant an application for a certificate of naturalisation provided certain statutory conditions are fulfilled. These conditions are that the applicant must: be of full age, or by way of exception, be a minor in the State; be of good character; have a period of one year's continuous residency in the State immediately before the date of the application and, during the eight years immediately preceding that period, have a total residence in the State amounting to four years; intend in good faith to continue to reside in the State after naturalisation; have made, either before a Judge of the District Court in open court or in such a manner as the Minister, for special reasons allows, a declaration in the prescribed manner, of fidelity to the nation and loyalty to the State.

In the context of naturalisation, certain periods of residence in the State are excluded. These include: periods of residence in respect of which an applicant does not have permission to remain in the State; periods granted for the purposes of study; periods granted for the purposes of seeking recognition as a refugee within the meaning of the Refugee Act, 1996.

I understand that the person concerned has received permission to remain on work permit conditions until the 31st August 2008.

Fire Stations.

191. **Deputy Dinny McGinley** asked the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government his plans to improve fire services in the Ballyshannon/Bundoran areas; if it is his intention to have separate stations in Ballyshannon and Bundoran; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11019/08]

Minister of State at the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government (Deputy Tony Killeen): The provision of a fire service in a fire authority's functional area, including the establishment and maintenance of a fire brigade, the assessment of fire cover needs, the provision of a premises and the making of such other provisions as it considers necessary or desirable, is a statutory function of the individual fire authority under section 10 of the Fire Services Act 1981. The Department's role is one of supporting and assisting local authorities in delivering fire services through the setting of general policy and the provision of funding under the fire service capital programme.

In March 2000, Donegal County Council proposed to the Department a building programme to replace all 15 fire stations in the county. Substantial progress has now been made and the Council, with Department funding, has completed 10 stations since 1998 at a combined cost of over €8.5 million: Milford (1998), Buncrana (2000), Letterkenny (HQ) and Falcarragh (both in 2003), Carndonagh and Donegal Town (both in 2004), Killybegs (2005), Dungloe, Glenties and Moville (all three in 2007). Stations at Gweedore and Stranorlar are currently in construction phase at a combined cost of approximately €1.75 million. As part of its original building programme, Donegal County Council proposed a new fire station in the Ballyshannon/Bundoran

[Deputy Tony Killeen.]

areas. In October 2006, the Department requested Donegal County Council to prepare and submit a capital appraisal in relation to this proposal, in accordance with the Department of Finance Guidelines for the Appraisal and Management of Capital Expenditure Proposals in the Public Sector.

In January 2007, Donegal County Council submitted an independent capital appraisal to the Department on the case for the redevelopment of the existing fire stations at Ballyshannon and Bundoran. The capital appraisal concluded that the most economically and operationally advantageous option would be the amalgamation of the existing fire stations at Ballyshannon and Bundoran into a combined unit at Finner. This conclusion was based both on the estimated construction cost and ongoing maintenance costs. The capital appraisal also concluded that the fire cover for both communities currently addressed by the two existing stations could be achieved by one fire station and this is currently being reviewed by the Council at the request of the Department. The Department has also requested the Council management to consult with the crews in both fire stations to explore this option and a response is expected shortly.

The Council has indicated that there is no suitable site in either town. The Deputy will be aware that the fire station in Bundoran is in a unsuitable location and that the Council is unable to identify an alternative site in Ballyshannon. I am reluctant to commit capital resource to the refurbishment of these two existing fire stations in their current locations and I understand that suitable alternative sites are not available. While it has not been possible to provide funding for a new fire station at Finner as part of the 2007 fire services capital programme, nevertheless, I believe that a robust case has been made for the improvement of facilities and fire cover in the Ballyshannon/Bundoran areas by the provision of a single station at Finner. The provision of exchequer funding for a fire station at Finner will be considered under the 2008 capital programme, which I hope to announce shortly.

Hunting Licences.

192. **Deputy Michael McGrath** asked the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government if his Department has issued a decision regarding the issuing of a licence to a group (detail supplied); and the reason for that decision. [11021/08]

Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government (Deputy John Gormley): Section 26(2) of the Wildlife Act, 1976 provides that I, as Minister, may grant to the master or other person having charge for the time being of a pack of beagles or harriers a licence to hunt hares outside the open season for hares which runs from 26 September to 28 February. The Irish Masters of Foot Beagles applied to my Department in December, 2007 for a licence to hunt hares with a pack of beagles for the period 1 March to 31 March 2008.

My Department has had concerns for a number of years that the hunting of hares in the month of March could have an adverse effect on the breeding season for the species. Accordingly, in granting a licence in respect of March 2007, my Department advised the Association that for conservation reasons, licences to permit the hunting of hares with beagles beyond the general open season for the species may not, in future years, be granted, as this would impinge on the breeding season of the hares. It was also pointed out that in planning their calendar for future years the Association should work on the assumption that all beagling events would need to be scheduled within the standard open season for the hunting of hares, which runs to the end of February. It would appear the Association did not take account of my Department's position regarding holding such events outside the open season for hares in submitting their new application. A decision to refuse a licence to the Association for March this year was conveyed to the Association by letter of 21 February, 2008.

Environmental Policy.

193. **Deputy Richard Bruton** asked the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government if he is undertaking a fresh review of evidence surrounding the alleged negative environmental and health defects of aërials, particularly in sensitive residential areas; if this review is complete; if he has plans to publish the findings; and if he plans changes in either the planning or monitoring of such facilities. [11032/08]

Minister of State at the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government (Deputy Tony Killeen): In March 2007 the Government published an Expert Group Report entitled “Health Effects of Electromagnetic Fields”. Following the publication of the Report, responsibility for the health effects of electromagnetic fields was transferred by Government decision to the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government in the short-term. The long-term intention is for one single agency to be responsible for this area and the Department is currently considering expanding the functions of the Radiological Protection Institute of Ireland to take on that additional role.

This Report examined a wide range of issues in relation to the potential health effects of electromagnetic fields, including those produced by electric appliances in the home and from electricity pylons. It answers many of the health risk questions raised by the public in relation to the potential effects of electromagnetic fields, and is available for download on the Department’s website (www.environ.ie). The views in the Report are based, inter alia, on World Health Organisation and other expert studies and are accepted by the Government and Department accordingly. The report of the expert group is entirely based on, and is an editorial review of, all the major scientific reviews available worldwide on this matter at that time.

The Expert Group concluded that there is limited scientific evidence of adverse health effects from electromagnetic fields. The Report has, however, recommended that precautionary measures be used, where appropriate, and that Ireland continue to adopt and enforce the international guidelines developed by the International Commission on Non-ionising Radiation Protection and endorsed by the World Health Organisation and the European Union. This recommendation has also been accepted by Government. In relation to planning, the Department will initiate a review of its existing Guidelines on Telecom infrastructure following the publication by the Department of Communications, Energy and Natural Resources of their new statement on broadband policy.

National Monuments.

194. **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** asked the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government if his attention has been drawn to events on 6 March 2008 at Rath Lugh, Lismullen, County Meath, when protestors and construction workers clashed over the boundary of the Rath Lugh site and the threat of destruction by two diggers and a bulldozer against the protected esker structure, and the fact that some protestors felt the threat to the national monument was so real that they took to tunnels built throughout the complex to try to save the site; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11036/08]

Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government (Deputy John Gormley): My statutory responsibilities relating to the national monument at Rath Lugh, Lismullin, County Meath are those provided for under the National Monuments Acts 1930 to 2004. On 28 September 2007 I placed a temporary preservation order on the national monument at Rath Lugh, which is located on an esker in the townland of Lismullin, Co. Meath, under Section 4 of the National Monuments (Amendment) Act 1954. On 7 March 2008, I made that temporary preservation order permanent under Section 8 of the National Monuments Act 1930 (as amended). Arrangements are being made to have the preservation order laid before the Houses and to notify relevant parties of the making of the order.

[Deputy John Gormley.]

It should be noted that the area of the monument covered by the preservation order is adjacent to, but does not encroach into, the lands made available by the National Roads Authority to the company responsible for constructing the M3 motorway. The area of the monument is delineated by reference to National Grid co-ordinates in an Ordnance Survey map attached to the order. The order relates to the national monument itself and not to the entire esker on which the monument is located. To assess the stability of the esker on which the monument at Rath Lugh is located I commissioned a report from an independent firm of consultants with relevant expertise in this matter. The report from the Consultants recommended that a number of precautionary measures be put in place to ensure that the esker is not undermined during the nearby road construction works or in the longer term. My Department has asked the NRA to implement the measures outlined in the consultant's report.

Housing Aid for the Elderly.

195. **Deputy Brian O'Shea** asked the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government the proposals he has to introduce a grant system for older house owners who would not have the means to bring their property up to EU energy rating regulations; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11045/08]

Minister of State at the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government (Deputy Máire Hootor): My Department operates a number of grant schemes to assist older people in carrying out repairs and improvements which may assist in improving the energy efficiency of their homes. The Housing Aid for Older People scheme, which was introduced in November 2007, provides targeted support to improve conditions in the existing housing of older people. The types of works grant aided under the scheme may include structural repairs and improvements, repairs to / replacement of windows and doors and provision of central heating and associated insulation works. The effective maximum grant under the scheme is €10,500 which may cover up to 100% of the cost of works.

The Special Housing Aid for the Elderly Scheme was established to provide assistance, by way of emergency repairs, to improve conditions in the existing homes of older people living alone in unfit or unsanitary conditions. The Scheme is operated by a Task Force under the aegis of my Department with implementation at local level by the Health Service Executive. In line with a Government Decision this Scheme will be transferring from the Health Service Executive to the local authority sector in the context of the Housing Aid for Older People Scheme as soon as all relevant issues arising from the transfer are satisfactorily resolved. In addition, older people will benefit from the central heating programme introduced by my Department in July 2004. The programme assists local authorities in providing central heating facilities in their rented dwellings which lack them. The programme involves not just the provision of central heating, but, where necessary, measures to ensure the energy efficiency of the dwelling.

Furthermore, I am aware that Sustainable Energy Ireland funds and coordinates the Warmer Homes Scheme, which provides insulation and other energy efficient measures to low income homes across Ireland. I understand that the service is delivered principally through community based organisations that typically provide the labour from a FAS or Rural Social Scheme. Sustainable Energy Ireland provides funding towards overheads and material for the operation of the service, which is provided at little or no cost to the homeowner. The services provided under the Warmer Homes Scheme include draught proofing, attic insulation, lagging jacket, low energy light bulbs and cavity wall insulation.

Recycling Policy.

196. **Deputy Olwyn Enright** asked the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local

Government his views on a reverse vending machine approach to collecting certain recyclable materials; if his Department is considering the roll out of same; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11051/08]

Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government (Deputy John Gormley): Automated reverse vending machines can be a feature of deposit and refund schemes aimed at supporting recovery rates for certain types of packaging waste. Directive 94/62/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council on packaging and packaging waste (the Packaging Directive) is based on the concept of producer responsibility, which effectively requires producers to contribute to the waste management costs of products which they have placed on the market at end-of-life. Under the Directive, Ireland was required to achieve a 25% recovery rate of packaging waste by 1 July 2001, increasing to a 50% recovery rate by 31 December 2005.

Practical implementation of the Directive in Ireland is organised mainly through a collective industry-based compliance scheme operated by Repak Limited which is working successfully. The National Waste Report 2006, published in January by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), states that packaging waste recovery increased to 57.3% in that year, indicating that Ireland continues to exceed the current target recovery rate of 50% set by the Packaging Directive.

I fully recognise that despite progress on recycling we need to continue to improve our performance. The Programme for Government commits us to a comprehensive review of waste management planning, which I have asked my Department to initiate. This review, the procurement for which is currently under way, will ensure that our waste management plans reflect best international practice and that we have the policies and infrastructure to meet ambitious environmental objectives. The review will also look at the desirability of other producer responsibility schemes, including deposit and refund.

Local Authority Housing.

197. **Deputy Seán Sherlock** asked the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government the amount of funding allocated for housing starts, acquisition and maintenance to all of the town councils in the Cork East constituency including Mallow, Fermoy, Youghal, Cobh and Midleton; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11080/08]

Minister of State at the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government (Deputy Batt O’Keeffe): My Department is currently meeting all housing authorities as part of the annual Housing Action Plan review process. Following this, allocations under the social housing investment programme will be made to all housing authorities. I expect to be in a position to announce the allocations for 2008 in April.

198. **Deputy Thomas P. Broughan** asked the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government his plans to eliminate long-standing social housing lists; his views on whether it is appropriate that families on low incomes should be left on housing lists for five to nine years and more; and if he will issue directives to Dublin City Council, Fingal County Council and other local authorities in this matter. [11085/08]

Minister of State at the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government (Deputy Batt O’Keeffe): Good progress is being made on the delivery of social housing programmes with some 9,000 new social housing starts achieved in 2007. This is in line with the commitment in Towards 2016 to achieve 27,000 starts in the period 2007 to 2009. Record levels of funding for social and affordable housing are being provided in 2008 with over €2.5 billion available for housing programmes generally. The total Exchequer provision for housing in 2008 is over €1.7 billion — an increase of approximately 11% on the 2007 provision. The funding

[Deputy Batt O’Keeffe.]

will allow for the commencement of a significant number of new social housing units, further progress under regeneration programmes, as well as bringing to completion a large number of units under both the local authority and voluntary housing programmes.

I expect to announce individual local authority allocations under the Social Housing Investment Programme for 2008 in April. Local authorities are currently undertaking the 2008 statutory assessment of housing need. Information on housing need will be available from this assessment later this year.

Fire Stations.

199. **Deputy Thomas P. Broughan** asked the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government if he will report to Dáil Éireann indicating the applications his Department has received from local authorities for the provision of new fire fighting equipment for each of the past six years. [11086/08]

Minister of State at the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government (Deputy Tony Killeen): The provision of a fire service, including the provision of fire fighting and emergency equipment, is a statutory function of the individual fire authorities. The Department supports the local fire authorities through the setting of general policy and the provision of capital funding, including the recoupment of costs incurred by local authorities in relation to the purchase of fire fighting and emergency equipment. The information requested is being compiled and I will forward it to the Deputy as soon as it is available.

Planning Issues.

200. **Deputy Thomas P. Broughan** asked the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government if he has plans to abolish charges to the public for making submissions and observations on planning applications to the local authorities and An Bord Pleanála; and if in the view of the important democratic role of representation of councillors and TDs he will also abolish these charges for public representatives and especially in view of the short time frame allowed for planning applications. [11087/08]

Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government (Deputy John Gormley): The €20 fee for making a submission on a planning application was introduced in the context of the comprehensive review of planning legislation which culminated in the Planning and Development Act 2000 and the Planning and Development Regulations 2001. The fee was introduced in tandem with the increased rights for third parties in the planning process under the revised legislation. Since the enactment of the 2000 Act planning authorities are statutorily obliged to acknowledge submissions on planning applications and to consider those submissions before making decisions on planning applications. Persons who make submissions are also entitled to be notified of: any new information provided; the decision of the planning authority; an appeal against the decision of the planning authority.

Many submissions by elected representatives on planning applications are simply queries on the position of an application, requests that the processing of applications be speeded up, or general support for an application or for the comments made by another person. A fee does not have to be paid for these types of submissions, which add no substantive matter for consideration by the planning authority. However, where a public representative makes a formal submission, such as elaborating on the grounds of an application or an objection to an application, the submission cannot be considered by the planning authority unless it is accompanied by the appropriate fee.

My Department is currently examining the costs of the planning service with a view to reviewing the Regulations relating to planning application fees in the context of improving

further service delivery. Any proposed changes to the current fees structure, including the fee for making a submission on an application, will require the endorsement of the Oireachtas.

Heritage Sites.

201. **Deputy Brian O'Shea** asked the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government if he has received the report of the advisory committee on the future of the Viking site at Woodstown, County Waterford; the decisions taken on foot of the report; when the report will be published; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11094/08]

Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government (Deputy John Gormley): My Department has received the Final Report of the Woodstown Working Group on the future preservation and archaeological investigation of the national monument site at Woodstown, Co. Waterford. This detailed report, which includes a number of recommendations made by the expert Working Group, is currently being considered. I will make a further statement on the matter in due course. It is also my intention to make the report publicly available as its contents will be of considerable public interest, especially to people locally in Waterford and the South Eastern Region, as well as to the wider archaeological community given the significance of the discoveries at Woodstown in 2003 and the subsequent archaeological investigations which shed further light on those discoveries.

Departmental Programmes.

202. **Deputy Brian O'Shea** asked the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government when decisions will be announced on the €300 million gateway innovation fund; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11095/08]

203. **Deputy Brian O'Shea** asked the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government the assistance he will provide in regard to the Waterford City Council project to develop the National Viking Centre in Waterford; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11096/08]

Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government (Deputy John Gormley): I propose to take Questions Nos. 202 and 203 together.

I refer to the reply to Question Nos. 496 and 515 of 11 March 2008. The position is unchanged. The Waterford Gateway Innovation Fund (GIF) proposal includes a request for funding to develop the Viking Quarter, and this will be considered in the context of the overall assessment of the GIF proposals.

Local Elections.

204. **Deputy Emmet Stagg** asked the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government if there will be elections to new town councils in June 2009. [11104/08]

Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government (Deputy John Gormley): In accordance with the Programme for Government, my Department will shortly be publishing the Green Paper on local government reform, which will examine a number of issues with the objective of making local government more transparent and responsive, and will set out options for reform in advance of a subsequent White Paper. Issues to be considered will include the establishment of town councils in those towns that have shown significant population growth in recent years. The White Paper will address the timing of any new reforms.

Rural Renewal Scheme.

205. **Deputy Frank Feighan** asked the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local

[Deputy Frank Feighan.]

Government the reason an inspection has not been carried out for a grant under the rural renewal scheme on the home of a person (details supplied) in County Leitrim; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11144/08]

Minister of State at the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government (Deputy Batt O’Keeffe): An inspection with a view to issuing a Certificate of Reasonable Cost, if in order, will be carried out before Easter.

Greenhouse Gas Emissions.

206. **Deputy Thomas P. Broughan** asked the Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources if he will give a full report on all available insulation grants for householders; the funding being provided for this in 2008; and the measures he is taking to provide householders with full information of all available assistance to access low carbon home heating systems and home insulation. [11084/08]

Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources (Deputy Eamon Ryan): I expect to make an announcement later this month on the commencement of a Home Energy Saving Scheme. This scheme will be a pilot for the full national insulation scheme to be rolled out from next year. The pilot scheme will test a number of different energy efficiency technologies. It will also trial different options for best delivering on the Government’s objectives for the scheme, which are to reduce energy use and lower CO₂ emissions from existing housing stock, while promoting the development of a market for energy services. I have made some €5.5 million available to Sustainable Energy Ireland (SEI) in 2008 for this scheme. The Programme for Government commits to a €100m scheme over the lifetime of this Government.

I have also made some €2.5 million available in 2008 to SEI for the Low Income Housing Programme, which through its main component, the Warmer Homes Scheme, provides funding to some 18 community groups to upgrade the energy efficiency of low income homes, particularly through improved insulation.

My colleague, John Gormley T.D., Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government, introduced a new Housing Aid for Older People Scheme on 1 November 2007, with the aim of providing targeted support to improve conditions in the existing housing of older people. The scheme may assist with works that can improve the energy efficiency of homes, such as insulation, provision of central heating and repair or replacement of windows and doors. Both SEI and my Department’s Power of One campaign provide information on best practices in home insulation. This information can be accessed at www.sei.ie or www.powerofone.ie.