

DÁIL ÉIREANN

Dé Céadaoin, 28 Eanáir 2009.
Wednesday, 28 January 2009.

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

Paidir.
Prayer.

Business of Dáil.

Deputy Finian McGrath: I would like to raise a point of order. Will Independent Deputies be allowed to speak in the debate on the economy in this House over the next two days? If not, why not?

An Ceann Comhairle: That is not a point of order.

Deputy Finian McGrath: Could I have a response?

Deputy Billy Timmins: Deputy McGrath is not an Independent.

An Ceann Comhairle: I will be in contact with the Deputy on the matter.

Deputy Finian McGrath: As we celebrate the 90th anniversary of the First Dáil, Independent Deputies are being denied the right to speak in this Chamber. The Ceann Comhairle has a responsibility to defend the rights of minorities in this House. It is an absolute disgrace.

An Ceann Comhairle: The rights of every Deputy will be defended by the Chair in this House today and every other day. I will communicate with the Deputy on the matter.

Deputy Jim O’Keeffe: Fianna Fáil will give the Deputy some of its speaking time.

Deputy Billy Timmins: The Deputy got on the box — he is okay.

Deputy Finian McGrath: The Opposition parties are a disgrace. They are a bunch of fascists.

Leaders’ Questions.

Deputy Enda Kenny: Many people watching the proceedings of this House are worried about the future of their jobs, the value of their homes and the difficulties that lie ahead. While our views on how to restore confidence in this country’s economic strategy may differ, we all want the country to be able to move forward. Fine Gael has consistently outlined its constructive views to the Government. The least people expect in this forum is some sense of mutual respect. Those whose ideas differ from one’s own deserve to be respected. The Taoiseach’s outburst yesterday did little to build confidence among people outside this House, including people overseas. If he is serious about building a national consensus on the recovery of the economy, he should have a rational respect for the views of other Members of the House. It may well be

[Deputy Enda Kenny.]

that he wants to run the Government his way. There has been evidence of that over the last six or seven months. It was the Taoiseach's way to introduce the budget in October. It was his way to say that the Estimates he had produced were on target — they were off target by €2 billion in one month before Christmas. It was his way to intend to take medical cards from elderly people. It was his way to attempt to withdraw an allowance from those who are intellectually challenged. That was his way.

As this country faces a war for economic survival — the clock is ticking for Ireland — no cohesive strategy or plan has been produced by the Government. If the Taoiseach was running this country as a company, with the population of Ireland as its workers, and he was borrowing to pay interest, we would be out of business. If that is his way, I disagree fundamentally with him. It is time for the Government to examine the reality of the situation we are in. Some 60,000 jobs have been lost since I first called for the introduction of a programme of recapitalisation. The Taoiseach said it was not necessary — that was his way at the time. When I suggested that Anglo Irish Bank should be taken over, the Taoiseach said it should not be. When I said it should not be included in the recapitalisation programme, the Taoiseach said it would be business as usual. The Taoiseach's way is not working and has not worked. I suggest it is about time that the Taoiseach, in his capacity as leader of the Government, ensures that it stops dancing to the tune of developers and big bankers.

Deputies: Hear, hear.

Deputy John Cregan: Rubbish.

Deputy Enda Kenny: The Taoiseach should set out a strategy now. He should outline in this House how he intends to ensure that banks make credit lines available to small businesses, in the interests of creating and protecting jobs in this country. Will the Taoiseach respond to that? What has he done? What is he doing? Can he confirm the extent of the credit lines that are open to small and medium sized enterprises at this time of national crisis? We will play our part, but the Taoiseach needs to shape up by playing his part.

Deputy Pádraic McCormack: He will sing it his way.

The Taoiseach: We have heard the usual outburst from Deputy Kenny.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: Yes.

The Taoiseach: He is looking for the high ground.

Deputy Paul Kehoe: The Taoiseach should listen to him.

The Taoiseach: We have also had——

An Ceann Comhairle: The Taoiseach has to be listened to.

The Taoiseach: The catcalling and heckling started before I opened my mouth.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: This is more of the same.

Deputy Paul Connaughton: The Taoiseach knows what is coming.

The Taoiseach: My job is to set out the Government's position on all these issues.

Deputy Jim O'Keeffe: Why is the Taoiseach not doing that?

The Taoiseach: I remind Deputy Kenny that bringing stability to the banking system continues to be one of the Government's top priorities. This issue is being dealt with by every government in the world that is concerned with the difficulties being faced in the global financial system.

Deputy Pádraic McCormack: What about the national element of it?

Deputy John Cregan: Go back to sleep.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: The Government should start with our national financial system.

The Taoiseach: Deputy Kenny mentioned that he called for recapitalisation when that approach was being taken in the UK. At that time, I made the point, which I emphasise again today, that the Irish banking system has not suffered from the sub-prime mortgage problem that has been a significant feature of the British banking system. The British authorities had to take immediate steps to recapitalise the banks in that country because they needed to mark the market in many of those assets. That was not the situation in the Irish system. The guarantee scheme we introduced provided the stability that was necessary. It was an important and decisive act on our part. Subsequently, we took the time to get the necessary advice on how to proceed with recapitalisation policy issues. Since then, market sentiment has been quite negative to banking, in general. All banking shares have decreased in value. Irish banking shares, in particular, have dipped more than others. We are aware that governance issues have arisen in respect of one particular financial institution, with the consequence of further negating market sentiment in respect of other institutions. The Government, including the Minister for Finance and I, continue to accord top priority to this issue in the interests of maintaining a stable financial system in Ireland. It is important that all of us, in our comments, make the point that we are interested in ensuring that the Irish financial system operates and functions. That is a prerequisite for a properly functioning market economy in this country, even in the difficult times in which we are operating.

I reject with the contempt it deserves the continuing suggestion that we are motivated by anything other than the public good in trying to bring stability to the financial system in this country.

Deputies: Hear, hear.

The Taoiseach: While I do not expect that this sort of behaviour will end on the Deputy's part, I reject it with the contempt it deserves.

(Interruptions).

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: What about the Government's performance in recent years? Will the Taoiseach put that question to the people?

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

The Taoiseach: In regard to small and medium sized enterprises and first-time buyers, we have indicated the need to ensure there is access to credit lines. This is something in which we are engaged. The availability of mortgage support and mortgage finance is increasing by 30% over last year and by 10% for medium sized enterprises in respect of access to credit lines. The independent directors we have appointed in the public interest are ensuring this policy is brought forward and that the strategic plans for the banks as they proceed with the recapitalisation will keep all of that in mind. Fundamentally, we must ensure market sentiment towards

[The Taoiseach.]

the Irish banking system is more positive so that shares can rise and people in the investment community can see that the Irish banking system is solvent, is functioning and has a clear future as part of the economic renewal and revival we are trying to organise. These are my responses to the issues raised by Deputy Kenny which are relevant to the debate.

Deputy Enda Kenny: The problem is about building trust and confidence. There is no trust in the banks, nor is there the degree of confidence there should be. International markets look at the country and the banks in the same way, and there is trust in neither at the moment. Confidence is critical to this. The Taoiseach says he is engaged in the business of seeing that credit flows to small businesses. Will he publish the information he has to date so that we can see the extent of that credit flow? Anybody I speak to, whether those involved in the business of this House or in small businesses, tells me that the lines have tightened so much that it is becoming very restrictive.

One of the problems is that the banks have all the information. There is no real confidence or trust between the National Treasury Management Agency, the Department of Finance and the banks. I have a suggestion for the Taoiseach. What he could do is make an appointment of somebody within the regulatory authority who would direct that the banks strip out their commercial from their residential and other loans and do an analysis on every bank of the numbers of persons who are unable to repay their mortgages and the numbers of small businesses now in distress. This information is available to the banks but they will not publish it. They should give it to the Taoiseach.

The Minister for Finance has said we are now deeply embedded in the banking sector. Confidence is at its lowest ebb. The Taoiseach could have that information in a week and could then put together a package to say to the 80,000, 100,000 or 150,000 mortgage holders who have lost their jobs, are on three-day weeks or face redundancy that we are now in position to know the scale of the picture and to do something in respect of focusing the banks on restructuring those mortgages or putting into effect a number of options to ease the burden upon those people who will not then be faced with foreclosure. In a similar sense with the commercial entities, we would then have a clear picture of the number of small and medium enterprises in serious distress. We could then at least decide what best to do in their interest. I am interested, as I am sure is the Taoiseach, that those people should be able to hold onto their jobs, protect those jobs and that we should be able to build on that through a series of mechanisms.

Will the Taoiseach do this in respect of the banks? We now own a bank whose liabilities we are unaware of, and we are being asked to continue that. I have offered a constructive suggestion that would give the Taoiseach and everybody else a clear picture of what the banks face and what those mortgage holders who cannot make their repayments now face. That would be in everybody's interests and I ask the Taoiseach to respond. A book the Taoiseach should consider for his spare time reading is by Robert Goffee and Gareth Jones and is entitled *Why Should Anyone be Led by You?*.

The Taoiseach: I do not know who writes Deputy Kenny's quips but I hope he can get somebody to improve them.

(Interruptions).

Deputy Pádraic McCormack: The Taoiseach brought it on himself, by singing.

The Taoiseach: In regard to mortgage issues, it is important to point out that the information up to June was that there were some 127 repossession orders out of the total of 1 million mortgages. Thankfully, thus far — this issue is being monitored on an ongoing basis — the

number of mortgages in stress is much lower when compared with the situation in the United Kingdom. This is an issue we must continue to watch closely.

It is important to point out that the Financial Regulator is developing a statutory code of practice in respect of this issue. There is a good record in this respect for those who make contact early with financial institutions regarding any issue of difficulty concerning repayment capacity. The banks will work with customers in a way that is in the interests of everybody to ensure they get over the particularly difficult times they may be facing. It is important to point out that whereas this is a problem which has the potential to increase, it should not be exaggerated to a level of distress above what we know to be the situation based on data available up to June. The second six months of last year will see further developments in this regard. We are monitoring that situation very closely.

Deputy Eamon Gilmore: On 18 December 2008, several hours after the Dáil went into recess for Christmas, Mr. Seán FitzPatrick announced his intention to resign as chairman of Anglo Irish Bank following the disclosure that he had taken out loans of €87 million which, by shifting them periodically to another institution, he was able to conceal from the bank's shareholders over a period of eight years. We have subsequently found out that the total loans he had amounted to €129 million, an astonishing amount of money in any circumstances.

Mr. FitzPatrick says that what he did was inappropriate but that he did not break any law. The Minister for Finance, in his initial comment, expressed disappointment at what Mr. FitzPatrick had done. The Taoiseach will appreciate that the feeling among the public is somewhat stronger than that. Shareholders in Anglo Irish Bank, many of them pensioners, whose savings have been lost, staff of the bank, people who have loans, sometimes for small amounts, and are being followed quite strongly by the banks to pay them back, people who have lost their jobs because of the difficulties in the economy to which the crisis in banking has contributed, and the other banks in which international confidence has declined and which are having difficulty raising money on international financial markets — these people would feel somewhat more strongly about the damage that has been caused by the actions of Mr. FitzPatrick and perhaps others in Anglo Irish Bank.

The Taoiseach has said that problems in banking and the economy are happening in other countries worldwide. However, we see in other countries that wrongdoing is outed and illegality is punished. We see that people who have engaged in wrongful activities or are accused of illegal activities are arrested and, in some cases, are in custody awaiting trial. Members will recall the case of Martha Stewart who served time in jail for what would be regarded here as a relatively minor offence.

The Labour Party, through Deputy Burton, proposed here last week when we were dealing with the nationalisation of Anglo Irish Bank that a High Court inspector should be appointed to investigate what happened in the bank and in particular the activities of Mr. FitzPatrick. The Taoiseach's Government voted down that proposal. What I want to ask the Taoiseach today is if he can tell the House and the public what investigations are under way into what happened in Anglo Irish Bank. Who is conducting the investigations and when will the public find out the truth about what has happened in Anglo Irish Bank, who was involved in it, if there were illegal actions and if laws were broken? I find it difficult to believe and to understand that laws were not broken. The Companies Act is quite specific and clear that full information is to be made available and that directors have responsibilities to make full information available on their companies' affairs and accounts to their shareholders. I find it difficult to understand how laws were not broken. What I want to establish from the Taoiseach today, and I do not want to do it in any prejudicial way, is what investigations, if any, are under way into what went on in Anglo and the activities of Mr. FitzPatrick and others.

The Taoiseach: The Deputy will be aware there are well established mechanisms to establish the full picture of what went wrong in the bank. The Financial Regulator is carrying out its own investigation and I understand will report back to a committee of this House on the matter. The Director of Corporate Enforcement is also investigating behaviour in the bank. Those two mechanisms available to us are what is going on in regard to the bank at present. When they have completed their inquiries, they will report as quickly as possible on them. On the question of the appointment of a High Court examiner, in the interests of maintaining confidence in the institution it will continue to operate as a going concern, but the Office of the Director of Corporate Enforcement and the Financial Regulator's office are conducting inquiries at present.

Deputy Eamon Gilmore: All that reply tells me is that it seems this Government is soft on corporate crime. The matter of the Financial Regulator investigating this matter is a joke in the present circumstances. The Financial Regulator has 380 staff and it was getting quarterly reports apparently about these loans, which included, we were told, information about the loans that Mr. FitzPatrick had taken out, and it could not spot what was going on. The idea of the Financial Regulator investigating this matter does not fill me with any confidence. I have more confidence in the Director of Corporate Enforcement investigating it and he has the power, as I understand it, to apply for the appointment of a High Court inspector. To my knowledge, no such application has been made. Neither have we heard about any Garda investigation or any other type of investigation. The Taoiseach will have to do better in terms of reassuring the public that this matter is being treated seriously and being seriously investigated.

I have not seen or heard anything that convinces me or conveys to me that a serious investigation is being undertaken into what happened here. It is not acceptable that the people involved in this can simply walk off into the sunset without being called to account for what happened here. Everybody knows that Anglo was at the heart of the banking crisis that caused the Taoiseach to introduce legislation here in September to provide a blanket guarantee. We know that banking crisis is at the heart of the economic difficulty now facing this country where people are losing jobs and businesses are going to the wall. If there has been wrongdoing and crimes committed in respect of the conduct of the banking business of that bank, it must be investigated, identified and prosecuted. The kind of soft glove treatment the Taoiseach appears to be giving to it is not good enough.

There have been reports in newspapers during the last two days, particularly in respect of Anglo, what was made known to the Financial Regulator and what was conveyed to the Department of Finance. We were told from a report in one newspaper at least that the current Minister for Finance was briefed on the position in Anglo when he took up office.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: Correct.

Deputy Eamon Gilmore: We are told in another newspaper today that information in relation to some of the activities in Anglo were made known to the Department of Finance at the beginning of last year.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: Correct.

Deputy Eamon Gilmore: The Taoiseach was the Minister for Finance at that time. What did he know about what was going on in Anglo when he was Minister for Finance? Did he know about these loans Mr. FitzPatrick had taken out? What did the Financial Regulator bring to his attention while he was Minister for Finance about what was happening in Anglo Irish Bank?

The Taoiseach: First, I say to Deputy Gilmore that I reject again the assertion made forcefully by him this morning that the Government will in some way ensure that the rigours of the law or the full mechanisms that are available for investigation will not be applied or applied independently, respecting the independence of those offices. I reject that. They will be applied. I have confidence in the Office of the Director of Corporate Enforcement. He is the person undertaking the investigation. We have ensured it is an independent power of the Director of Corporate Enforcement to decide whether an examiner or any person be appointed by the High Court. That is a matter for the Director of Corporate Enforcement independently of any political direction or control and rightly so. The suggestion, therefore, made by the Deputy that something less is being done than should be done is not correct. One either accepts the integrity of the people who hold these offices or one does not. I happen to accept their integrity. I have heard them praised in other contexts for work they have done in other areas in the past, but obviously the political opportunity to suggest otherwise——

Deputy Eamon Gilmore: I did not suggest otherwise.

Deputies: The Deputy did.

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

Deputy Eamon Gilmore: I said I had confidence in the Director of Corporate Enforcement.

(Interruptions).

The Taoiseach: The political opportunity to suggest otherwise is something that could not be passed this morning.

Deputy Charles Flanagan: It is a smoke screen.

The Taoiseach: I also have confidence in the new chairman of the bank. I have confidence in the integrity of those who were appointed in the public interest by the Government as directors of the bank——

Deputy Brendan Howlin: It is a case of business as usual.

The Taoiseach: ——including Frank Daly, a former chairman of the Revenue Commissioners, Mr. Alan Dukes, a former Minister for Finance——

Deputy Joan Burton: We are asking about the Taoiseach, not about them.

The Taoiseach: ——and Mr. Maurice Keane. I have confidence in those people in terms of their commitment to proper corporate governance in the bank. I want to make that clear.

A Deputy: The Taoiseach should read last Sunday's newspapers.

The Taoiseach: In regard to the other matter Deputy Gilmore raised, the Minister was aware from contacts between the Department of Finance and the Financial Regulator over the course of last year that a large overhang of shares were held by a particular investor and related persons, that this was considered by the bank and the market to be a source of instability and that the institution was seeking some resolution of this issue. The details of this were a matter for the institution and, as appropriate, the Financial Regulator.

To answer specifically the question the Deputy asked, I am not aware of any directors' loans, the content of them, the context for them or in what respect they are held — not at all. I am not involved in that area whatsoever——

Deputy Joan Burton: When the Taoiseach went to guarantee the banks, did he not even look into that?

The Taoiseach: —either as Minister or as Taoiseach.

Deputy Joan Burton: When the Taoiseach went to guarantee the banks and risk our whole financial structure, did he not even check that?

The Taoiseach: Excuse me Deputy—

Deputy Billy Kelleher: The Deputies opposite sat on their hands.

The Taoiseach: —a specific question has been asked and I want to clear any doubt about the matter.

As a result of the due diligence process recently undertaken on behalf of the Minister, certain matters in connection with transactions involving the Quinn stake in the bank came to the attention of the Minister which may warrant further investigation by the Financial Regulator.

11 o'clock Anglo Irish Bank has now been taken into public ownership. Various matters are being considered by the Financial Regulator as I have said, the Office of the Director of Corporate Enforcement and the bank, under its new chairman. The House can it that any significant corporate governance issue that comes to light will be investigated by the appropriate authorities.

Deputy Joan Burton: That comes to light — will the Taoiseach bring it to light?

An Ceann Comhairle: That concludes Leaders' Questions.

Ceisteanna — Questions.

Criminal Prosecutions.

1. **Deputy Eamon Gilmore** asked the Taoiseach if it is intended that the reduction of 3% in payroll costs will apply to the Offices of the Director of Public Prosecutions and the Chief State Solicitor; the number of jobs that are expected to be cut as a result; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32375/08]

2. **Deputy Eamon Gilmore** asked the Taoiseach if his attention has been drawn to the concerns expressed by the Director of Public Prosecutions that the imposition of cutbacks on his office may limit its capacity to prosecute cases, particularly in the District Court; the steps he is taking to ensure that the DPP has sufficient staff and resources to discharge his duties; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37953/08]

3. **Deputy Charles Flanagan** asked the Taoiseach his views on reports that recent budgetary changes will result in the office of the Director of Public Prosecutions being unable to process criminal cases in 2009; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [40456/08]

4. **Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin** asked the Taoiseach if pay cuts and job cuts are planned for the Offices of the Director of Public Prosecutions and the Chief State Solicitor; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [1776/09]

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

The Government announced in July 2008 that Departments and State agencies in general were to make a 3% payroll reduction by the end of 2009. The Office of the Chief State Solicitor and the Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions have informed me they can meet this reduction without affecting existing levels of service.

I am aware of what the Director of Public Prosecutions said in the media in October 2008. Contrary to the claim made in Deputy Flanagan's question, he did not say that he would be unable to process criminal cases in 2009. What the DPP said related to the Government's announcement in October that no specific provision would be made for the 3.5% increase to be paid from September 2009 under Towards 2016. In that context, the DPP said that from the end of 2009, "some cases prosecuted in the District Court may have to be handed back to An Garda Síochána for prosecution".

I am confident that the Director of Public Prosecutions and the Chief State Solicitor will, throughout 2009 and beyond, continue to achieve the best level of service possible from the resources available to them.

An Ceann Comhairle: I call Deputy Ó Caoláin.

Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin: Ní mise an chéad ceisteoir. I am not the first questioner.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy is, on my list.

Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin: I beg the Ceann Comhairle's pardon. On the Order Paper, Deputy Gilmore is first. I am happy to take the opportunity but I do not think that would be fair.

An Ceann Comhairle: There are conflicting lists.

Deputy Eamon Gilmore: I thank Deputy Ó Caoláin for his courtesy.

I do not wish to get into the area of "who said what" but it is on record that the Director of Public Prosecutions signalled that the 3% cut will create difficulties for him in terms of staffing and that there is a possibility he may have to ask gardaí to take cases that otherwise would be taken by his office.

Can the Taoiseach assure the House that no criminal case will be delayed as a result of shortage of funds and resources being made available to the DPP's office, or as a result of the DPP's office being short of staff? I appreciate there are difficulties in the public finances but there is also a serious crime problem in the country. We know that the conviction rate is very low, particularly for serious crimes. The last thing we want is a situation where crimes go unpunished or are not adequately prosecuted because of a shortage of staff available to the DPP. Neither do we want to have gardaí sitting around all day in a court room waiting for a case to come up when they might be deployed more usefully in detecting crime. That is what would result if more cases are to be handed back to the Garda for pursuance in the court.

We must have an assurance from the Taoiseach that no criminal case will be delayed, held up or handed back to the Garda because of shortage of staff or resources in the DPP's office.

The Taoiseach: The DPP indicated it is not the case that he will not be able to function, but that he will be forced to hand back District Court prosecutions to the Garda. He went on to say that his was "not desirable". We do not have provision for making up the 3.5% increase that currently stands in the pay agreement and which is to fall due from September. We must continue to monitor the situation as best we can with the Chief State Solicitor.

[The Taoiseach.]

The Chief State Solicitor's office has four vacancies at present. However, following a review of that office, an additional 16 staff were approved in January 2007. The office has a staff complement of 249 whole-time equivalents. The DPP's office states that it is important to emphasise the Director is satisfied there is no danger at present that his office will be unable to deal with the prosecution file submitted to him. He made the point that he felt that problems might manifest themselves towards the end of 2009 and onwards, as he outlined in the statement to which I referred. We will continue to monitor the situation and see how that pay commitment evolves.

Deputy Eamon Gilmore: The difficulty lies in that reply. The problem is that the 3%-3.5% cut across the board is a very crude instrument. Whatever one might think of the measure, if it results — and it has been signalled to us in this instance that it will result — in the DPP having to ask the Garda to pursue cases in the District Court, that is not a good use of public resources. It will mean that gardaí who should be out detecting and preventing crime will spend a lot of time sitting around District Courts.

The Government must take a much more targeted approach to ensure that essential services, those that are important to public safety, are not undermined or weakened. In this case, it would be accepted generally in the country that the DPP must have the resources with which to do the job, namely, to prosecute crime and ensure that offenders are brought to justice. This is an area that the Taoiseach and the Departments of Finance and Justice, Equality and Law Reform must sort and work out with the DPP's office. They must ensure that the office is enabled to operate efficiently and that the cutbacks and restrictions on availability of finance and the curtailment on recruitment of staff do not mean that, ultimately, criminals will walk free or will walk around free for longer than they should.

The Taoiseach: The Deputy's final contention has not been suggested by anybody, even in the context of outlining whatever prospective difficulties and problems those offices may have. What was suggested is that instead of the DPP taking certain prosecutions those would be handed to the Garda to prosecute. That is what was said. The DPP indicated that this is not the optimum position. I acknowledge and understand what he says. I make the point that the administration of justice is not being compromised by this.

The other point made concerned the bluntness of the instrument. A far more blunt instrument would be an across the board embargo. Last July, for instance, when a direction was given to all Departments to cut payroll costs by 3% for the remainder of the year, this outcome was achieved by them. It was achieved with the flexibility of management given to people by that direction rather than by another way used in the past whereby a centralised embargo was imposed that required the approval of the Minister for Finance in each individual case of prospective recruitment. By allowing managers and Accounting Officers of Departments deal with the situation in that way, one enables them to work out, through term time and overtime, a full range of ways of reorganising their offices that achieve the savings without diminution of levels of service to any significant degree, or to any degree at all.

We have put forward to Departments the most flexible mechanism available to us, while insisting on obtaining the savings required. This contribution, in terms of staff costs, goes towards making the savings and the economies required in the light of the reduced revenue we now have.

Deputy Charles Flanagan: I remind the Taoiseach that the public statement made by the Director of Public Prosecutions last October was unprecedented. A chief prosecutor has never

before had to resort to making public comment that so great was the cut inflicted on his office that he would find it impossible to deal with its day to day business.

In response to Deputy Gilmore, the Taoiseach spoke about the bluntness of the instrument. This 3% cut across the board could not by its very nature have been based on any objective criteria and absolutely no consideration was given to the fact that Ireland has the lowest prosecution rate per head of population of any EU state. In terms of convictions, which is where the office of the DPP plays a most important role, our conviction rates are such that out of 166 gun murders, only 22 successful prosecutions have been brought to date. There is a very serious problem given that the DPP will confirm the work in his office increases at a rate of 5% per annum.

In addition, no consideration is given by the Government to the new phenomenon of credit crunch crime, which will give rise to an even greater level of pressure on the office of the State prosecutor. What steps are being taken to ensure the drastic effects are being minimised? It is giving rise to serious public concern when one of the most important crime enforcement offices in the State is being seriously affected by a cutback.

The Taoiseach: I do not accept that the 3% payroll cost reduction is a drastic cut. In fact, some of the criticism from the other side of the House has been that it is insufficient. I know Deputy Flanagan's interest as justice spokesperson for his party is with regard to the efficacy of the prosecution service, and he makes the case. The point we would make is that in late 2006 the Department of Finance carried out a review of staffing in the DPP's office and 28 extra posts were approved, bringing the staff complement to 106. The office is carrying 5.8 whole-time equivalent vacancies within the 2006 sanctioned posts and this is expected to reduce to 4.8 whole-time equivalent posts with the filling of a library post in late February or early March of this year.

The DPP's office states it will be able to meet that 3% payroll expenditure cut without affecting service levels, so it is not accurate to describe it as drastic. The office will be able to do this because it is operating from only two buildings rather than the expected three, which means it does not need to fill three permanent posts and two contract posts that had been sanctioned, and there will also be savings in respect of heat and lighting and other expenses. In addition, it is introducing a range of measures such as changes in work practices and the level at which work is performed, delays in filling vacancies and tight control of overtime payments.

Also, in regard to fees which the DPP pays barristers, a planned 2.5% percent increase from September 2008 for such fees was not implemented and the payment of refresher fees after 5 p.m. has been suspended. Those are the practical steps that were taken to accommodate the direction and it was done in a way which did not affect service levels.

By way of background, during the previous year the approval of 28 posts was an indication at that time of the need to deal with the increased workload. Through good management, information technology and higher productivity, these caseloads are being met and can be met. We candidly acknowledge what the DPP had to say regarding what he sees as possible difficulties later on in the year. This is something we must monitor.

Deputy Charles Flanagan: On the specific point regarding offices and personnel, how many vacancies are there currently in the Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions? If vacancies are not filled, does the Taoiseach not accept this gives rise to a situation where the office cannot function to maximum capacity?

The Taoiseach: I do not accept that. The vacancy that is being filled in late February or early March is a librarian post, which I am sure is important in itself in terms of organising data processing, the availability of case law and so on. That is the position——

Deputy Charles Flanagan: There are still vacancies in the office.

The Taoiseach: That has been filled. It is often the case, given that approved posts and casual vacancies occur all the time for a whole range of reasons, that whole-time equivalent vacancies are available. Obviously, people work within their budgets, which is a common feature of all HR issues in Departments.

Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin: Does the Taoiseach accept there is growing concern within wider society at the level of crimes committed by persons on bail and that there has to be a direct relationship between the resourcing of the Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions and this very worrying statistic? Does the Taoiseach accept that rather than the argument of creating further restrictions on the right to bail, the key address of this must be to facilitate a speedier processing of all the required preparations from the decision to prosecute to trial? Does he accept that we need to see the period of bail shortened significantly to ensure that there is less prospect of a continuation of the extent of recidivism that is currently demonstrating itself?

Does the Taoiseach not accept, given that the DPP, Mr. James Hamilton, has stated this means fewer prosecutions will be undertaken, that this 3% reduction in the budget of the office runs directly contrary to the stated objective I have just recounted? Does the Taoiseach not accept that in these times of very obvious crime and given the extent of serious crimes, including murder, that are being carried out by people while on bail, further investment and resourcing is what is needed rather than a reduction in the DPP's budget? Does the Taoiseach not accept there are far less damaging areas for savings to be made within the overall outlay on the justice system, which, for example, could include tighter regulation of legal fees and costs?

The Taoiseach: Obviously, these are all issues that will be considered closely by the Minister concerned, by our Department and by the Minister for Finance on an ongoing basis as we seek to effect economies and savings across a whole range of activities. The 3% payroll costs cut, compared to what will be required in the years ahead, is a minor imposition, to be frank, and we must see it in that context.

The challenge before us in terms of the public finances is a very large one, and one that will require ongoing consideration. The Minister has appointed people to consider public expenditure in all of its aspects, in every respect, in every Department, both in terms of the numbers employed and whether programmes which are attracting funding are critical, core or necessary in the new context in which we find ourselves. As the Deputy knows, stability in our public finances is an absolute prerequisite for a sustainable level of service. We must re-adjust our expectations, I am afraid, and re-adjust what is possible given the overriding importance of showing a determination to address the instability in the public finances that has arisen, particularly in the last six months of last year and continuing this year, as a result of the international recession and the financial crisis with which we are contending.

From our point of view, while difficulties will arise in various Departments at various times, and pressures will increase, it behoves us all to bring about whatever change we can in how we do our business to drive efficiencies and raise productivity everywhere we can.

Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin: Does the Taoiseach not believe that it would be a useful exercise to inform himself and Members of the House of the factual situation regarding the cost to communities and the economy of serious, repeat offences by people already on bail, which occur on a frequent basis? I argue for the right to bail, but the Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions does not have sufficient resources and there is a long, inordinate delay in moving from the decision to prosecute to the trial. This is a very serious problem. Examining

the 3% cost in terms of the immediate saving is a simple book-keeping exercise. However, we should consider it in a more holistic way and examine the real cost. I believe it is arguable, and the facts will sustain the case I am making, that if we were to examine the real cost of what is occurring, further investment rather than a reduction in payroll allocation to the Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions would yield a much more significant overall saving. Such a saving would be apart from the cost of great human misery that is brought to individuals' families and communities by the actions of certain people.

The Taoiseach: We examine all these issues, but the question is put in terms of people re-offending on bail. One of the criteria laid down for the refusal of bail is the prospect of re-offending. Under our system, the decision of whether to grant bail is made by an independent judge. We cannot decide on that. If such a danger exists, the case is made to the court. It is a matter for the Judiciary to decide whether detention is warranted. These are issues related to constitutional rights, which have been tested in all the courts over a long period. While people may believe that certain things should occur in the Legislature, these matters have been reviewed in the courts in terms of compliance with constitutional rights and obligations, which must also be observed by this Legislature. This is an ongoing debate, but I make the point that the question of how we organise offices in the future in the context of the very tight budgetary situation which we are face is something which must be taken on board by everyone. It is a reality which cannot be avoided by anyone.

Departmental Expenditure.

5. **Deputy Eamon Gilmore** asked the Taoiseach the priorities for his Department in regard to its Estimate for 2009. [32380/08]

6. **Deputy Enda Kenny** asked the Taoiseach if he will make a statement on his Department's Estimate for 2009. [35744/08]

7. **Deputy Eamon Gilmore** asked the Taoiseach if he expects to publish a Revised Estimate for his Department for 2009; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [1003/09]

8. **Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin** asked the Taoiseach if he will make a statement on his Department's Estimate for 2009. [1777/09]

The Taoiseach: I propose to take Questions Nos. 5 to 8, inclusive, together.

The total allocation for my Department in the Estimates set out in the budget for 2009 is €36.269 million. This is an overall decrease of 14%, some €5.871 million, on the 2008 Revised Estimate allocation. This decrease includes the transfer of the information society and e-inclusion functions and associated funding of €3.507 million from my Vote to the Department of Communications, Energy and Natural Resources and the Department of Finance.

I look forward to addressing specific issues relating to the Estimates provisions when they are considered in the usual way by the Joint Committee on Finance and the Public Service. I also look forward to responding to questions which Deputies may wish to table separately regarding specific aspects of the work of my Department. It is envisaged that Revised Estimates for 2009 will be published in March this year.

Deputy Eamon Gilmore: Does the Taoiseach expect to amend the Estimate for his Department shortly? By what amount does he anticipate the Estimate will be amended? With regard to the provision for the payment of staff, which I understand is in the order of €14 million—

The Taoiseach: Can the Deputy repeat that, please?

Deputy Eamon Gilmore: There is approximately €14 million allocated for staff costs in the Department's Estimate. How much of that is in respect of the staff of the private and constituency offices of the Taoiseach and the Ministers of State attached to his Department? With regard to the provision in the Estimate for the Moriarty tribunal, we are told the tribunal is to hold a renewed round of public hearings. Can the Taoiseach confirm whether this is the case, or if he knows anything about that? Will the Taoiseach explain what the implications will be for the Estimate which has been provided for the Moriarty tribunal?

The Taoiseach: I do not have the specific information available in terms of the Minister for State and my constituency office. I will have to get that for the Deputy and correspond with him. I cannot anticipate Government decisions regarding any savings made in the days ahead until they are made. There was a small provision for the Moriarty tribunal. I am not aware that public hearings are being provided for again. We must deal with that situation again, should it arise, by way of a Supplementary Estimate later in the year.

Deputy Eamon Gilmore: Those three replies can be reduced as follows: the Taoiseach does not know the answer to one question, he will not provide the answer to the second question and he has not properly heard the third question. I wish to concentrate on the third question, because I find the matter somewhat strange. I recall the Taoiseach told us on a previous occasion, when I put questions concerning the Moriarty tribunal, that he anticipated there would be a renewed round of hearings. I remember this because it surprised me at the time, and it was the first occasion anyone heard that the Moriarty tribunal was going to hold further public hearings. It is now in the public domain, or at least it has been reported in newspapers, that it is expected the tribunal will convene further public hearings. I wish to know if that is the case. The finance for the tribunal is provided for in the Taoiseach's Estimate. There is a reduction in the 2009 Estimate to €7.5 million. If there are to be new public hearings of the tribunal, is it not fair to assume the cost is likely to increase? Has any consideration been given to this in the context of examining anticipated expenditure by the Taoiseach's Department in the coming year?

The Taoiseach: I refer to subhead F and the costs of the Moriarty tribunal 2009. As the Deputy stated, €7.516 million was provided. That provision relates to the running costs of the tribunal in 2009 and the costs which are estimated to arise in 2009 regarding the completion of the tribunal's work. It is expected to include reporting costs and some element of award of legal costs. As it is not possible to definitively assess the amount of legal costs which may be awarded by the tribunal or the timing of these awards, a provision of approximately €7.516 has been included. However, this is only an estimate of the costs. This is a reduction of the 2008 allocation due to the fact that there is a reduced provision for legal fees in 2009, given the intention of the tribunal to conclude its work as early as possible in 2009. In a recent commitment to me, the sole member of the tribunal stated that he made need to convene a sitting to take a limited amount of further evidence, and that he would keep me informed of the likely developments and the likely impact on the timetable.

Deputy Enda Kenny: There has been a cut of 14% in the Taoiseach's Department. What is the Taoiseach's view on the future of the National Forum on Europe, the allocation of which has been cut by 42%? Is it in suspension, or does the Taoiseach see it having a role to play in the future programme for the next Lisbon referendum? Does the Taoiseach envisage a change in the role and status of the forum?

In respect of the Moriarty tribunal, Mr. Justice Moriarty can only write the report based on what he has heard. Does the Taoiseach have information as to the provision for lawyers to

write up other sections of the report? Is that work continuing, pending the possibility of further public hearings?

What is the organisational review programme for which €686,000 has been provided this year, and what is that programme supposed to do?

The Taoiseach: I refer to the first question regarding the forum. It will meet in working group session. I understand it has decided to meet in a working group session rather than in plenary session as it is more effective.

Obviously, an allocation has been made to it this year, within which one hopes it must operate. Second, in respect of the Moriarty issue, that matter is being dealt with by Mr. Justice Moriarty himself. As I have indicated, he has organised this to minimise the number of public hearings to avoid unnecessary costs, as he saw it, to the public. Obviously, however, he has indicated that he may need to deal with that issue again and we must wait and see whether that is the case.

The allocation for the organisational review programme, subhead a9, is a sum of €686,000. As the Deputy noted, it is being provided to cover the costs associated with that programme, including salaries, publication of reports and consultancy. The funding allocation in respect of consultancy has been halved, following the Government's decision in July 2008, to €46,000. This programme is about trying to ascertain how the Government can reorganise programmes in various Departments in a more cost-effective manner. It constitutes a strategic overview by the Department of the Taoiseach to try to drive efficiency and effectiveness in the delivery of programmes.

Deputy Enda Kenny: A good public servant with some experience would do that on his or her own. As the Taoiseach is aware, such expertise exists within the public service.

Last year, the Comptroller and Auditor General issued a damning report on the Government's strategy for what it calls e-Government. He described the target of having all public services capable of being delivered on-line by 2006 as being clearly unrealistic and the roll-out as being average. Despite the existence of a Government subcommittee on e-Government, no strategy has been in place since 2006 and Ireland's position has fallen from first in 2001 to seventeenth in 2007. While a total of €420 million was spent, which was 20% over budget, it yielded only half the on-line services that were set out. Of the 141 flagship projects to provide Government services, 23 were abandoned and a further 44 were only partially implemented by mid-2006. Moreover, only half the projects were fully operational six months after the deadline had passed. When will the Government produce an updated and credible strategy for the delivery of e-Government and when will such a strategy be published?

Second, this is an area in which the Government set out to increase competitiveness. Does the Taoiseach accept that the failure in his Department in this respect goes to the heart of what has been debated in this House, namely, the lack of capacity to be competitive on the part of the Government? My understanding is that the e-Government programme was approved by the Department of the Taoiseach and was run by an assistant secretary from that Department. Given the litany of failures outlined by the Comptroller and Auditor General, was a bonus paid to that section of the Department for this work? The last report of the committee for performance awards relates to 2006, at which time all 205 people who were eligible for bonuses received them. As the person who is doing it his way and is driving this on, is the Taoiseach satisfied with the findings of this report on delivery? Is the Taoiseach satisfied that Ireland has slipped from first position to seventeenth? Is he satisfied with the comments made by the Comptroller and Auditor General? When does he propose to have someone take charge of

[Deputy Enda Kenny.]

this issue, publish an updated credible strategy for e-Government and deliver it in the interest of efficiency, to which he referred in respect of the previous question?

The Taoiseach: As I pointed out, part of the decrease in my Department's Vote pertains to the transfer of the Information Society and e-inclusion functions from its Vote to those of the Departments of Communications, Energy and Natural Resources and Finance. The Government considers that the funding would be better expended on the workload in which people in those Departments are involved in this regard. Obviously, the Government will continue to seek to implement this policy to the best of its ability. The transfer has been about ensuring that activities that are under way in other Departments are joined up with that specific project.

Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin: I note that the pay and pensions Estimate for 2009 published for the Department of the Taoiseach in tandem with the budget shows a 9% decrease over the 2008 forecasted outturn. Can the Taoiseach explain to the House how this figure is arrived at? What are the specific reductions, cost savings, etc., that give rise to a 9% decrease in respect of pay and pensions? Does it include address of the extent of the non-Civil Service advisers within the Department of the Taoiseach? Has the Taoiseach carried out a review of their relevance or an assessment of the availability of at least equal advisory capacity within the Civil Service itself?

I note the Moriarty tribunal has been mentioned by other Members. Certainly, the provision of €7.5 million in 2009 for a tribunal of inquiry that already has presented its so-called final report after 11 years of sitting, which is even longer than the last Taoiseach sat in office, is hardly credible. This has contributed greatly to the undermining of public confidence in the entire tribunal of inquiry process. I refer to the amount of time, the years involved and the overall cost. Surely it is time to bring this matter to finality.

Can the Taoiseach indicate whether it is intended to retain the steward's house at Farmleigh, which has been refurbished at a cost of €600,000? At the time, Members were told by the former Taoiseach that it was intended to be a Taoiseach's residence. Is the Taoiseach considering taking up occupancy of the property at any time? I understand that since 2006, this facility has only been used for overnight purposes 11 times. To what other uses does the Taoiseach intend to see this property put, if it is not to be a city residence for the Taoiseach while in Dublin on business?

The Taoiseach: Specific questions on pensions issues and similar matters should be tabled as I do not have such information to hand. As for the Mahon tribunal, the question of bringing such tribunals to a conclusion is a matter that has been dealt with by the various responsible Ministers by interacting with the tribunals themselves. As the public hearings now are over, one would expect the commensurate costs to reduce greatly and they are being reduced. This is being done in an effort to finalise the drafting of the reports by those who were appointed by this House to draw up the reports, that is, the judges themselves, and to enable this to happen as soon as possible. Given the lengthy hearings that have taken place over many years, it will be a matter for them to pull together and collate the relevant evidence and to provide their findings in due course.

As for the question on Farmleigh, I have used it from time to time.

Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin: I referred to the steward's house at Farmleigh, as it was formerly known.

The Taoiseach: Yes, I have used the steward's house from time to time, as I have required it. While I have not used it regularly, I have used more frequently in the new year than was the case previously.

Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin: The Taoiseach has indicated that he will use the facility, which is fair enough. However, given 11 nights' occupancy over the period of almost three years since 2006, good value for money does not appear to have been achieved heretofore.

The Taoiseach: The Deputy will not mind if I go home every now and again.

Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin: Perhaps, as a country-based Deputy like me, the Taoiseach might have more need and use of the facility during his term in office.

In respect of the 9% reduction in the pay and pensions Estimate, I appended a further question. I can understand if the Taoiseach does not have the information to hand immediately. However, can he respond to the query on the non-Civil Service advisers that I appended to the initial question? Has a review being carried out regarding their relevance or the need to continue to have whatever is the number of such non-Civil Service advisers within the Taoiseach's Department? Has he made an assessment of the equal quality of advice available to him from within the Civil Service, within his Department? Has he taken any such steps to examine the savings that might result from such an exercise?

The Taoiseach: Given my overriding responsibilities as Taoiseach, the number of staff I have are required to help me do the job given the range of responsibilities that it entails. They are appointed for that purpose and serve me for that purpose.

An Ceann Comhairle: Sin deireadh le ceisteanna chun an Taoisigh. That is the end of questions to the Taoiseach for today.

Requests to move Adjournment of Dáil under Standing Order 32.

An Ceann Comhairle: Anois, iarratas chun tairisceana a dhéanamh an Dáil a chur ar athló faoi Bhuan Ordú 32, request to move the Adjournment of the Dáil under Standing Order 32.

Deputy James Bannon: I seek the Adjournment of the Dáil under Standing Order 32 to raise a matter of national importance, namely the threat to the economy posed by the projected loss of 55,000 jobs in the construction sector, as outlined by the Construction Industry Federation, unless urgent action such as the reintroduction of home improvement grants, home insulation grants and school building projects is taken by the Government.

An Ceann Comhairle: Tar éis breithnithe a dhéanamh ar an ní atáardaithe, níl sé in ord faoi Bhuan Ordú 32. Having considered the matter raised, it is not in order under Standing Order 32.

Order of Business.

The Taoiseach: It is proposed to take No. a15, statements on Delivering Sustainable Economic Renewal and Securing Our Public Finances; and No. 9, motion re proposed approval by Dáil Éireann of the Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse Act 2000 (Section 5) (Specified Period) Order 2009, to be taken at 6.40 p.m. tonight and the order shall not resume thereafter.

It is proposed, notwithstanding anything in Standing Orders, that (1) the proceedings on No. a15 shall, if not previously concluded, be brought to a conclusion at 3.30 p.m. tomorrow and the following arrangements shall apply: the statements of the Taoiseach and of the main spokespersons for the Fine Gael Party, the Labour Party and Sinn Féin, who shall be called upon in

[The Taoiseach.]

that order, shall not exceed 20 minutes in each case; the statement of each other Member called upon shall not exceed ten minutes in each case; Members may share time; and the Minister for Finance shall be called upon to make a statement in reply which shall not exceed 20 minutes; (2) the proceedings on No. 9 shall, if not previously concluded, be brought to a conclusion after 20 minutes tonight and the following arrangements shall apply: the speeches shall be confined to a Minister or Minister of State and to the main spokespersons for the Fine Gael Party and the Labour Party, who shall be called upon in that order, who may share their time, and which shall not exceed five minutes in each case; and a Minister or Minister of State shall be called upon to make a speech in reply which shall not exceed five minutes; and (3) Private Members' business, which shall be No. 48, motion re Child Protection (resumed), shall be taken at 7 p.m. tonight or on the conclusion of No. 9, whichever is the later, and brought to a conclusion after 90 minutes.

An Ceann Comhairle: There are three proposals to be put to the House. Is the proposal for dealing with No. 15, statements on Delivering Sustainable Economic Renewal and Securing Our Public Finances, agreed to?

Deputy Enda Kenny: No, it is not agreed to.

The House discussed previously the fact that when the Dáil should meet we should have a discussion on the economic crisis facing the country, and that should not be just a series of bland statements.

It is even worse. Week after week there is evidence of discussions taking place with the social partnership, which is fine. However, this House, to which people are elected from all over the country to represent all of the people of the island, has been left in the dark completely and we do not know the figures available to Government about the extent of this crisis, how bad it is or how the clock is moving towards the end game.

This is a farce of a debate. The Taoiseach expects Members in the Dáil to speak completely in the dark in respect of the information he has and that he is discussing with the social partners.

I wrote to the Taoiseach yesterday looking for the details of the issues he is discussing with social partnership so the spokespersons on finance at least could have some direction on the trend of this so-called debate here today. The Taoiseach wrote back to me stating the Framework for Economic Renewal was published in December last by the Government. I recall that being done with great pomp and ceremony, and it was rubbished completely by the media afterwards. He stated that he met with the social partners, that he sought their views, reactions and comments, and he is entitled to do that. He added that earlier this month he met the social partners and he briefed them on the extent of the implications of the end-year Exchequer returns, and he is entitled to do that. He stated: "The proposals for a framework agreement which are being discussed with the Social Partners are based on these parameters." They are based on the parameters of what was published in December last. He continued: "In accordance with long-established precedent, it would not be appropriate to put into the public domain specific texts which are subject of current discussion." The Taoiseach went on to state:

However, [this is an insult to everybody in the House] the framework within which they have been developed are in the public domain and are the subject matter of our statements today.

I disagree entirely. The statements today are not about the launch by the Taoiseach in December last. They are about the fact the Government has waited, waited and waited and has made no decisions.

This House should have been back in session on 7 January. The discussions with the social partners should have been concluded. We should have evidence of the Taoiseach's decisions. We should have evidence of his strategy and his plan.

The Taoiseach sent this reply to me. Not only did he not see it himself, when he talks about other people's scripts, but it is even rubber-stamped by somebody over in the Office of the Taoiseach, which speaks for itself.

The Taoiseach: I did see it.

Deputy Enda Kenny: Maybe he did see it. I take that back if he did see it.

A Deputy: He rubber-stamped it.

Deputy Enda Kenny: The Taoiseach has a rubber stamp over there. The Brian Cowen I knew years ago would write the signature with a pen anyway, the very least that he could do.

The Taoiseach: Lend me your one.

Deputy Enda Kenny: The fact is the Taoiseach is stating in this letter that he does not want the Members of this House to know what Government is discussing with the social partnership. I reject that.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: Hear, hear.

Deputy Enda Kenny: I would like to think that we would have a motion tabled here that would provide an opportunity for the Minister for Finance, for two and a half hours at the end of this series of statements, to answer questions about the impending and current economic crisis, which affects everybody and which everybody wants to play their part in getting out of. How in hell can we get out of it if we do not know the scale of just what it is we face into? The Taoiseach has that evidence but he will not tell us and he expects us to speak over the next two days on a debate that is meaningless when we do not have the fiscal and economic parameters of what it is that we face. Therefore, I reject the proposal before us.

Deputy Eamon Gilmore: What we are about to undertake, or what the Taoiseach proposes we undertake, today and tomorrow is one of the greatest abuses of the Dáil we have seen in recent times. However, it is not just an abuse of the Dáil and not just an insult to the Members of the House who have been elected. It is also, I believe, an even bigger insult to the public.

For the past six or seven weeks we have been treated to daily speculation about what the Government is or is not deciding, or going to do about the economy and about the public finances. People all over this country are wondering will there be a cut in pay, will there be increased pension contributions, will there be increases in tax, will there be a property tax, will there be cuts in services, will there be something done to provide credit for business, and what will happen with people who are losing their jobs and what kind of services will be provided for them. All of this is what people are concerned about.

On what the Taoiseach is proposing, we are back in the Dáil after a recess, which certainly the Opposition did not want but which the Government claimed it needed in order to reflect on all of these matters. All of these meetings of the Cabinet took place. One sees Ministers

[Deputy Eamon Gilmore.]

who are normally mad keen to get their faces in front of a camera going into Cabinet meetings with their car windows firmly closed——

Deputy Pádraic McCormack: And their hoods up.

Deputy Eamon Gilmore: ——and nobody prepared to say anything to anybody or utter anything in front of a microphone.

Great discussion, great consideration, great deliberation is being done by Government about the financial affairs of the State and now that we come to this point where we will debate it in the Dáil there are no proposals from the Governments, no announcement of what decisions have been made, and no background information provided as to the options that have been considered by the Government or on the information on the public finances. We are told that there is some kind of a framework document that has been presented for discussion with the social partners which does not contain any specifics, but even that document has not been released and made available to us——

Deputy Pádraic McCormack: A blank sheet.

Deputy Eamon Gilmore: ——and we are going to have a series of statements. The series of statements will be a joke and a waste of energy and time. We are talking in a vacuum. We on this side of the House, who were elected to represent the people, cannot meaningfully——

Deputy John Cregan: So were we.

Deputy Eamon Gilmore: ——engage in this kind of discussion in the absence of information that the Government has or in the absence of knowledge of what decisions the Government has made without telling us or is about to make. We will all need to reply to the Taoiseach's opening statement today. No doubt it will be wordy and we will all say what must be said generally about the economy.

Deputy Pádraic McCormack: The Taoiseach will not be saying much.

Deputy Eamon Gilmore: Tomorrow, the Minister for Finance will also make a 20 minute speech, but he will not take questions and no opportunity will be given to finance spokespersons to reply. Presumably, when the decisions are announced after the debate and the discussion with the social partners, we will be told that everything has already been discussed.

Deputy Seán Barrett: We could all go down to Liberty Hall and find out more.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Gilmore has made his point.

Deputy Seán Barrett: We could learn more at Liberty Hall.

Deputy Eamon Gilmore: This is a nonsensical proposal with which the Labour Party does not agree. While we want a meaningful debate on the serious state of the economy, it must start with the Government making available to the House information on what decisions it is considering and has made, what is being discussed with the social partners and what are the real details of the situation.

Deputies: Hear, hear.

Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin: I made all of my arguments yesterday. It is essential that, if we are to have the opportunity to participate from an informed basis, the information to which

the Taoiseach, the Minister for Finance and others have access be shared. I am referring to relevant information. If people outside the House who are engaged with the Government in respect of the social partnership talks have access to the detail that clearly swirls around that engagement, why can Deputies not be informed so that they can properly prepare and participate in what should be a real debate?

The debate must address more than a mere bookkeeping exercise or attempts to find €2 billion in cuts. It must address job creation initiatives, about which we see and hear even less from the Government, and its commitment to seize the moment to redress infrastructural deficits and to create employment. These are the necessary steps. Contrary to some media commentators' suggestions that these are medium to long-term solutions, it is not the case. They can have a direct and immediate impact, not only in terms of improved job opportunities and the return to the Exchequer consequently created, but also in addressing the deep inner depression being felt by people across the State. This is the real situation. People are looking for hope and leadership, but it is not being given. All that they see are utterances and media reportage of further doom, gloom, cuts and deep slashes in their income expectations. This situation cannot continue. The Government is driving the country into a deep depression——

12 o'clock

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy is making a Second Stage speech.

Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin: ——collectively and individually. There is ample evidence of this.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy will have a chance to make his speech later.

Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin: We must address this problem in the round, but the Government is not doing so. The Government will certainly not do it today or tomorrow. To all intents and purposes, it is offering a very imperfect opportunity to comment on what we see in media reportage and on our analysis of what the Government tells us. It is not telling us the whole truth.

The Taoiseach: I refute Deputy Ó Caoláin's statements in that regard. The purpose of the debate is to——

Deputy Ruairí Quinn: It is not a debate.

The Taoiseach: ——allow for the delivery of sustainable economic renewal and the securing of our public finances. Statements can be made by any Member of this House on those issues. When the Framework for Delivering Sustainable Economic Renewal was launched by the Government, the complaint in this House was that we would not debate it. I said we would have that debate at the first available opportunity. We can have that debate in the House today.

Deputy Ruairí Quinn: What about last December?

The Taoiseach: Of course, it is the tactic of people in opposition to rubbish every initiative that is made.

Deputy Enda Kenny: It is not.

The Taoiseach: It was not rubbished——

Deputy Fergus O'Dowd: It could be a more popular initiative.

(Interruptions).

An Ceann Comhairle: Members should listen to the Taoiseach in silence.

The Taoiseach: One listens in silence and then hears the cackle of the hens.

Deputy Enda Kenny: When the Minister beside the Taoiseach rang me at 7 a.m., I said we would support the guarantee scheme. We do not rubbish everything.

An Ceann Comhairle: Allow the Taoiseach to make his point.

The Taoiseach: I am trying to make a serious point. The point I am making is——

Deputy Enda Kenny: So am I.

The Taoiseach: Deputy Kenny has made his point and I am now entitled to make my point without interruption. That is the way that the good order of the House works.

Deputy Enda Kenny: The Taoiseach stated that we rubbish everything he says.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Taoiseach must be allowed to respond.

The Taoiseach: That is the problem with Opposition Members.

Deputy Fergus O'Dowd: The Taoiseach is the problem.

The Taoiseach: They expect courtesy to be extended to them, but they give none.

Deputy Enda Kenny: Your predecessor would always take constructive criticism from Opposition Members.

The Taoiseach: I am just telling you about how you are behaving towards me. Not to worry.

Deputy Enda Kenny: You are doing it your way. I know.

An Ceann Comhairle: We will address some comments through the Chair and we will proceed. The Taoiseach without interruption.

The Taoiseach: The important point to make is that there is an opportunity for the House to give its views on all of these issues in terms of economic policy in the country and on how we can secure our public finances.

Deputy Richard Bruton: There will be no framework in which we could do that.

The Taoiseach: That is the purpose of the debate. Regarding future decisions to be made by the Government and to be brought to the House and debated, that option is available to us and, I am sure, will be availed of in the coming weeks and months as well. It is a question of the House giving an opportunity to all Members to set out what they believe to be the issues and the means by which we can sustain economic renewal and secure our public finances. This issue is of concern to the people.

Question put: "That the proposal for dealing with No. *a*15 be agreed to."

The Dáil divided: Tá, 77; Níl, 69.

Tá

Ahern, Dermot.
 Ahern, Michael.
 Ahern, Noel.
 Andrews, Barry.
 Andrews, Chris.
 Ardagh, Seán.
 Aylward, Bobby.
 Behan, Joe.
 Blaney, Niall.
 Brady, Áine.
 Brady, Cyprian.
 Brady, Johnny.
 Browne, John.
 Byrne, Thomas.
 Calleary, Dara.
 Carey, Pat.
 Collins, Niall.
 Conlon, Margaret.
 Connick, Seán.
 Coughlan, Mary.
 Cowen, Brian.
 Cregan, John.
 Cuffe, Ciarán.
 Cullen, Martin.
 Curran, John.
 Dempsey, Noel.
 Devins, Jimmy.
 Dooley, Timmy.
 Fitzpatrick, Michael.
 Fleming, Seán.
 Flynn, Beverley.
 Gallagher, Pat The Cope.
 Gogarty, Paul.
 Gormley, John.
 Grealish, Noel.
 Harney, Mary.
 Haughey, Seán.
 Healy-Rae, Jackie.
 Hoctor, Máire.

Kelleher, Billy.
 Kelly, Peter.
 Kenneally, Brendan.
 Kennedy, Michael.
 Kirk, Seamus.
 Kitt, Michael P.
 Kitt, Tom.
 Lenihan, Brian.
 Lenihan, Conor.
 Mansergh, Martin.
 McDaid, James.
 McEllistrim, Thomas.
 McGrath, Mattie.
 McGrath, Michael.
 McGuinness, John.
 Moloney, John.
 Mulcahy, Michael.
 Nolan, M.J.
 Ó Cuív, Éamon.
 Ó Fearghail, Seán.
 O'Brien, Darragh.
 O'Connor, Charlie.
 O'Dea, Willie.
 O'Flynn, Noel.
 O'Hanlon, Rory.
 O'Keefe, Batt.
 O'Keefe, Edward.
 O'Rourke, Mary.
 O'Sullivan, Christy.
 Roche, Dick.
 Ryan, Eamon.
 Sargent, Trevor.
 Scanlon, Eamon.
 Smith, Brendan.
 Treacy, Noel.
 Wallace, Mary.
 White, Mary Alexandra.
 Woods, Michael.

Níl

Allen, Bernard.
 Bannon, James.
 Barrett, Seán.
 Breen, Pat.
 Broughan, Thomas P.
 Bruton, Richard.
 Burke, Ulick.
 Burton, Joan.
 Byrne, Catherine.
 Carey, Joe.
 Clune, Deirdre.
 Connaughton, Paul.
 Coonan, Noel J.
 Costello, Joe.
 Coveney, Simon.
 Crawford, Seymour.
 Creighton, Lucinda.
 Deasy, John.
 Deenihan, Jimmy.
 Doyle, Andrew.
 Durkan, Bernard J.
 English, Damien.
 Enright, Olwyn.

Ferris, Martin.
 Flanagan, Charles.
 Flanagan, Terence.
 Gilmore, Eamon.
 Hayes, Brian.
 Higgins, Michael D.
 Hogan, Phil.
 Howlin, Brendan.
 Kehoe, Paul.
 Kenny, Enda.
 Lynch, Ciarán.
 Lynch, Kathleen.
 McCormack, Pádraic.
 McEntee, Shane.
 McGinley, Dinny.
 McGrath, Finian.
 McHugh, Joe.
 McManus, Liz.
 Mitchell, Olivia.
 Morgan, Arthur.
 Naughten, Denis.
 Noonan, Michael.
 Ó Caoláin, Caoimhghín.

Níl—*continued*

Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.
 O'Donnell, Kieran.
 O'Dowd, Fergus.
 O'Keeffe, Jim.
 O'Mahony, John.
 O'Shea, Brian.
 O'Sullivan, Jan.
 Penrose, Willie.
 Perry, John.
 Quinn, Ruairí.
 Rabbitte, Pat.
 Reilly, James.

Ring, Michael.
 Sheahan, Tom.
 Sheehan, P.J.
 Sherlock, Seán.
 Shortall, Róisín.
 Stagg, Emmet.
 Stanton, David.
 Timmins, Billy.
 Tuffy, Joanna.
 Upton, Mary.
 Varadkar, Leo.

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Pat Carey and John Cregan; Níl, Deputies Paul Kehoe and Emmet Stagg.

Question declared carried.

An Ceann Comhairle: Is the proposal for dealing with No. 9 agreed to?

Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin: The time allocated for this is only 20 minutes. There is no time provision for the spokesperson for my party to participate. With respect, it is an important issue and is not just something to be glibly let go through. There is provision for the Government, Fine Gael and Labour in the 20 minutes allocated. Can we not have an acceptance of the right of participation? I am the Sinn Féin spokesperson for health and children and would like to have the opportunity to contribute. Will the Taoiseach and Chief Whip facilitate an extension of an additional five minutes so that we may all have an opportunity to contribute to this particular matter?

Deputy Finian McGrath: Hear, hear; it is undemocratic.

The Taoiseach: On this item, section 5 of the Commission to Inquire into Child abuse Act 2000 requires that the commission's report must be published within the specified period. That specified period is due to expire at midnight on 31 January next. The Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse Act 200 (Section 5) (Specified Period) Order 2009 will extend the specified period of the commission for a further four months to 31 May 2009. The extension is required to allow the commission to fulfil its statutory mandate to publish its report during the specified period. The commissioners are working hard to finalise their report. Mr. Justice Sean Ryan, chairperson of the commission, has recently indicated to the Department that it hopes to be in a position to forward the final version of its report to the printers by mid-February and that the commission's legal team will obviously be significantly reduced at that stage. Indications are that the report is a particularly voluminous document, the printing process is expected to take in the region of two months and arrangements will then have to be put in place for its release to the general public, as required by the Act.

A resolution approving the order must be passed by both Houses of the Oireachtas to enable that to happen.

Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin: The Taoiseach has not answered my question.

The Taoiseach: That is in accordance with Standing Orders.

An Ceann Comhairle: Is the proposal agreed? Agreed. Is the proposal for dealing with Private Members' business agreed to? Agreed.

Deputy Enda Kenny: Arising from comments I heard the Taoiseach make yesterday to the effect that it may be necessary to introduce increased tax provisions, does this mean he intends to bring in another budget?

The Taoiseach: I was making the point to the Deputy that in respect of the gap that has emerged in the public finances, they cannot simply be dealt with by way of expenditure cuts alone, and clearly during the course of this five-year adjustment period there will obviously need to be adjustments to the tax base as well. I cannot anticipate the outcome of the discussions ongoing at the moment, as to what our final position will be on these matters. I was making the general point, obviously, that taxes will be involved in trying to deal with this issue.

Deputy Enda Kenny: In respect of the five years the Taoiseach mentions, can I take it that the discussions he is having do not envisage another budget in 2009? Given the current state of the financial crisis, is he excluding further tax increases in 2009, while leaving the Government open to consider what it has to deal with for the remainder of the five-year period?

The Taoiseach: Obviously, it is not intended that a special budget will be required during the course of this particular year, but discussions are taking place at present to see how we may build consensus on the arrangements to be made in 2009 and the years following. We are indicating, first of all, that the immediate requirement relates to the €2 billion saving that has to be obtained, and discussions are ongoing in that regard. When the Government makes its full decision, it will come before the House, with its full complement of measures.

Deputy Eamon Gilmore: I asked the Taoiseach yesterday whether he could tell the House what the total was, between social welfare payments and secondary benefits——

An Ceann Comhairle: Leaders' Questions are over, Deputy Gilmore.

Deputy Ciarán Lynch: This arises from an undertaking which the Taoiseach made here yesterday in response to my question, that he would provide the information to me. I have it here. He said, "I shall have to get more details before I can respond fully to Deputy Gilmore". He then gave me an estimate for what 100,000 people unemployed would mean, in terms of social welfare payments. I want to ask the Taoiseach whether the information is available yet, and when it will be provided to us.

The Taoiseach: The information is not available yet, but I shall get it for the Deputy as soon as possible.

Deputy Ciarán Lynch: Yesterday, when we were debating the Residential Tenancies (Amendment) Bill 2009, I found out later in the evening that the Bill had been withdrawn in the Seanad. Will the Taoiseach say why the Bill was withdrawn in the Seanad last evening, when——

An Ceann Comhairle: He cannot, actually, because that is a matter for the Seanad.

Deputy Ciarán Lynch: When the Bill was concluding last evening——

An Ceann Comhairle: It is a long-standing precedent.

Deputy Ciarán Lynch: Will the Ceann Comhairle please give me some leeway? When the Bill was concluding last night, I pointed out a number of legal difficulties, which might indicate that it could give rise to further anomalies so that we might have to enact further legislation in this House. If the Bill is being amended, that means it is coming back to this House, and that

[Deputy Ciarán Lynch.]

is relevant to the Order of Business. Where stands the Bill at present, relative to the Seanad? Has it been amended? If it has not, given that it was withdrawn, it was obviously examined. Was that examination done based on advice from the Attorney General's office, or is the case that the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government has deemed the Bill should not now proceed?

The Taoiseach: It is not anticipated that the Bill shall be required to come back to the Dáil, as I understand it. It is being taken in the Seanad, as we speak. A clarification matter arose, as a result of a contribution here in the Dáil that was checked last night, and this has enabled the Seanad to take the Bill this morning.

Deputy Michael D. Higgins: Deputies on all sides attended a meeting just before Christmas at which undertakings were given on the Employment Law Compliance Bill, and I note that it seems to have slipped off all of the lists. In fact it is not referred to at all in the Government's legislative programme. When will Second Stage of that Bill be taken?

The Taoiseach: I understand that it is published, and that we are awaiting Second Stage.

Deputy Michael D. Higgins: When will Second Stage take place?

The Taoiseach: That will be a matter for the Whips.

Deputy Michael D. Higgins: It is not on any list. In fact, it has been dropped from the legislative programme. It is neither on the pink list nor is it on later lists. No provision has been made for it, and as regards the talks that are taking place between social partners, given the number of parties that presented before Christmas——

An Ceann Comhairle: I cannot have that, now.

Deputy Michael D. Higgins: It is a very straightforward question. What has happened the promised legislation that was due for Second Stage, known as the Employment Law Compliance Bill? Why was it taken off the Government's programme and all lists?

The Taoiseach: For the purpose of clarification from our viewpoint, as the Deputy knows, once the Bill is published it comes off the list and is put on the Order Paper. Section D of the legislative programme, as I understand it, outlines those Bills that are on the Order Paper as a result of publication——

Deputy Michael D. Higgins: Yes, that is correct.

The Taoiseach: ——which includes that one. The present situation, as regards the status of the Bill, is that it will be a matter for the Whips to decide when the Bill's Second Stage will be taken in the House.

Deputy Denis Naughten: I want to ask the Taoiseach about an item of legislation that has evaporated as well. It is the education (Ireland) Bill which was on the C list of the promised legislation before Christmas and has now disappeared from that. In light of the fact that this is an industry which needs to be regulated and could actually provide a financial benefit to the economy, why has it been removed and are there any plans to reintroduce it?

The Taoiseach: I understand the Bill has been dropped pending a way being found to deal with the issue that may avoid the necessity of taking that particular legislative route.

Deputy Emmet Stagg: In the matter of Dáil reform, which was raised by my colleague, Deputy Stanton, yesterday, I want to again thank the Ceann Comhairle for his guidance in steering all parties towards agreement on a package on Dáil reform in the middle of last year, albeit modest but important, which was referred then to the Government for decision. We are waiting for the Government on that package on Dáil reform, which has been agreed by all parties for a very long time. I realise that other matters might have been given greater priority in the course of the last six months, but it is very important that we attend to that. I thank the Ceann Comhairle for his assistance and guidance in that matter, which assisted all the parties to get agreement on that packet of Dáil reform.

Deputy Paul Kehoe: Could the Taoiseach give a timescale we can work from, without saying it will happen in the next number of months? Will it be in February or March? I am Whip of my party for almost five years and this has been put off repeatedly by consecutive Taoisigh and Government Whips. If the Taoiseach is interested in the Dáil, can we see some action from that side of the House?

The Taoiseach: I note the proposals to which Deputy Stagg referred. The Government intends to bring forward a comprehensive set of proposals which will address the need for Dáil reform. A working group for that purpose has been set up, so it will not just address the issue in a piecemeal way on the day-to-day operations of the Dáil, which can be addressed by adherence to Standing Orders of the Dáil. The Government intends to bring forward its proposals in light of—

Deputy Emmet Stagg: That is a most disappointing reply because I have received the same reply for 20 years from the Government side.

Deputy Richard Bruton: Back into the file again.

Deputy Enda Kenny: It will be another three months.

Deputy Joe Costello: In the context of Deputy Higgins's question on the employment law compliance Bill, I remind the Taoiseach that this time last year the Government took its eye off the ball regarding the Lisbon treaty and that there is a package of proposals related to legislative development that must take place before there is any further vote, if that is the way the Government is going. Has the Taoiseach included the legislation regarding the temporary agency workers Bill and will the services directive legislation, which has to be implemented, be transposed into domestic legislation by the end of this year? These should be front-loaded into the legislative programme well before the summer if we are to deal properly with the area of worker's rights and provision of that nature that will be required.

The Taoiseach: The legislation to which Deputy Costello refers is being worked on and there has been much consultation with the social partners in an effort to find agreement on these matters, which has not been easy to achieve. We will continue to work on that and detailed questions to the Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment, Deputy Coughlan, during Question Time would enable more debate and amplify the matter more thoroughly.

Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin: The legislation I wish to raise was first signalled in the Government's health strategy in 2001 when it was stated new legislation to provide for clear, statutory provisions of entitlement would be brought forward by Government. The signalled target date was over six years ago, 2002. I speak of the eligibility for health and personal social services Bill, which has been promised year in and year out. This time last year it was indicated that it would be published in 2009. In autumn the Government's list said it was not possible to

[Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin.]

indicate when it would happen and that has been replicated this week with the most recent publication of promised or proposed legislation. Can the Taoiseach explain why this essential legislation has not been progressed some eight years after it was first signalled? Are we being strung out by Government promises on this? Has the Government abandoned its intent to bring forward this legislation, embarrassed by the fact that it is neither in a position nor willing to see the equitable delivery of health care and personal social services across this State? That is the only conclusion anybody can reach from the Government's failure to bring forward the required legislation.

The Taoiseach: There is no date for bringing forward that legislation. I know what the Deputy has had to say about it. A number of legislative priorities have been outlined in the legislation programme for this session. In many cases when work begins on a Bill other priorities come into play regarding trying to deal with issues that arise according as problems arise. A parliamentary question to the Minister for Health and Children would be the best way of getting further details on the possible timescale for such a Bill.

Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin: With respect, legislation is the Taoiseach's responsibility. I do not intend to put parliamentary questions to the Minister for Health and Children on promised legislation.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Taoiseach has answered the question.

Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin: This is the opportunity on the Order of Business and I would expect the Taoiseach to be in a position to give a more informed reply on legislation that deserves priority and is long overdue.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy cannot comment on that. He has made his point.

Deputy Joan Burton: I want to ask about two matters. In the budget there was a proposal to merge a number of quangos and State agencies. That gave rise to the need for 15 separate pieces of amending legislation. Regarding one proposed merger between the Competition Authority and the National Consumer Agency, this morning I saw that the chief executive of the NCA was amazed to find that prices in the North were 60% higher than those in the South, and that—

An Ceann Comhairle: We are not discussing prices in the North.

Deputy Joan Burton: The Minister announced she might bring in legislation.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Burton should ask about that.

Deputy Joan Burton: She is quoted in *The Irish Times* as bringing in legislation to deal with the matter.

Deputy Mary Coughlan: This is the first time I have heard Deputy Burton speak about this.

Deputy Joan Burton: When will we get the merger of these bodies? Has there been any progress on the 15 pieces of legislation for these two bodies or the other quangos? Is there any progress? We are nearly at the end of the first financial month of the year.

The Taoiseach: These are policy decisions that have been taken and which Ministers in their Departments must progress. The question of how quickly they will happen depends on the

specific issues that arise for the mergers in each Department. These matters are being dealt with by Ministers as we speak.

Deputy Joan Burton: My second related point is that under the reformed budgetary procedures we were promised that we would get Estimates volumes on time and at a reasonable time to allow for examination. The budget was brought forward so there is no reason why the Estimates volumes should not be available now. When will we receive them?

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy will have to raise that in another way.

Deputy Joan Burton: That is a reasonable question.

An Ceann Comhairle: It is a reasonable and very good question if the Deputy will put it down.

Deputy Joan Burton: Thank you. May I have an answer to it? I am entitled.

An Ceann Comhairle: You may when you put it down. It is not in order now. The Deputy will have to raise it another way. I cannot wander all over the countryside on the Order of Business.

Deputy Joan Burton: The Government cannot do it. It is blatantly obvious to the whole country that it cannot.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Burton should put down a question.

Deputy Pat Rabbitte: In early December I asked the Taoiseach about the defamation Bill and why it has been pushed into a lay-by since the former Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform decided to rise to a more exciting challenge. The Taoiseach very kindly wrote to me to say the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform, Deputy Dermot Ahern, would be in touch with me about it. The Minister has been very busy representing all his constituents without discrimination, or as some would say, without discernment, and has not written to me yet. Would the Taoiseach ask the Minister to drop me a note about the defamation Bill because there is a difficulty in the Ombudsman's office unless it is underpinned by legislation?

The Taoiseach: Yes, I will ask the Minister and we will see what the story is.

Deputy Joan Burton: The Taoiseach will write more letters.

Deputy Michael D. Higgins: He will make representations.

Deputy Seán Barrett: The Oireachtas Joint Committee on Climate Change and Energy Security produced new legislation, the Offshore Renewable Energy Development Bill, which puts in place new structures for the development of offshore energy. While we are told there is €16 billion in investment waiting to be made in this country and jobs could be created we have not heard what will happen to this legislation. It appears on no list. This is an all-party committee of both Houses of the Oireachtas including parties and Independents. We went to the trouble of putting in place modern legislation to deal with offshore development. Surely the Government can take on board this important legislation which can be passed here in the space of a week so development can take place in offshore wind and wave energy. The Ceann Comhairle may have read in *The Irish Times* that €100 million is being invested by the European Union in a super grid.

An Ceann Comhairle: We cannot discuss this morning's *The Irish Times*.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: Go on. Be a sport.

Deputy Seán Barrett: That is the connector between Great Britain and Ireland. This is an essential part of this overall development. Where did this legislation disappear to? We sent it to the Minister for Communication, Energy and Natural Resources, which is the proper place for it to be dealt with. The Taoiseach is Chairman of the climate change and energy security Cabinet sub-committee. Maybe the Taoiseach will take the trouble to find out exactly where it is, unless we are all wasting our time in trying to be productive, positive and create jobs. Will the Taoiseach please find out where it is and ask that it be put through the system so that we can get on with creating employment?

The Taoiseach: I will ask the Minister to contact the Deputy in his capacity as chairman of the committee as to the status of the legislation in the Department and what progress can be made.

Deputy Seán Barrett: Can the Taoiseach not get it on the list?

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: Yesterday, I tabled several questions seeking specific information on schools. The replies were 90% accurate but some of the information sought was not provided. Will the Minister for Education and Science, who is generally reasonable, attend to that matter?

The Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform has 26 Bills on the legislative programme. The crime situation here is without precedent and is achieving international notoriety. Judges of the High Court say that the law is inadequate to deal with particular cases because it does not allow them to hand down the proper sentences.

An Ceann Comhairle: To what legislation does the Deputy refer?

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: Which of the 26 Bills does the Government propose to bring before the House to address these serious issues? It is now regarded as being as simple to order a hit——

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy must stop. If everybody did that we would be here for the night.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: It is as simple to order a hit as to order a cup of coffee. Are we serious about this business or not? The Ceann Comhairle knows about it as well as I do.

An Ceann Comhairle: Will the Taoiseach answer on the criminal justice legislation? I presume the list tells the story.

The Taoiseach: Which Bill is the Deputy asking about?

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: Which of the Bills proposed by the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform is likely to address the most serious issues facing the country in the criminal justice area? Which Bills will cover organised crime and will update legislation?

An Ceann Comhairle: The Government has published the list.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: I do not want to go through the list of Bills.

The Taoiseach: The Minister is dealing with several Bills in this area. Deputies can put questions to Ministers to inquire in detail about any aspect of policy. With respect, the Order of Business is not the means to amplify that to any great extent. Under Standing Orders, I am

required on the Order of Business to indicate what stage legislation has reached, not to give detail of the legislation or the policy behind it.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: I did not ask about the detail of the legislation. I asked about its thrust.

The Taoiseach: If we are talking about using our time more——

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: I am using it effectively.

Deputy Billy Kelleher: The Deputy is abusing his time.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: I am using it effectively, which the Minister of State should do.

The Taoiseach: I respect the fact that everyone is entitled to ask whatever question he or she wants, but the parliamentary question procedure provides better clarification for Deputies on the detail they require than the Order of Business.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: That is a totally inadequate answer. The Taoiseach knows as well as I do that the people outside this House are calling for action on those issues.

Deputy P. J. Sheehan: When will the Minister for Health and Children introduce the Second Stage of the nursing home support scheme that incorporates the fair deal about which we heard so much over eight months ago?

The Taoiseach: It may be possible to resume Second Stage of that Bill next week. We are dealing with the economy this week. It will be subject to discussion with the Whips.

Deputy James Bannon: The National Monuments Bill is still pending. It is in part C of the list of proposed legislation.

Deputy Michael D. Higgins: We will never see that Bill.

Deputy James Bannon: There is a view among the public that this Government is not giving our heritage any priority following the recent 40% cut in the heritage sector.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy cannot go into that now. He cannot give a Second Stage speech.

Deputy James Bannon: Will the Taoiseach assure me that the National Monuments Bill will be taken this year?

The Taoiseach: It is hoped to take it this year. I cannot be any more specific than that.

Deputy Thomas P. Broughan: When will we debate the Deloitte report on buses? It is item No. 3 on the green paper, the non-statutory list. Also, will the Minister for Transport's proposal on congestion charges require legislation?

The Taoiseach: That may be secondary legislation. I will inform the Deputy later about that.

The Economy: Statements.

The Taoiseach: I welcome the opportunity at the beginning of the new Dáil session to address the current economic challenges facing this country and to outline the Government's strategy in response.

[The Taoiseach.]

We are facing the most difficult global economic conditions in 70 years. The most severe financial crisis since the Great Depression is taking its toll, for example, on the US economy, now in the middle of recession that began in December 2007 and which may prove to be the longest and most severe of the post-war period.

The International Monetary Fund is expected to make further significant downward revisions to its global forecasts, beyond those already made in November. Most of the world's advanced economies are in recession. Global output is expected to decline for the first time in recent memory. International trade is also declining sharply, with the World Bank expecting global export volumes to be down for the first time since 1982.

As a regional economy accounting for around 1.8% of Eurozone output, Ireland is particularly exposed to these developments. The combined value of our imports and exports is equivalent to approximately 150% of national output which is among the highest shares in developed world. Exports of goods and services represent approximately 80% of our national output, which is over double the EU average, and means our fortunes are inextricably linked with those of global and European markets.

The scale of the economic challenge which we in Ireland face is clear. It is evident in the distressing rise in the number of people becoming unemployed. It is evident in the downturn in economic activity and the associated sharp reduction in Exchequer revenue. It is clear from the crisis in the banking sector and the associated difficulties in securing access to credit on a consistent basis and at competitive rates. It is also evident from the global spread of the crisis, and the uncertainty about its likely depth and duration.

The economy contracted by close to 2% last year and this is likely to represent the beginning of an adjustment that will see a reduction of up to 10% in national income over the 2008 to 2010 period, a scale of decline that is without precedent here in Ireland and with few international parallels. The direct impact on the labour market is already evident and we are faced with the prospect of further job losses totalling over 100,000 between this year and next.

The challenge is severe but the Government has a clear strategy which we will continue to implement. This combines a clear medium-term approach to renew and revitalise the economy based on a deepening of competitiveness and specific short-term measures to address the immediate difficulties we face.

In assessing how well we are placed to confront the crisis, it is reasonable to consider how well the nature of the problem is understood, how clear is the strategy that is designed to respond to it, how credible are the measures to be taken and how likely are they to succeed.

In the first case, the various elements of the interactions which have brought us to the current stage are well known. The unexpectedly rapid collapse of activity in the construction sector in Ireland, the crisis in the international financial and banking system, the sharp appreciation in the value of the euro, especially against sterling, and the decline in demand in our export markets associated with the general downturn, have all impacted severely on the economy.

There is little point in looking back at how some of this might have been anticipated or avoided. The reality is that the current situation is unprecedented and calls for clear thinking and resolute action. A critical challenge to be faced is the rapid decline in tax revenue requiring an unsustainable level of borrowing to fund day-to-day expenditure. Tax revenues in 2008 were over €8 billion below expectations, reflecting the rapid downturn of transaction-based taxes in particular.

Last July, we took early, and successful, action to restrain the growth in public expenditure. As the situation deteriorated further, we brought forward the budget, containing some very

difficult expenditure and taxation adjustments to give a clear signal of our determination to respond to those pressures.

The outlook for the public finances in the period ahead is subject to more uncertainty than normal, and depends on the timing and extent of an international recovery, and how well-placed we are to participate in that upturn. However, our considered assessment is that in the absence of appropriate further measures, a general Government deficit of between 11% and 12% of GDP would be in prospect for each year up to 2013. This is not sustainable and urgent measures are now required to start the process of fiscal stabilisation.

Earlier this month, the Minister for Finance published a five year fiscal consolidation programme which sets out how we will progressively reduce the level of Exchequer borrowing over the next five years, in order to reduce the general Government deficit to below 3% by 2013. This will involve a combination of expenditure and taxation measures over the period. We have also indicated that a credible start in 2009 requires a further adjustment of €2 billion, and we are committed to making decisions to achieve that adjustment.

The €2 billion required now is only the first phase in the process. Further adjustments of the order of €15 billion will be required for the five year period as a whole. The Government has established two independent processes, namely, the Commission on Taxation and the special review group on public service expenditure, which will inform our decisions in 2010 and beyond.

The international financial crisis, alongside the fall in housing prices, has created enormous pressures on our domestic banking sector. We swiftly introduced a banking guarantee scheme to ensure the viability of our banking system. As experience in other countries has shown, the scale and complexity of the difficulties facing the banking system do not lend themselves to simple solutions. We have adopted a comprehensive approach and acted with care and prudence at all stages. We are determined to ensure that our main banks continue as strong, independent institutions, while our financial system as a whole can enjoy international confidence and provide adequate liquidity flows to business.

As part of our strategy for the banking sector, we are also acting to support mortgage holders who get into arrears on their mortgages. The Financial Regulator is developing a statutory code of practice on mortgage arrears and home repossessions, and funding under the mortgage interest scheme has been greatly expanded. Thankfully, at present the current level of home repossessions remains very low, and significantly lower than the UK, but we will be monitoring trends very closely and will take further measures if required.

There must be a new approach to doing business in the banking sector. The Government will support efforts at international level to establish regulatory mechanisms to ensure that this financial crisis crippling the world economy can never happen again. Even more importantly, the international financial community must work to a higher ethical standard. Poor standards of behaviour on the part of well paid executives must not be allowed to result in ordinary decent people losing their jobs and businesses struggling to stay afloat.

Another area of concern is the dramatic impact the downturn in our economy is having on increased unemployment. This represents one of the starkest and most immediately understood impacts on the lives of individuals, families and communities. Despite the budgetary constraints, the Government is maintaining proportionately the largest capital investment programme in Europe. We will prioritise, to the greatest extent possible, employment-intensive activities like school buildings and energy efficiency improvements. The Government is also working to improve significantly access for unemployed persons to job search, training and education, and employment programmes. Relevant Ministers and their Departments are working together to maximise opportunities for up-skilling and re-skilling, so that people will be better placed to

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avail of new job opportunities when they become available, including in new sectors such as energy efficiency.

Specific actions already taken include the following. We have identified scope for approximately 30,000 additional places in 2009, ensuring that unemployed people have access to all existing full-time further and higher education places. We have established a training fund to enable a speedy response to identify re-training needs for low skilled and redundant craft workers. The Government will bring forward further measures in these areas which ensure that we get the maximum impact from resources available and that innovative approaches are used to maintain people in employment as well as assisting those who lose their jobs.

Our people need to have confidence that the difficult decisions taken now are part of a coherent approach to return the economy to sustainable growth. That approach is articulated in the framework for sustainable economic renewal, which was published by the Government in December. That framework, based on the development of a smart economy, reflects the Government's determination not only to meet the severe short-term challenge we face, but also to make the structural reforms which ensure that Ireland emerges from the global downturn in pole position to benefit from the international recovery when it comes. We have set out clearly the measures we are taking to support a return to sustainable growth and jobs over the medium term, with specific actions in the following areas: maximising the potential for growth by building on our strengths in innovation and research and development; addressing the huge market for environmental and energy related products, services and innovation; investing in critical infrastructure, while favouring more employment-intensive activity in the short term; and driving our reform agenda for a more efficient and effective public service supported by smart regulation.

We have already taken steps in the budget and in the Finance Bill to help realise these objectives, including an increase in the research and development tax credit available to companies from 20% to 25%, putting us to the forefront of research and development regimes globally. This will increase Ireland's attractiveness as a location for research and development activity and it will provide a well-targeted stimulus for such value-added activities. We have also provided an exemption from corporation tax and capital gains tax of up to €40,000 for the first three years of any new start-up business, and we have provided other measures to help people who want to start enterprises and create jobs. We are working to bring forward further measures to implement the vision set out in the smart economy framework.

Over the medium-term, our economy, employment prospects and living standards require a rebalancing of economic activity towards sustainable, export led growth. That is why we are determined to build on our core strengths, strengths which have brought us two decades of economic expansion, doubling the number of people employed to around 2 million. The smart economy framework will see continued high levels of investment in upgrading the knowledge intensity of key growth sectors. It will move the economy to a more sustainable growth path, reducing our reliance on fossil fuels and further lowering the carbon-intensity of what we produce. This is not fanciful or speculative on our part. On the contrary, it represents a deepening of our commitment to the measures which we already know have been delivering for our economy in recent years.

OECD figures show that our investment in knowledge — including higher education — has increased by an annual average of over 10% in the last decade, compared with EU and OECD averages of around 3%. The critical mass we are building means that research and development investments accounted for over four-in-ten of all new projects announced last year by IDA Ireland. This pipeline remains strong, and will be further strengthened by the initiatives we are taking.

Services exports, on which future prosperity is increasingly reliant, have seen a threefold increase since 2000, bringing to over 40% their share of total exports. This is a figure the ESRI expects could reach 70% by 2025. We are confident that the measures we have set out in the framework for sustainable economic renewal will continue to attract the best of internationally mobile technology and talent-driven investment. No less important, they will bring a new emphasis to embedding this investment more deeply in linkages with the rest of the economy. We will create new funding and venture capital for Irish firms, and new niches of excellence in which they will succeed on world markets.

I have outlined the core elements of the Government's strategic response to the crisis and we are determined to continue on that path. However, all our experience tells us that effective implementation requires mobilisation of stakeholders behind this effort. It is that which builds confidence and credibility, at home and internationally. It is particularly important in a small economy in which flexibility and consistency of response can become critical sources of competitive advantage. For that reason, the skills and relationships built over the past 20 years of social partnership are potentially an asset of great value to Ireland in finding a coherent way through these difficulties. Other countries with similar systems of social dialogue, such as the Netherlands, are also using them to help navigate through this crisis.

Social partnership was central to Ireland's economic resurgence starting with the Programme for National Recovery in 1987. The Government believes that a similar approach now, where all sectors agree to share in the difficult adjustments required, will greatly enhance internal and external confidence in our economic strategy.

The Government is in the process of finalising a framework with the social partners within which it is intended to develop and implement a pact for stabilisation, solidarity and economic renewal. It embodies the conviction, which is shared by the social partners, that any failure to take radical decisions in the years to come has the potential to erode national and international confidence in the Irish economy. The draft framework being discussed with the social partners includes an outline of the challenge facing the country, the rationale for urgent and radical action and the potential contribution of a shared approach through partnership. It highlights the need to stabilise the public finances over the next five years through an appropriate combination of tax and expenditure measures, such as an adjustment of approximately €2 billion in 2009. The document focuses on areas that require short-term stabilisation measures, including maximising economic activity and employment, stabilising the financial and banking sector, maximising employment and helping those who lose their jobs. It lists a number of policy issues on which the Government and the social partners can work together to implement reforms which will ensure Ireland emerges from this crisis as quickly as possible. The document draws in particular on the Government framework for sustainable economic renewal, which was published in December.

Significant reductions in public service pay and pension costs cannot realistically be achieved if the burden of the adjustment is not fairly spread across society and the proposed framework does not identify some of the implications of such an approach. The implications include moderation in executive remuneration, particularly in the banking sector. Those who benefited most from the economic boom should make a particular contribution to the adjustment that is required. I hope it will be possible to conclude a pact with the social partners based on a shared understanding of the problem and the best way forward. The Government will have to take the decisions that are needed if it is to achieve its objective of stabilising the public finances. Its clear strategy for the difficult times that lie ahead is based on the framework for sustainable economic renewal that was published in December. We have put in place a five-year fiscal stabilisation strategy. We will announce measures next week to make a significant start on providing for a further adjustment of €2 billion in 2009. We will continue to act decisively to

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ensure our banking system serves the needs of the economy. Credit should be extended to the enterprise sector, as appropriate, and householders facing mortgage difficulties should be assisted. We are taking immediate measures within the fiscal constraints we face to maximise economic activity, sustain employment and help people who lose their jobs. We are reforming and restructuring the economy to ensure we emerge well placed to benefit from the global upturn, with a focus on innovation, research and development, green enterprise, energy efficiency and high productivity employment.

The Government's strategy addresses the challenges that face the country. We are working with the social partners to conclude an agreement that is based on an approach of solidarity and equity and ensures that all sectors of society make an appropriate contribution. The strategy is clear, appropriate and credible. There are no easy options. Challenges will be faced across all sectors of society. If we work together constructively, we can meet those challenges. We face many difficult decisions. While it is easy to call for quick action, we need to ensure, based on careful analysis of a fast-changing economic situation and following consultation with major stakeholders in Irish society, that the decisions we make are the right ones. This debate is an important opportunity for the Members of the Dáil to make their views known as a contribution to this process. The world is in recession. Ireland is being battered by international storms the like of which this generation has never seen. I assure the Irish people that if we work together as a team, we can ensure we have a prosperous future for ourselves, our children and future generations.

Deputies: Hear, hear.

Deputy Eamon Gilmore: Is that it?

Deputy Billy Kelleher: We can hear the Deputy's ideas in a moment.

Deputy Joan Burton: The Taoiseach did not even acknowledge responsibility for how bad it is.

Deputy Enda Kenny: The speech just given by the Taoiseach belies the reality, which is that the clear Government strategy to which he referred does not exist. Departments are not working together. The Department of Social and Family Affairs does not even collate statistics on the numbers of people looking for mortgages. The reply the Taoiseach gave to the Chairman of the Joint Committee on Climate Change and Energy Security a few minutes ago is further evidence of the fact that there is no drive on the part of the Government to deal with the possibilities of renewable energy. The Taoiseach was unable to give the House details of the current status of a Bill dealing with renewable energy and foreshore licences. Such a Bill is needed to maximise this country's potential to become a centre for the development of technology in this sector, with the ultimate aim of exporting energy from Ireland within ten years.

1 o'clock

We are facing an economic crisis of frightening proportions. I am worried that officials in the Department of Finance, the banks, the National Treasury Management Agency and the regulatory authorities have never before faced a crisis of this scale. The Government is not leading any co-ordination between the various sectors of the Irish financial sector. That is frightening people who are losing their jobs, whose businesses are in distress or who see a bleak future for themselves. It is no exaggeration, unfortunately, to say that the bubble economy created under Fianna Fáil is imploding before our eyes. People across the country are frightened out of their wits about their prospects and those of their children. Irish retailers have endured the greatest collapse in sales since 1984. Thousands of small businesses are failing

as banks pull back their credit lines. Every Deputy in this House is aware of businesses, including some that had been in operation for 30 or 40 years, that have closed in their local towns, cities and villages over recent months. Perhaps some of the newer businesses that have closed were not going to make it anyway. The scale of closure is incredible. Many closures have resulted from contracts that were signed for exceptionally high rents, or transport, energy or communications costs that were driven by Government decisions.

We are losing thousands of jobs every week. It has been estimated as being the equivalent of five Dells every month. It has been suggested that 400,000 people may be unemployed by the end of this year. Over 100,000 young families are now finding that their mortgages exceed the value of their homes. They are trapped in the negative equity trap. Hundreds, if not thousands, of people will lose their homes in 2009. I was glad to hear the Taoiseach say he is aware, at least, that people are in distress. When I addressed my party in Wexford last November, I called for banks to be instructed not to foreclose on the mortgages of people who are in distress. I suggested that arrangements like those agreed in the 1980s, when mortgages were split in two and people were encouraged to pay off half if they could, be put in place again at this time. It is exceptionally difficult for people who are out of a job, working a three-day week or facing redundancy to be in a position to pay their mortgages. I hope the Taoiseach reminds the banks that looking after such people is a priority. We do not want thousands of homes to be taken over. Private sector wages are falling for the first time in the history of the State, even though Ireland continues to be the most expensive country in Europe. Everybody has evidence of wage cuts of 10%, 15%, 20% or, in some cases, 50%, along with redundancies and the imposition of a three-day week.

The European Commission estimates that the Irish economy will decrease by 5% this year. Others have suggested that the real pace of decline is twice that. The Government's estimates were off target by €2 billion, or €500 million a week, in a four-week period coming up to Christmas. Are we sure that the scale of the crisis under discussion will not be greater than that currently projected by the Government? The Government is continuing to peddle the delusion that the scale of the problem in Ireland is replicated throughout the world. I would like the Minister for Finance to contribute to this debate by telling us where else in the world unemployment is about to double in the space of a year. Where else are living standards declining so dramatically? What other country is hiking up taxes while slashing investment in infrastructure because its public finances are in such a mess? Is the national debt of any other country about to double in the space of two years? It seems to be escalating out of control in this country, with potentially ruinous consequences for the next generation.

The frightening aspect of this problem is that the Government does not seem to have the capacity to get from the back of the curve to the front of the curve and beyond, by dealing with the scale of the problem we now face. While all countries are facing economic difficulties, few if any are facing an economic reversal on the scale of this country. Under the leadership of the Taoiseach, Ireland has been relegated from the premiership of world economies to the third division. Under the Taoiseach's economic leadership, Fianna Fáil turned the Celtic tiger into a bubble economy. It destroyed the basis of our economic and social progress. When he was in charge of the Department of Finance, we had the biggest property boom of any EU country, the highest level of personal debt, the biggest loss of national competitiveness and the biggest reliance on the construction sector to provide jobs.

The economic principles that delivered the prosperity of the Celtic tiger in the 1990s were control of costs, high productivity, export-led growth, tight budgeting and prudent regulation of the financial sector and the housing market. All these economic strengths were hard won by the people of Ireland under the leadership of previous Governments but were swiftly abandoned under the Taoiseach's leadership. Government indecision and incompetence are making

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the crisis even worse, and we are now in a situation where the State must borrow €55 million per day.

Last December, the Government published a strategy for economic renewal, entitled Building Ireland's Smart Economy. While it contains little that is objectionable, neither is there anything novel, visionary or coherent. Of the 125 action points in the document, only one can be counted as new, the rest being recycled promises from previous unimplemented strategies. The cut and paste mechanism worked exceptionally well. The problem is that one cannot build a smart economy with dumb decisions. The strategy does not reverse any of the major policy mistakes made by the Government in recent months which threaten to turn the current recession into a deep and sustained depression.

Among these mistakes was the 18-month delay since the Taoiseach's party was returned to government in its acknowledgement of the scale of the crisis and the failure to take any action to rein in the unsustainable growth in spending, making the adjustment now required all the more painful and severe. Another mistake was the decision last September, taken wilfully by the Government, to promise €2 billion in pay increases in 2008 and 2010 to an unreformed public service when it was already clear that this would require extra borrowing and more cuts in front line services. The Government paid out that money in the knowledge of the crisis coming down the track.

The 17 new taxes and tax increases introduced in the budget and Finance Bill will cost the average family more than €3,000 in 2009, just as consumers are already losing confidence and cutting back on spending. These tax increases will raise at total of €2 billion for the State. The hike in VAT to 21.5% since 1 December, just as the United Kingdom, including Northern Ireland, reduced its rate of VAT from 17.5% to 15% turned a steady trickle of cross-Border Christmas shoppers into a flood, with devastating consequences for Irish retailers within a broad swathe of what used to be known as the Border area.

Another mistake the Government has made is to reduce spending on infrastructure by €1 billion in 2009, just when the construction industry needs a boost because of the collapse in house-building. The former Minister of State, Mr. Tom Parlon, said yesterday that money must be provided for State investment in infrastructure so that tradesmen and crafts people can go back to work. Where is the response to the requirement for a regeneration of Limerick city? As Deputy Noonan pointed out, an investment of some €3 billion is projected, which would create thousands of job. Representatives of the construction industry say it can provide those workers in the morning.

There has been ongoing prevarication and indecision in addressing the banking crisis. It is four months since the crisis began and no actions have yet been taken to kick-start lending to credit-starved businesses. It is because of these types of decisions that domestic and international confidence in the competence of Ireland's economic management is at rock bottom, making the crisis much worse than it need be. International bond markets look at this country in the same way they look at our banks, and they have confidence in neither. The actions and inactions of the Government have done precious little to reverse that impression.

The truth is that the implosion of the bubble economy has exposed the fallacy of the Government's claims to economic management skills. This Government is the worst in 40 years and must now deal with the worst economic crisis the country has ever faced. While the Government sought all the credit for the Celtic tiger, it is now casting around to blame everybody but itself for the part it has played in this economic crisis. The Government blamed the Opposition parties for talking the economy down. To mention economic difficulties was to be guilty of national sabotage. Journalists were blamed for the bank crisis. Those who rejected the refer-

endum on the Lisbon treaty were blamed for the loss of confidence. That treaty rejection is now playing a crucial part in the attitude of Europe towards the State. The Minister for Finance, Deputy Brian Lenihan, blamed the Irish people for the housing boom when he said:

You know, we have to be honest about this as a people. We decided as a people collectively to have this housing boom.

Now he tells us we have a thriving economy. The Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment, Deputy Coughlan, even sought to blame struggling families when she suggested that families seeking lower prices north of the Border were being unpatriotic.

It is clear that we cannot solve the mess in the economy and public finances created by Fianna Fáil through higher taxes on work and enterprise, stealth charges and cuts in front line services and capital spending. This is only further damaging confidence and competitiveness. I believe it was Churchill who said that any country that intends to tax itself into prosperity is like a man standing in a bucket trying to lift himself by the handle. However, I also recognise that we cannot massively borrow our way out of recession by spending on unreformed public services. Borrowing is already spiralling out of control. The news every day is critical given the cost of money and the difficulty the State will have in borrowing in the current circumstances.

On the present path, even excluding the currently unknown cost of rescuing the banks, Government borrowing will triple to at least €140 billion by 2013, up from just over €46 billion in 2007. The greatest problem is that we do not know the scale of what we have got ourselves into in regard to the banking crisis. We have not been told the assessment of liability for Anglo Irish Bank. While we strongly support the two major banks, we do not know the extent of any so-called toxic debt they may have. That is why I said during Leaders' Questions that we must separate out the banks' commercial, residential and other loans so that there will be a clear picture which will allow us to devise the clear strategy to which the Taoiseach referred. At the current level of borrowing, annual interest costs will rise to some €8 billion per annum, which is equivalent to the hospitals budget, from €1.8 billion in 2007. This assumes international markets are willing to lend us this amount of money, which is by no means clear.

The Government has set out a target of €2 billion in current spending cuts this year. Failure to achieve this target would signal to the world that this Administration does not have the political vision or strength to do what it takes to fix the public finances and the economy. This is why Fine Gael took the difficult decision of publicly recognising, in a manner the Government remains unable to do, that cutting the cost of running the public service must play a key part in a credible economic recovery package. This was outlined in detail by our spokesperson on finance, Deputy Bruton, on many occasions.

Last November, I called for a complete public sector pay freeze, including increments, to help recover competitiveness and to free up resources for investments in infrastructure which position the economy for an export-driven recovery. We will not escape this crisis unless we can trade our way out to the scale of export percentage we had in previous years. Public sector pay increases are simply wrong at a time when front line services are being cut, borrowing is spiralling out of control and wages are falling across much of the private sector. I understand that public sector workers might feel angry on hearing this message. They are not responsible for this economic crisis, the Government is. I have listened carefully to the arguments from trade unions that public sector payroll cuts would be deflationary and would make the crisis worse. On balance, however, I am of the view that a significant cut in the public sector pay bill is a vital element of protecting jobs across the economy because of the impact it would have on competitiveness, on the resources available for capital spending and on international confidence in the long-term stability of the Irish economy.

[Deputy Enda Kenny.]

I have set out our view in terms of the public sector. Six years ago I pointed out that the then Government had a brilliant opportunity to begin a real process of public sector and public service reform with the benchmarking process, which is now costing €2 billion per year. Everybody in the country knows the extent of waste through Departments and across a whole range of sectors. This has never been examined properly by the Government. If the Taoiseach expects that it is so easy to put his focus on the public sector, the workers in that sector are the first who would recognise that they can contribute towards moving our country forward. However, the Taoiseach must point out before they do so that if they are to take pain in the same way as all others, he must have a tough but fair strategy and he must be able to point out how he intends to reform the business of the economics of running the country and the public sector in providing services for the taxpayer. He has not done that, nor has he made any reference to it. He has not faced the big decisions that need to be taken in terms of reducing public payroll costs.

Cutting the public sector pay bill is necessary but not enough. What is also needed is a credible medium-term plan to cut Government, control prices and eliminate the bureaucracy, waste and extravagance that still plagues public spending and diverts scarce resources to the wrong places. That is why Fine Gael called for radical public sector reforms to deliver 3% annual efficiency improvements in each Department, as has been achieved in Northern Ireland.

Hospitals should only be paid for what they do this year, not what they spent last year. Why should it not be the case that hospitals get more money if they treat more patients, rather than closing wards and cancelling operations when they run short of cash?

Acting Chairman (Deputy Charlie O'Connor): I remind the Deputy that he has one minute remaining.

Deputy Enda Kenny: The Acting Chairman will have to give me another one after that.

Acting Chairman: It could get me into terrible trouble.

Deputy Enda Kenny: Being from Tallaght, I know the Acting Chairman is a generous man.

The €300 million State subsidy for public bus transport should be opened up to new alternative, more efficient providers. It is lunacy that CIE should respond to falling demand by cutting services and raising prices while continuing to make pay increases. Dubious capital projects should be subject to published cost-benefit evaluations, which would avoid the PPARS and the e-voting debacle we had some years ago. Contracts with public servants should be changed to provide for much more flexibility to move staff to new priority areas. The Comptroller and Auditor General should be given new powers to improve the governance and financial management of agencies in order to root out the type of waste and excess we have witnessed in FÁS.

We will support Government if it implements Fine Gael policies to help small businesses and the unemployed such as the following. An immediate cut in VAT — at least back to the 21% before the introduction of the budget — should be introduced to ensure that retailers can compete on a level playing field with Northern Ireland and the UK. An employer PRSI exemption should apply for businesses that take on extra staff in 2009. No employment PRSI payments should apply for extra staff for two years. Additional PRSI offsets should apply for employers' investment in research and training. A freeze in commercial rates and other State charges should apply for businesses. A massive investment should be made to drive high speed next generation broadband across the country. In a place on the west coast people are moving around inside a building, as the Minister sitting next to the Taoiseach is aware, to find where they can connect to the Internet. A massive investment should be made in retraining unem-

ployed construction workers in areas such as home insulation, smart electricity appliances and energy certification. Better access for training for the unemployed should be provided, for example, by changing the criteria for the back to education allowance.

We will play our part in ensuring that this country recovers through this recession, but this debate is taking place in the vacuum of our not being told the truth or the reality by Government, and I deplore that kind of activity. This is the House where the Taoiseach should be making his State of the nation address. This is where the decisions should be made. In reference to what we said last week in the Mansion House, the fundamental principle of the First Dáil was accountability and transparency by all Ministers to this House, the elected representatives of the people, and I deplore the way the Taoiseach has gone about this.

Deputies: Hear, hear.

Acting Chairman: I call Deputy Gilmore and advise that I am obliged to interrupt him at 1.30 p.m. for which I apologise in advance.

Deputy Eamon Gilmore: Since this country went into recession the Labour Party has taken a positive and hopeful view of our country's economic affairs. We have concentrated on putting forward solutions, suggestions seeking to convey our belief that, as a people, we can get through this recession, there can be better times and, however difficult the adjustment may be, that it will be worth it in the end.

Despite every effort we have made to see opportunities where there are obstacles, the most depressing thing I have heard in this period of recession is the speech the Taoiseach has just delivered. Is that the best the leader of the country's Government can offer the people of Ireland at this very difficult time? I was angry that no proposals were presented by the Taoiseach before the commencement of this debate and that we are debating this matter in a vacuum. To find not only have no proposals been put forward in advance of the debate but that nothing new was on offer in the Taoiseach's contribution tells me that this country is now led by a Government that is incapable of leading us out of the recession and that is bankrupt of ideas.

Deputy Ruairí Quinn: Hear, hear.

Deputy Eamon Gilmore: Let us consider some of points the Taoiseach made today. He said that the Government has a clear strategy which it will continue to implement. If it has a clear strategy, we have not been told about it and we certainly did not hear about it today. As for continuing to implement it, I advise the Taoiseach that "continue" is not the verb for these times, "change" is the verb for these times.

Deputy Ruairí Quinn: Hear, hear.

Deputy Eamon Gilmore: If the Taoiseach continues to lead this country in the way he is and if he continues on the road he prescribed in his speech, he will lead it to ruin. He told us that there is little point in looking back at how some of this might have been anticipated or avoided. From a Government that has been in office for 11 years, the Taoiseach has some neck to say there is little point in looking back; there is every point in looking back because the pilot who crash landed this economy is hardly the pilot who will take off this economy and lead us back out of this recession.

At the end of his contribution, the Taoiseach invited us to work as a team. We are willing to work as a team, but we want to know what is the game. The Taoiseach has not told us. He has not outlined any set of proposals. He has not said anything in his contribution to this House

[Deputy Eamon Gilmore.]

today to which any member of the Opposition can constructively respond because there are no new proposals coming from Government today.

We are at a moment of grave national crisis. It would be difficult to overstate the depth of the economic emergency that now faces our country and people. The extent of our difficulties is well known, even if their cause is not admitted and the cure is disputed.

It is not necessary for me to rehearse the full litany of statistics that describe the fall in economic output, the threat to our banking system or the spiralling gap in our public finances. This is not a debate about statistics, it is about people. It is about the 300,000 of our people now signing on the live register, queuing down the street in the rain, trying to collect social insurance to which they contributed, caught up in an unfamiliar bureaucracy which seeks to deny them and which often humiliates them. It is about elderly people who have watched helplessly as their bank shares have collapsed in value and, in the case of Anglo Irish Bank, have been extinguished. It is about the unrelenting dread of a parent who wakes each morning to the fear of losing the family home. It is about the best and brightest of what would have been our most fortunate generation graduating once again to the emigrants' aeroplane. It is at this moment that our people look here, to the Dáil and Government for leadership. People want to know if there is somebody, somewhere in Government, who has a grip on this situation. What they will see today is the Dáil gathered to debate a Government plan that does not exist, drafts of which it is not allowed to see, including a set of cuts that the Cabinet will not publish

This is an economic crisis, but it needs a political solution. It requires a Government that is clearly in command of the situation in everything it says and does. The nucleus of a modern economy is trust. From the moment money replaced barter as the means of exchange, economies became dependent on trust. In the global economic turmoil that has followed the collapse of Lehman Brothers Bank, trust has been in short supply. The first function of Government is to make up that shortfall.

That means bringing forward a national recovery plan that will address the economic crisis, comprehensively and coherently. It should be a plan that shows the Government has a grip on the situation, a plan that will allay fear and chart a course out of recession. It should be a plan not to shrink the economy, but to stimulate it. The question is not what can be cut, but what can be created.

I do not suggest that this can be done without pain. It cannot. However, one must know what it is one wishes to achieve. Is it to re-boot the economy, protect jobs and restore growth? Or does one wish to focus solely on one component of the problem, namely, the public finances, and, in so doing, risk a downward spiral of cuts and economic contraction?

The recovery plan should be based on what I call the three Cs, namely, confidence among consumers, credibility among investors and competitiveness on world markets. It is an understatement to say that consumer confidence is low. It would be more accurate to say that consumers are petrified. The ESRI consumer confidence indicator has fallen to historic lows and retail sales are collapsing. The latest figures from the CSO, which relate to November, report the largest annual fall in retail sales since April 1975. A survey of retailers published last weekend in the *Sunday Business Post* suggests a fall of 10% in the fourth quarter of 2008, compared to the same quarter of 2007. This indicates a significant rise in the savings rate consequent on a loss of confidence. Many people have lost their jobs, but a lot of people have not. They simply are not spending money.

The Government can act to restore confidence by addressing fear head on. The one thing people fear more than losing their job is losing their home. It would allay much of the fear

among consumers if there were to be a guarantee that, for the duration of the recession, nobody will lose their home.

Deputies: Hear, hear.

Deputy Eamon Gilmore: We must also look at the VAT situation. The flood of consumers going over the Border cannot be ignored. Equally, falling prices are likely to result in consumers postponing their spending. A temporary cut in VAT would have the effect of boosting incomes and would also help to shift the growing expectation of falling prices.

There has been a similar shift in sentiment among the buyers of Government bonds. The benchmark measure, namely, the yield on ten-year paper compared to German bonds, or the Bund Spread, has widened dramatically in recent weeks. Germany borrows ten-year money at 3.2%; Ireland borrows at 5.65%. Clearly, there are strong fundamentals driving that market but the rising rates are also the result of incompetence and inaction.

So far, the Government has made five major policy shifts on Anglo Irish Bank. On each occasion, the remaining banks were the subject of unwelcome attention from the financial markets. The Government cannot even get its story straight as to what happened on the night of the guarantee. We are also suffering the effects of a failure to set out a credible fiscal strategy for the next five years. For months, the Labour Party has been calling for a medium-term approach to the fiscal and economic crisis. The stability pact update published in January is not a plan but an accounting exercise.

The third component required is competitiveness. We all know that Ireland must begin to wean its economy from reliance on construction and get back to the business of selling goods and services in the rest of the world.

Deputies: Hear, hear.

Deputy Eamon Gilmore: Our competitiveness was badly eroded during the property boom and the problem has been made worse by the fall in the value of sterling. It is a source of deep concern, therefore, to read reports that the Government is contemplating cuts in capital spending. Ireland has serious infrastructural deficits that must be remedied. Looking back on the past decade, it is unbelievable that the deficiencies in key infrastructures such as broadband could not be dealt with in the best of times. It was hard not to agree with the person I met last week who summed up the achievements of this Government as “a broken bank, two trams that don’t meet and a spike in O’Connell Street”.

For some months now, the Labour Party has been advancing concrete proposals to stimulate economy recovery and create jobs. Our approach has been similar to that proposed in November by the European Commission. Public investment should promote short-term stimulus and long-term competitiveness. We have brought forward a series of concrete ideas and proposals. We have argued repeatedly, for example, for additional investment in building projects such as schools and urban regeneration. The skills involved in building schools are similar to those involved in building houses. We have also argued that the Government should provide incentives to kick-start what might be a €25 billion industry, namely, insulating homes. That theme is also reflected by the EU Commission’s stimulus plan which calls for investment in carbon reduction and green collar industries.

Some of those proposals have been taken on board, in theory, by the Government. It is flattering to hear the Taoiseach repeating them here today. What we need to see is action. My party has repeatedly called for innovative thinking in the field of education and training. We know that about 500,000 people need to upgrade their skills. Now is the time to do it. We need fresh, innovative thinking on how that can be achieved. The Labour Party suggested, for

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example, an earn and learn scheme. If a company is faced with reducing its workforce, why should it not move to having people working part of the week and learning for the rest of it? That is a far better solution than merely having people join the dole queue.

This is an emergency and we cannot get hung up on the rule book. We must think afresh. There is currently a cap on the number of places in further education which stops further education colleges from responding to the needs they themselves see. There is also a cap on vocational training opportunities scheme, VTOC, courses. The Taoiseach referred today to 30,000 places that will be available in higher and further education. However, he did not make it clear whether that refers to the existing 30,000 places or to an additional 30,000. If it is merely the existing figure that must be expanded in order that people who are coming out of employment will get the opportunity of re-entering the education system and upskilling.

Now is a time to invest in our people, who are the core of our competitiveness. What answer does the Government have, for example, for the thousands of young people who will graduate from college this year? Will they be faced in a few years with the old story of the 1980s, namely, one cannot get a job without experience, but one cannot get experience without a job? Rather than pay people to do nothing, can we come up with a work experience or job placement scheme? There is work to do in our country. This is a generation brimming with talent, energy and creativity, who are willing to give service to their country and their community. What is needed is the imagination and the energy to put their talents to good use.

For any recovery plan to work, however, it must be fair. It must be clear that the burden is being shared across society and not being borne by any one group. Here again, trust is vital. It is hard to see how a Government that presided over a frenzy of greed among property developers can now ask, with a straight face, for sacrifice from others. It has been suggested, for example, that a cut in public sector pay will have a demonstration effect for private sector pay and, in that way, will boost competitiveness. What that argument amounts to is a call for a simulated devaluation in our real exchange rate.

Acting Chairman: The Deputy has one minute remaining.

Deputy Eamon Gilmore: However, this is a simulated devaluation that places the burden on only one section of society. We are told that workers should take a pay cut. If they do, will the fees charged for a doctor's visit also fall, or their health insurance bills? Will other interests in our society take a similar hit?

I have no doubt that we will see lengthy talks going on in Government Buildings in the coming days. We can be fairly confident that an agreement will emerge. We know that, when called on, the social partners will seek to do their part even if some of those social partners will insist on using the opportunity to beat their ideological drum. This is not a game of "deal or no deal". What matters is what is actually in the deal. So far, all the indications from the Government are that the over-riding objective of the talks is to cut public expenditure.

Will I have time to continue after the break?

Acting Chairman: That is my understanding. I now ask the Deputy to call for the adjournment of the House.

Deputy Emmet Stagg: There is plenty of precedent if the House were to agree to sit for another five minutes.

Acting Chairman: My understanding is that the Chair does not have that flexibility.

Deputy Emmet Stagg: The House has.

Deputy Joan Burton: The House has.

Acting Chairman: The advice I am getting is that I do not.

Deputy Ruairí Quinn: The advice is over there, on the Government benches.

The Taoiseach: That is fine.

Deputy Emmet Stagg: The Taoiseach is agreeable.

Acting Chairman: I hope it does not cause a constitutional crisis, but I will accept——

(Interruptions).

Acting Chairman: The Taoiseach is allowing me to do that——

Deputy Eamon Gilmore: If it does, and we are both sent anywhere in retribution, Acting Chairman, we will share a cell.

Acting Chairman: Thank you, Deputy. I am told I must have the agreement of the House, which I presume I have.

Deputies: Yes.

Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach (Deputy Pat Carey): I propose the extension.

Acting Chairman: Deputy Gilmore should continue.

Deputy Eamon Gilmore: I repeat that the way to deal with the public finance crisis is to get the economy moving again. That is not to suggest we can ignore the state of the public finances because we cannot. What matters now is not the deficit this year or in any one year. What matters is whether we have a credible plan to address the problem over a period of years. We must send a signal that we are serious about putting our affairs in order. This must be done in a fair way, however. Those who have most should contribute most.

Deputy Michael D. Higgins: Hear, hear.

Deputy Eamon Gilmore: Let us be honest about it, let us be up-front with people and let us call a tax a tax. The Government will do anything to avoid using the word “tax”. It has levies, user charges and contributions, all of which are taxes by another name.

It is clear there is a requirement to broaden the tax base. The wide range of reliefs and exemptions that grew up in the last ten years must now be rigorously pruned and curtailed to ensure the wealthy pay a fair share. That means a re-examination of the tax breaks for interest on rental properties, it means dealing with the loophole in respect of directors’ pension schemes and it means looking afresh at the rules pertaining to tax exiles — an Irish passport should bring responsibilities as well as rights.

To get the economy moving again, we also need a different approach to the banking crisis. First, we need rigour, discipline and consistency from Ministers, which has been lacking. Second, we must look to the credibility of the banking system. This means, in reality, major changes in personnel across the guaranteed banks. It also means sending a clear message to

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investors across the world that Ireland is making a fresh start in its banks, and that wrongdoing will be exposed and illegality punished.

What has gone on in Anglo Irish Bank cannot be brushed under the carpet. There has to be full accountability to restore confidence, credibility and Ireland's reputation. While we did not wish to own a bank, we do now, so let us set that bank to work and draw down the money available from the European Investment Bank to lend to small businesses which are currently starved of credit.

Deputy Ruairí Quinn: Exactly.

Deputy Eamon Gilmore: The world around us is changing very rapidly. Our present difficulties owe a lot to mistakes made by Government and to its lack of urgency in addressing the crisis. However, we must also realise that we are witnessing a major crisis in the structure of globalised capitalism. There is no certainty that we will return to the system as it existed before the credit crunch and the collapse of Lehman Brothers.

There were fundamental imbalances and injustices in that system which were always going to be unsustainable. In a recent article, Professor Joseph Stiglitz makes the point that the lifestyle of the developed world was in fact being financed by borrowing from the developing world. Sub-prime mortgages were financed by the trade surplus of countries such as China and were the flip-side of the US trade deficit. The sub-prime crisis was also driven by inequality in the US, where people in the lowest income bracket had not seen a real increase in incomes since the 1980s. Stiglitz makes the following point:

A few years ago, there was worry about the risk of a disorderly unwinding of global imbalances. The current crisis can be viewed as part of that, but little is being done about the underlying problems that gave rise to these imbalances . . . we need not just temporary stimuli, we need long-term solutions.

It was never supportable or sustainable that the US would have a carbon footprint of 20 tonnes per person while China's was 3.8, or that the average carbon emission for high income countries was 13 tonnes compared to less than 1 tonne in low income countries. Nor is it supportable that 1 billion people live on less than \$1 a day, that the richest 500 people in the world earn more between them than the 416 million poorest, that two senior bankers could earn more in a year than Malawi spends on its health service or that the CEOs of the top 15 US companies earned 520 times the wage of the average American worker. That kind of structure was never sustainable and it was never right.

Globalisation has brought billions of people into the global trading system. That can be a major benefit to humanity but we need a world that is constructed in a sustainable and just manner. These are not academic considerations. The question we must ask ourselves is what will the new global order be and what will Ireland's place be in it. We were and still can be one of the richest countries in the world but what will the world look like? What industries will grow and which will contract? Where should Ireland position itself in the new global order?

In all of this, the EU has a vital role to play. For a brief moment last year, we saw Europe assume a leadership role in world affairs. That has faded, partly as the natural consequence of the change of President in the US but also because of reluctance among some countries about pushing ahead with the EU stimulus package. A recovery plan, based on confidence, credibility, and competitiveness, has a good prospect of success. It should be fair and should be seen to be fair. It should be focused on stimulating the economy, not shrinking it. It should follow the logic, set out by the European Commission, of using public investment to deliver short-term

stimulus and long-term competitiveness. It should seek to create jobs and to train and educate people for new jobs. While this is a profound crisis, it is also an opportunity to re-gear our economy, to provide the schools our children deserve, to make our economy more sustainable and to create a new sense of fairness and solidarity.

What is happening in the economy is very frightening for some people. People are losing savings, jobs and businesses. They know these are difficult times and that there is more to come. However, they also need to be certain that the solutions put forward by those who represent them will help them weather the storm. They need to know that there is as much talk of security as there is of sacrifice. We can get through this. There will be an end to the recession. The solutions to this economic crisis need to reassure our fellow citizens and our young people that they will still be standing when the economy recovers. Standing and ready to contribute to a society that values fairness and the common good over self-interest and greed, and ready to grow an economy that is competitive, sustainable and fair.

Debate adjourned.

Message from Seanad.

Acting Chairman: Seanad Éireann has passed the Residential Tenancies (Amendment) Bill 2009, without amendment.

Sitting suspended at 1.40 p.m. and resumed at 2.30 p.m.

Ceisteanna — Questions (Resumed).

Priority Questions.

Tourism Industry.

92. **Deputy Olivia Mitchell** asked the Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism if, in view of various recent developments, he is satisfied that the level of access to the capital and to the regions is consistent with maintaining and expanding Irish tourism; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2753/09]

Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism (Deputy Martin Cullen): While access is essential to tourism, the primary responsibility for transport and access issues, whether access to and from overseas or within Ireland, and for investment in transport infrastructure generally, lies with my colleague, the Minister for Transport, and the agencies under the aegis of his Department.

The Deputy will be aware that our tourism strategy framework, *New Horizons for Irish Tourism: an Agenda for Action 2003-2012*, addresses this issue, among others. Since the report was published in 2003, there has been progress on a range of access measures with substantial investment in airports across the country, including Dublin Airport, and considerable improvements have been made to our national road and rail infrastructure. This was endorsed by the tourism strategy implementation group in its report to me last year. The investment in transport projects continues and the coming months and years will see many more significant transport projects completed.

One of my priorities as Minister is to ensure that the tourism agenda is accommodated in all the relevant policies and programmes that impact on tourism. This is being put into practice in the access area on an ongoing basis by my Department and the tourism agencies, by engaging

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with the Department of Transport and its agencies, as well as with other key players, including carriers and operators, on their plans and programmes.

As with other key drivers of tourism development, the access issue is a rapidly evolving one. In that context, I announced recently the establishment of the tourism renewal group. This high level group, comprising representatives of the tourism trade, national and international experts and senior public servants, has been tasked with reviewing and, where appropriate, renewing the current tourism strategy to ensure that it is focused for the short term and that the tourist industry is well placed to benefit from the upturn.

In terms of growth in Irish tourism, there is no doubt that one of the principal drivers of the growth in visitor numbers in recent years has been the improvement in the volume, range and competitiveness of air access. We are also well served by some of the world's most modern passenger car ferry services, which have benefited from significant investment in recent years.

Air and sea travel are not immune from the downturn in the global and domestic economies. The combination of falling consumer confidence, adverse exchange rate movements and volatile fuel costs has made it difficult for carriers to sustain route profitability. In that context, I am advised that Ireland is likely to see somewhat reduced access capacity in 2009. This is, ultimately, a commercial issue for the carriers concerned. Even with this phase of consolidation, access levels still compare favourably to those in place some years ago. I especially welcome the recent decision by Aer Lingus to restore the Shannon-Heathrow route.

The tourism agencies will continue to focus on maximising visitor numbers and associated revenue in 2009, through increasing investment in co-operative marketing campaigns and working to help fill any air access gaps. The agencies will also continue to promote sea routes, especially any new ones that may commence this year, with the aim of promoting car touring holidays.

As the Deputy is aware, the tourism state agencies have recently undertaken comprehensive briefing sessions for industry representatives throughout the country, including one in Waterford recently, which I attended.

Deputy Olivia Mitchell: I thank the Minister for his reply and I accept that international and internal access routes are not directly the concern of the Department of Arts, Sport and Tourism. Nevertheless, the matter is of concern to the Department. Tourism cannot exist unless access is good. It is crucial that as the market contracts, we maintain our links with the outside world.

Recent developments include the reduction of services on several routes. Some routes are being cancelled altogether, including the important air route to the Middle East, which was initially announced to great fanfare by Aer Lingus. More recently, I heard of the effective cancellation of the plans for a new runway by Dublin Airport Authority, which was vital to the China strategy.

Some years ago in Dún Laoghaire there were five Stena Line departures every day to Holyhead. Now, there is only one, the future of which is apparently in question. The Cork to Swansea route is gone, although I heard there is a possibility that it will be restored. Decisions have been made about postponing the independence of the airports at Cork and Shannon. All these factors are inhibiting growth. Even when people arrive in the country, there are many impediments to good transport and roads. Today, I heard of plans for roads being dropped, which were important in accessing various airports, including the State airports. Is the Minister talking to other Ministers about such issues? I understand growth in Dublin Airport this year was as low as 2.5%, and it was the only airport showing any growth. The Minister, Deputy

Cullen, will remember from his time as Minister for Transport that, at the time, the annual growth of at least 10% was forecast. The new terminal was built in expectation of such growth and the airport now has capacity. Is Dublin Airport Authority seeking further business?

Deputy Martin Cullen: I do not necessarily agree with the Deputy's overall introductory remarks and assessment. We must understand that we have a responsibility to the market for the messages we send concerning the direction in which tourism is going. The figures do not correspond with the Deputy's comments. The number of tourism visitors in recent years has risen to 8 million per year, which is a phenomenal performance.

There is no question that the industry is under pressure. The second half of last year was far more challenging than any quarter in the years preceding. Nevertheless, I have been heavily engaged with all tourism bodies and other stakeholders, including the Irish Hotels Federation and other representative bodies, in terms of the approach for 2009. The market responds to its needs and requirements. We have been able to cater for all this, but suddenly the Deputy is suggesting we will not be able to cater for the need, because we need X, Y and Z. Investment in access to transport, including roads and rail, has been very substantial in recent years, and has clearly enhanced and adds to the tourism product. Investment from the public and private sectors in improving quality in the coach tourism business has been very significant. I can inform the Deputy that the attitude of the tourism industry is very positive. It is very aware and realistic about the challenges. It is very positive about the robust approach that it is taking to the challenges that lie ahead this year and in coming years. I believe the tourism industry is up to the challenge.

Deputy Olivia Mitchell: I am sure the principals involved in the industry are up to the challenge, but is the Minister? I have serious doubts and the Minister is in denial about the figures. I have before me figures issued by the Irish Aviation Authority. The numbers have been and continue to reduce, and the expectation is that they will get worse this year. It is up to the Minister to ensure that access to the routes are re-established. I admit that in the second half of the year the industry was subject to the large decline. Someone should be selling Ireland and the market is contracting. By denying this, one is not dealing with the problem. The market is contracting and if we are to retain market share, it is up to the Minister to ensure that people can travel here easily if they so wish.

Deputy Martin Cullen: I simply do not accept the Deputy's remarks. I have stated that there are major challenges in 2009 and that the last quarter of 2008 was especially challenging.

Deputy Olivia Mitchell: The Minister said he did not accept my figures.

Deputy Martin Cullen: I do not. I am aware that the industry takes grave exception to some of the most irresponsible statements made by the Deputy in recent press releases. The Deputy sent out a message internationally that Irish tourism is in meltdown, which is utter rubbish. A previous statement from the Deputy used words such as "catastrophic" to describe the state of the industry.

Deputy Olivia Mitchell: Does the Minister doubt this? He should discuss the matter with the people losing their jobs in hotels throughout the country. The Minister is in complete denial about what is taking place in the tourism industry in the country.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I call on the Minister to conclude.

Deputy Martin Cullen: The Deputy's party leader comes to the House talking of the need to be responsible and to make responsible statements regarding Ireland. That is wrong. The Deputy is factually incorrect and is creating a nervousness in the industry which is unwarranted.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Minister's time has expired.

Deputy Martin Cullen: The Deputy is sending a negative international message about tourism, which is not the case.

Deputy Olivia Mitchell: The Minister is massaging the industry.

Deputy Martin Cullen: I suggest the Deputy temper her language. Either she supports the tourism industry, or she does not.

Departmental Expenditure.

93. **Deputy Mary Upton** asked the Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism the area in which he expects to make cuts in the budget for his Department for 2009 in response to the need to rein in Exchequer spending; the cuts to be introduced in his Department; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2479/09]

Deputy Martin Cullen: As Deputies will be aware there has been a serious deterioration in the economic and budgetary situation since the budget for 2009 was presented by my colleague, the Minister for Finance. The much more challenging economic situation has significant implications for the evolution of the public finances. The Government is working on a five-year plan to restore balance with an overriding target of eliminating the current budget deficit by 2013. This will mean reductions in the budgets of Departments and I am prepared to make my contribution as part of the effort to the success of this plan.

I am responsible for the arts, sport and tourism Vote, which has an allocation of €563 million in 2009. This comprises Vote 35, Department of Arts, Sport and Tourism, and Vote 33, National Gallery of Ireland.

Deputies will be aware that the Government has agreed that 2009 expenditure savings of up to €2 billion should be identified and incorporated into the Revised Estimates. This matter is the subject of Cabinet discussions at present. I will inform the House of the outcome of these deliberations, as they apply to my Department's 2009 allocation, in due course.

Deputy Mary Upton: I thank the Minister for his reply. Unfortunately, the allocation for arts, sport and tourism was reduced by 22% in the last budget and were any further cuts to be made, I would be concerned as to whether any budget would remain. The cut of 22% means the Department already has taken a major hit and I believe its allocation has fallen by €151 million. In the light of such an enormous deficit, what impact would it have were such cuts to proceed apace? The local authorities swimming pool programme already has been lost and nothing has happened since 2000. In spite of the Minister's remarks to Deputy Mitchell on tourism, clearly problems exist there. It is a huge industry that must be encouraged and developed and consequently, serious concerns arise in respect of further cuts to the budget.

Deputy Martin Cullen: Again, the Deputy has presented a figure that is correct but has so done in a distorted manner. Everyone knows that the cost of the Lansdowne Road redevelopment was removed from the budget allocation for 2009, as it was not going to be a repetitive capital cost, and one should be realistic. Moreover, while the Deputy is correct to suggest there have been cuts in some other areas, they have been marginal. The only reduction in the tourism area is being made in respect of administrative costs and the Government and I have been

roundly complimented by the tourism industry on maintaining fully the tourism budget. The Deputy is correct to state the tourism industry is one of Ireland's major economic industries. It employs more than 320,000 people and contributes up to €6 billion in revenue to the State at various levels. Therefore, I am acutely aware of the challenges that arise.

The funding increases in recent years to both the Irish Sports Council and the Arts Council have been phenomenal and both organisations accept that. If some retrenchment is taking place at present, so be it. However, we still are up at the record figures that were delivered to both organisations in 2006. While I do not deny that the environment is challenging, more can be achieved for less given the operation of deflation at present. As growth no longer is taking place, much more value can be achieved for the money that is being spent, particularly in respect of marketing budgets and across the spectrum.

Deputy Mary Upton: My concern is this Department will become the easy target for many of the cuts. While tourism in particular has been mentioned, clearly sport also has a huge input in respect of both job creation and provision and purely at a societal level. My concern is that there has been no movement in respect of initiatives such as the swimming pool programme. I know of areas in my constituency that are crying out for small amounts of support. For instance, although Lourdes Celtic, which is based in Sundrive Park, Dublin 12, has been screaming out for a changing room, no commitment has been given for that small project. My concern is that many other similar small projects will go by the board.

Deputy Martin Cullen: The swimming pool programme has been rolling out at a fast pace right up to the present week, in which a project in Kilkenny will be opened. A total of 55 swimming pools have been approved under the programme, most of which have been built. While I do not have the precise figures to hand, I understand that approximately 12 remain that either are in construction or are finalising planning. The programme is by no means stopped although the Deputy is correct to state that I have not opened another round at present. This is true as I do not have the resources at present to so do. Nevertheless, it is wrong to state that nothing is happening. This programme has been hugely successful and I will continue with that.

On the sports capital side, approximately €800 million has gone into small clubs nationwide in recent years, including sports such as rugby, soccer, Gaelic football, boxing and others, and rightly so. This programme has been highly successful and even last year, I maintained a €50 million package. A programme was announced and delivered on and successful applicants were duly informed. In the past ten years, this programme has had a major impact on local areas. Clearly, as Minister with responsibility for sport, I would like to do more and would like to have more money to spend. At present, however, that simply is not possible. Equally however, I would like to complete the programmes for which I have the resources in place, such as the swimming pool programme, over the next year or two.

Tourism Industry.

94. **Deputy Olivia Mitchell** asked the Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism if his attention has been drawn to the various problems being experienced by Irish tour operators in the context of the current economic situation; and if he will make a statement on the matter.

[2754/09]

Deputy Martin Cullen: I met the Irish Tour Operators Association, ITOA, in early December and therefore am well aware of the operators' concerns. I also remain in contact with other

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key tourism representative bodies, such as the Irish Tourist Industry Confederation and the Irish Hotels Federation. Tourism, as is the case with other industries, is affected by the global economic situation. In 2008, tourism in Ireland and across the world encountered difficulties arising from the international downturn and pressures on the travel industry, such as fluctuating energy costs. For European destinations, these difficulties were exacerbated by the strength of the euro.

While final Central Statistics Office figures are not available, the most recent figures show a decline of 2.1% in the number of overseas visitors to Ireland in the period up to the end of November. It is expected that for the year as a whole, the decline in numbers will be approximately 3% compared with 2007. Such outcome is a great compliment to all the tourism bodies, which have succeeded in avoiding a far deeper decline. When drawing comparisons with 2007, it is important to remember that the latter was a record year for Irish tourism in terms of overseas visitors and associated revenue. Overseas visitor numbers increased by 33% between 2001 and 2007. Although we undoubtedly are facing into a difficult period ahead, I believe the strategic approach taken to tourism development in recent years by both the public and private sectors has given the industry the capacity to deal with the cyclical external challenges and to sustain its performance in coming years.

The Government continues to review and renew the strategic framework for tourism development in response to the changing environment. This is the reason I established last December the tourism renewal group under the chairmanship of Mr. Maurice Pratt. That group is examining the current tourism policy and programme priorities. It will focus on the challenges facing the industry and will set out a framework for action to ensure that tourism continues to be a major industry for Ireland. The group is to complete its work in the mid-half of 2009.

In the meantime, an extensive range of marketing, product development, training and business supports are being initiated by the tourism State agencies under the tourism services budget of the Department. These supports are being modified to help the tourism industry deal with current problems. In this regard, I am aware that Fáilte Ireland has had meetings with the ITOA to discuss the difficulties its members are experiencing in the current economic climate. Through these meetings, actions have been identified to support Irish tour operators across a broad spectrum of activity, from product development to greater promotion in key markets. A follow up meeting between Fáilte Ireland and Irish tour operators is to be held shortly with a view to furthering a number of identified actions.

In conclusion, I wish to stress that while I am under no illusion about the scale of the difficulties we face, I am confident that the tourism sector here has the capacity to manage the current cyclical slowdown. Renewing our strategy will help the sector to manage the current challenges and to return to sustainable growth in the medium term.

Deputy Olivia Mitchell: I thank the Minister for his reply and accept, as does the Minister, the challenges faced by the industry. However, I wish to discuss and bring to the Minister's attention a number of self-imposed challenges that are coming to my desk in increasing numbers from a variety of sources within the industry. One pertains to the Office of Public Works, OPW, and the difficulty of access to heritage sites and facilities it operates nationwide on our behalf. While I am a great admirer of the OPW's work, it must recognise that it also must do its patriotic duty by ensuring that such facilities are available to visitors when they come here. Apparently, the OPW intends to cut back on the opening times of such sites, even though tours already have been booked into Ireland to attend such facilities and now will arrive in a month in which the facilities are closed. This is not the way in which one should treat

visitors. I have received endless examples in this regard. For instance, people tried to make a booking for Kilmainham Gaol in December for a tour in January, only to be told the diary for January was not yet available. Thereafter, when they tried to book in January, no opening was available. This is not the way in which one attempts to do business during a recession. One may as well close up and tell visitors not to bother coming. In addition, a location such as Glenveagh National Park does not yet know its opening times for 2009, even though tour operators already have booked tours into that area. This is no way in which to do business.

I wish to refer briefly to two other problems. The first concerns VAT, to which, as the Ministers is aware, tour operators will become subject next year. Unfortunately however, tours already have been booked and priced at a rate that did not take this into account. The operators seek a derogation for another year in order that they at least can factor in the price increase into their prices for that year. The Minister is aware that this constitutes a 2% increase in their prices, which they are unable to bear.

My last point is important because it pertains to a self-imposed barrier to visitors coming to Ireland. I refer to a go-slow at passport control at Dublin Airport, which I do not believe has garnered publicity. While I have not experienced it personally, I have received reports to the effect that in some cases, two to three-hour delays have been experienced in something akin to a blue flu that is taking place there. If this is happening, it constitutes a self-imposed barrier. People who are caught up in such situations will not return and will tell their friends not to come to a country that treats its visitors in such a fashion.

Deputy Martin Cullen: If issues as Deputy Mitchell highlighted arise — I do not have specific evidence of that but I will take what she states in good faith — they are very unhelpful and unacceptable practices.

On the other side of that coin, the number of visitors who went to the cultural institutions last year, many of which are managed by the OPW, for the first time went over 3 million. It is a very successful part of our tourism product.

Negotiations that preceded last year resulted in an extension to opening hours and more weekend opening, which must be the case. It is a seven-day business and, if you like, a seven night business in many of the locations around the country. I am told that this year that will be even further extended to facilitate tourists which is something we need to do.

The fact that 3 million tourists are now going through the cultural institutions puts cultural tourism as a central plank of the tourism product. I am trying to achieve more harmony for the tourism bodies, supported by them, between all the cultural side of what would be traditionally known as tourism issues and tourism facilities. We can make progress. The industry is keen on that.

I am not aware of a passport issue at present in Dublin Airport. It certainly has not been brought to my attention. I certainly would not want that to be the case because the first place where many tourists interact with and get their first sense of Ireland is when they come in to our major airport in the capital, and it can set the tone for their view of the country and how they might enjoy their holiday time here. I will ensure that the issues the Deputy highlighted have been resolved or, if they have not, that they should be resolved immediately.

National Aquatic Centre.

95. **Deputy Mary Upton** asked the Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism the expected level of public funding to the National Aquatic Centre in 2009; if more than €1.6 million in a subsidy

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will be required to sustain the centre in 2008; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2480/09]

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

Following the restoration of the NAC to the then Campus and Stadium Ireland Development Limited, on 1 December 2006, an extensive capital programme was undertaken to restore the centre to its original condition. Much effort has gone into rebuilding its reputation and increasing its customer base and, in that context, an initial subsidy of €1.8 million was required in its first full year of operation. In 2008 a more positive picture of operational needs emerged and I have been encouraged by the significant increase in both visitor numbers and income which is being achieved to date. In more specific terms, while in 2007 there were 576,000 visitors, in 2008 there were over 700,000 visitors. Notwithstanding the marked improvement in the level of activity and income at the NAC during 2008, there has still been a requirement of a subsidy of just over €1 million last year. This is a substantial reduction from €1.8 million in 2007.

In parallel with overseeing the ongoing operation, the authority undertook an international benchmarking exercise comparing the performance of the NAC against other equivalent facilities throughout Europe. This work was recently completed and has been evaluated both by the authority and by my officials. The clear message is that all publicly accessible 50 metre indoor pools receive direct or indirect subsidies from Governments, local authorities, sports councils, universities and/or other like facilities. Clearly, therefore, the performance of the NAC is not dissimilar to other like facilities.

Accordingly, and based on the National Aquatic Centre projections for trading in 2009, a subsidy in the order of €1 million will be needed by the authority for this purpose, out of its provision for 2009, in respect of this year's trading. I have indicated to the authority the priority which I attach to increasing the income at the National Aquatic Centre and I have confidence the Authority will continue to work to this as a priority.

Deputy Mary Upton: My understanding of this from the beginning was that the NAC should be self-financing and that that would happen in the short term rather than the long term. The NAC has cost €70 million in its construction and €1.8 million in 2007, and the Minister tells me now that it cost just over €1 million in 2008. I must defer to Deputy Mitchell for information that she had earlier which would suggest that €1.6 million was the figure required for 2008.

Deputy Martin Cullen: I have just given the up-to-date figure, which is just over €1 million.

Deputy Mary Upton: It is not €1.6 million.

Deputy Martin Cullen: It is just over €1 million.

Deputy Mary Upton: I welcome the increase in the numbers of visitors and usage.

Deputy Olivia Mitchell: On a point of order, I understand there is a rates bill of €500,000 that must be paid.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: This is a priority question. That is not a point of order.

Deputy Mary Upton: Based on the information Deputy Mitchell had, is that rates bill included in the figure the Minister has given me?

Deputy Martin Cullen: I cannot say. However, I presume not because it would not be a function of my Department to pay rates.

Deputy Mary Upton: In effect then the cost will be €1.6 million.

Deputy Martin Cullen: If the Deputy wants to know the position which I have given her, last year the subsidy directly from my Department to the National Aquatic Centre was just over €1 million and this year it will be €1 million.

Deputy Mary Upton: Can we expect that the €600,000 which would appear to be due in rates will come from the Exchequer somewhere along the way?

Deputy Martin Cullen: I cannot tell. I do not deal with rates and do not know from where that figure arises.

Deputy Mary Upton: Can I point out it is a significant amount of money that the taxpayer is——

Deputy Martin Cullen: Maybe the local authority could play its part and make the NAC rates-free. It has the power to do so.

Deputy Olivia Mitchell: And every other swimming pool in the country.

Deputy Martin Cullen: Yes, fine——

Deputy Mary Upton: I thank the Minister.

Deputy Martin Cullen: ——if it is a problem.

Sports Capital Programme.

96. **Deputy John O'Mahony** asked the Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism the amount of funding available in 2009 for the sports capital programme under national lottery funding; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2774/09]

Deputy Martin Cullen: Under the sports capital programme, which is administered by my Department, funding is allocated towards the provision of sports facilities at national, regional and local levels. It is the primary vehicle for promoting the development of sports and recreational facilities in Ireland. The programme has transformed the sporting landscape of Ireland with improved facilities in virtually every village, town and city. The facilities funded range from new equipment for the smallest clubs, to regional multi-sport centres and national centres of sporting excellence.

It has operated on an annual basis and is part funded from national lottery funds. Over 7,400 projects providing a range of essential sports facilities have benefited from sports capital funding since 1998 bringing the total allocation in that time to over €725 million. In 2008 over €50 million was allocated towards 685 separate sports facility and equipment projects. These grants continue to play a pivotal role in ensuring the provision of modern high-quality facilities around Ireland that attract more people to participate in sporting activities.

[Deputy Martin Cullen.]

In the 2009 Estimates, €56 million has been provided in my Department's vote to cover payments to be made from the C1 subhead out of which grants are paid for the provision of sports and recreation facilities.

Deputy John O'Mahony: Has that €56 million been allocated for new applications in 2009?

Deputy Martin Cullen: No.

Deputy John O'Mahony: This is what I really want to know. Is there any funding for sports capital grant applications during 2009?

Deputy Martin Cullen: Not at this stage, no.

Deputy John O'Mahony: The Minister mentioned in answer to an earlier question that one can do more for less money. I agree that the €725 million allocated up and down the country has been a wonderful encouragement and help to sporting organisations to provide facilities for young people.

While I accept we are all in a tight budgetary situation, there should be some allocation for 2009. Does the Minister agree there is evidence in other countries going through downturns that it is a help to increase funding in such circumstances because the part played by sport helps lift the gloom? While I could accept that there would be a reduction in funding, to think there is no funding at all in 2009 for these sports organisations up and down the country is nothing short of a disgrace.

Deputy Martin Cullen: It will be an interesting exercise to see how much of the €56 million that I have allocated will be drawn down this year. As the Deputy will be aware, every €1 the State gives triggers approximately €2 locally. All clubs have loans secured by the banks involved in their applications. There is evidence of clubs having difficulties in being able to underwrite their commitments and I am interested to see what exactly will come in this year. Time will tell on that one.

I agree that the more we can put capital projects, especially small ones, into smaller areas around the country, the more beneficial the effect. There is no question about that.

However, it is time to pause and look strategically at the programme. To be quite honest about it, there have been ten years of constant non-stop investment in facilities all over the country. A more strategic approach is needed to ensure there is a good balance of facilities in all of the regions around the country, and I am engaged in that process at present.

Deputy John O'Mahony: I assure the Minister that it has been a successful and wonderful scheme and there is no need to slow it down. He stated that some clubs and organisations will not be able to draw down the money because of whatever difficulties they may have. If there is a saving in this regard, will the Minister consider taking new applications? If no funding for 2009 will be available, will the Minister assure the House that funding will be restored in 2010?

Deputy Martin Cullen: When I answered the question, I stated that I do not have any funding for 2009 at the moment. Obviously, I am anxious to facilitate investment in as many parts of the country as I can, particularly in sports facilities, but I also see the economic benefit for small areas where better value for money may currently be achieved.

The number of approved projects is substantial, some 635 last year and a further number of projects that have not yet drawn down their funding. They are awaiting their final invoices so that they may draw down funding. I will wait to determine how the situation evolves. If I have given the impression that many of the projects are in serious difficulty, I want to correct myself. However, it is more difficult to put localised funding together than in previous years. I do not want to place the projects under extra stress to deliver in their areas.

Deputy John O'Mahony: What about 2010?

Deputy Martin Cullen: Of course I want to do the sports capital programme.

Other Questions.

Film Industry Development.

97. **Deputy Liz McManus** asked the Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism the number of new film and television projects that have begun since the amendments to section 481 tax relief; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2259/09]

Deputy Martin Cullen: At the outset, I extend my congratulations to all of the team behind "New Boy" on its Oscar nomination last week in the best short film category. In that regard, I congratulate the Irish Film Board, IFB, which funded the production. I also extend my congratulations to the other Irish nominees, Mr. Martin McDonagh and Mr. Nathan Crowley. I also heartily congratulate Mr. Colin Farrell and Mr. Gabriel Byrne on their Golden Globe wins. In a truly amazing month for the creative community in Ireland, I am sure the House will join with me in congratulating Mr. Sebastian Barry on winning the Costa Book Awards last evening.

Primary responsibility for the support and promotion of film making in Ireland in respect of both the indigenous sector and inward productions is a matter for the IFB, which is funded through my Department but is independent of the Department in its operations. I have no role to play in the day-to-day conduct of its business. My Department's primary operational role in supporting the film sector relates to the administration of elements of the section 481 tax relief scheme. The scheme is kept under regular review in conjunction with the IFB and the Department of Finance and any enhancements necessary to retain or regain competitiveness are addressed as appropriate.

The most recent amendments in 2008 related to extending the scheme until the end of 2012, increasing the overall ceiling on qualifying expenditure from €35 million to €50 million for any one production, increasing from €31,750 to €50,000 the annual investment limit for each individual taxpayer and an increase from 80% to 100% in the amount of the investment that can be offset for tax purposes.

Amendments relating to the increase in the ceiling on qualifying expenditure and the increased percentage in the amount of investment that can be written off for tax purposes have not commenced yet. These amendments are awaiting the approval of the European Commission because, as the Deputy knows, they involve State aid. This approval is expected shortly. Accordingly, no film or television project commenced under the new amendments in 2008. However, in 2008 a total of 38 film, animation and television projects received approval for section 481 funding, an increase of four projects when compared to 2007. The film and television production sector is the core activity of the Irish audiovisual industry, which employs

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approximately 7,000 people and was worth approximately €550 million to the economy in 2007. Its importance to Ireland's smart economy is essential.

Deputy Mary Upton: I join with the Minister in congratulating all of our successful actors and films and Mr. Barry. Yesterday evening was a great tribute to the traditional value of the arts and is to be welcomed and recognised.

While I welcome the increase by four in last year's number of start-up films, are any plans in place for 2009? What is the status of the supports available to Ardmore Studios, the major studio in Ireland, to encourage and promote film making? In a previous reply, the Minister stated that the IFB was conducting a review of audiovisual productions. If the report is available to him, will he comment on it and inform the House of what the overall review entailed?

Deputy Martin Cullen: I thank the Deputy for her compliments for all of our artists who have been successful in the past month. This year's pipeline is very strong. Although we have not signed off on the changes to section 481, the market has been made aware of the position. I expect that the amendments will put Ireland back at the centre in terms of attractiveness to the film industry.

Some years ago, we set the tone with some innovative approaches to bringing major film productions into Ireland. We were not only matched by other countries that saw our approaches' value, but surpassed. In recent years, we have needed to consider what we have been doing and what we can achieve. This year's changes to section 481 have been warmly welcomed, as they are what the industry wants. On the basis of its advice, the changes will add to Ireland's restoration greatly and increase the number of productions that come here.

I am informed that this year's pipeline looks good and that there is potential for much business to come our way. I am sure that, like all industries, the film industry is not immune to the economic climate, but the situation looks good.

Deputy Olivia Mitchell: I want to be associated with the congratulations offered to our successful authors and those films that have done so well in recent months. I read Mr. Barry's wonderful book and recently saw "In Bruges".

Deputy Martin Cullen: It is a great film.

Deputy Olivia Mitchell: From an arts point of view, it is interesting to see two quintessential Irish works travelling so well. The story of the girl in *The Secret Scripture* could only occur in Ireland and the dark humour of "In Bruges" is very Irish.

Deputy Martin Cullen: Yes.

Deputy Olivia Mitchell: Continuing investment in the arts would seem to be a good idea. While section 484 has been enhanced—

Deputy Martin Cullen: 481.

Deputy Olivia Mitchell: Yes. Those enhancements are slight. Given the industry's genuine problems, a cap of €50 million means that large American movies will never be produced here. Many individual investors must also be gathered together because of the cap on the amount that each individual may invest.

Deputy Martin Cullen: That is why we have changed it.

Deputy Olivia Mitchell: The amount is not significant.

Deputy Martin Cullen: I am informed that it is more than enough. The industry is happy with the amount.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Allow the Deputy to continue.

Deputy Martin Cullen: I am positively interacting with her.

Deputy Olivia Mitchell: The industry is worried that the provisions will be set in stone until 2012. Is that correct? I was not clear on the matter.

Deputy Martin Cullen: That is what is currently in place.

Deputy Olivia Mitchell: All of the incentives in question have been up for grabs for several years. There is a feeling in the industry that it is living from year to year and does not know what will occur. The industry, one of the few that is still successful, is important to Ireland and we should cherish it.

Deputy Martin Cullen: I agree with the Deputies. When people discuss the film industry, they often consider it in a small box to one side. However, a considerable portion of the knowledge economy and our creative energy lies within the audiovisual sector. It is from where all of the people in question are coming and where the creative genii lies. Actually, I should have said "genius".

Deputy Olivia Mitchell: Genii, too.

Deputy Martin Cullen: It employs more than 7,000 people compared to fewer than 1,000 five or six years ago. The amount of talent available in Ireland is recognised worldwide. I am told that €50 million will attract some large movies. Exceptional blockbusters might rightly cost more, but we may be able to catch some films up to the €50 million mark. The indications I have received are that 100% tax relief and the €50,000 cap will have a substantial impact. There is much confidence in the industry generally about what may be attracted to Ireland this year, notwithstanding the stresses under which this industry, like others, is being placed.

Tourism Industry.

98. **Deputy Seán Barrett** asked the Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism if he has had discussions with the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform or the Department of Foreign Affairs regarding the impact the cost of visas is having on tourism here; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2330/09]

100. **Deputy Kieran O'Donnell** asked the Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism if he has received representations from the tourism bodies regarding the impact on tourism here of the non-Schengen area visa arrangements; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2395/09]

Deputy Martin Cullen: I propose to take Questions Nos. 98 and 100 together.

As the Deputy will be aware, immigration policy is primarily a matter for my colleague the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform and its implementation is a matter for the relevant authorities, including the Garda National Immigration Bureau and the Irish Naturalisation and Immigration Service.

The Department of Foreign Affairs is currently responsible for setting visa fees. However, the Deputies will be aware that, under the terms of the Immigration, Residence and Protection

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Bill currently before the Oireachtas, this responsibility will transfer to the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform. I am advised that the cost of visas for Ireland is broadly in line with costs internationally and is a necessary charge to cover the cost of processing the visa application.

New and developing markets, such as India and China, are potentially of significant importance to Irish tourism. Visitors from these markets stay twice as long as the average holidaymaker, have the highest spend per visit, have a higher propensity to travel throughout the island of Ireland and make significant economic contributions to many elements of the tourism sector. Obviously, to fully exploit the opportunities presented, Ireland needs to be competitive on all fronts. Visitors from these countries typically require visas to enter Ireland. I am advised that the ability of potential visitors to secure the necessary visas in an efficient and cost-effective manner, when compared with our competitor destinations, is an important element of our competitiveness.

Tourism Ireland, which is responsible for marketing the island of Ireland overseas, conducted a review of new and developing markets, including India, China and 17 other markets. This review, completed in late 2007, highlighted the potential for increased tourism from Asia and the Middle East and set significant targets to attract a total of 475,000 visitors from new and developing markets by 2013.

Tourism Ireland has been in communication with my Department with some ideas for discussion in respect of the implementation of immigration policy and issuing of visas, in so far as this impacts on the promotion of inbound tourism, which may be what the Deputy is driving at. My Department has engaged with the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform on these issues. Discussions to progress these matters are ongoing.

The Deputies will appreciate that migration and border controls are complex and sensitive, affecting not only tourism of various kinds but also labour market policies and inward investment within the overall context of sovereignty. However, I am confident that, working in partnership, the immigration authorities and the tourism bodies can ensure that the visitor experiences of Ireland compare with any of our competitors.

Deputy Olivia Mitchell: Perhaps the Minister would reiterate which Department is currently responsible for setting visa fees.

Deputy Martin Cullen: The Department of Foreign Affairs but the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform will shortly take on that responsibility.

Deputy Olivia Mitchell: This issue has been raised with me by a number of tourist bodies. I accept the Minister's statement that our visa costs are roughly in line with those of other countries. However, in our case, it is an added cost. As the Minister stated, people visiting Ireland from China, India or the Middle East may come here as part of a tour that commences in Paris and moves on to London. These people are required to pay €60 for a Schengen visa which allows them entry into Paris, €100 for a visa to gain entry to London and a further €100 in visa fees to gain entry into Ireland. All of this adds to the overall cost of one's journey. Many people believe they have seen Europe once they have seen Paris and visiting Ireland may not be the most important issue on their minds.

We are disadvantaging ourselves. We should either reduce the visa fee or abolish it. Which is of greater value, the revenue derived from visa fees or the revenue from extra business? In terms of tourism, any growth in this area is likely to come from countries such as China and India and the eastern world rather than from western world.

Another disincentive in this regard is that people who apply for visas in, say, China and so on, must collect them from their nearest consulate or embassy. This is all very well if one lives in Ireland where no journey is more than 300 km. However, having to travel thousands of miles to collect a visa is a huge disincentive. The Minister referred earlier to a review in this regard and it is important such a review takes place. Also, this requirement is a particular barrier to children travelling here from Chernobyl, many of whom are required to travel to Moscow to collect visas, which is a huge imposition on them. Thousands of children come here every year from Chernobyl.

I ask that the Minister consult on this matter with the Departments of Foreign Affairs or Justice, Equality and Law Reform to see if anything can be done in terms of how this system works and the actual cost in that regard, a self-imposed barrier which should be abolished.

Deputy Martin Cullen: In my view — I believe Deputy Mitchell agrees with me — is that those markets have huge potential. I have no doubt in my mind about that. The more wealth created in the Middle East, Asia, India and China in particular the greater will be the numbers of people travelling here. If we are to attract directly into Ireland the volume of visitors which I believe are available, we will have to change our mindset in terms of how we operate this system. Departments, and those operating the system, are up for that. There is a greater understanding now of the requirement to reduce complexities in this area and equally of ensuring a proper balance in terms of cost and so on. The fee is largely to cover administration of the visa application. There is no excess involved.

Deputy Olivia Mitchell: I accept that.

Deputy Martin Cullen: Clearly, the potential for growth in terms of visitors from China, India, the Middle East and from Australia, if we can get direct services into Ireland, is enormous. The system will shortly become the responsibility of the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform which will take a fresh and streamlined approach to ensuring it is as efficient and as accessible as possible to those wishing to legitimately visit our country.

Deputy Olivia Mitchell: What is the timescale in terms of the introduction of changes and so on?

Deputy Martin Cullen: I believe legislation on the matter is currently before the House.

Departmental Agencies.

99. **Deputy Pat Rabbitte** asked the Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism the progress on the amalgamation of the National Gallery of Ireland, the Irish Museum of Modern Art and the Crawford Gallery; if legislation will be required to enact the amalgamation; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2255/09]

136. **Deputy Joan Burton** asked the Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism when the National Gallery of Ireland, the Irish Museum of Modern Art and the Crawford Gallery will be amalgamated; the amount that will be saved as a result of this amalgamation; his views on whether this amalgamation is feasible and practical; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2249/09]

Deputy Martin Cullen: I propose to take Questions Nos. 99 and 136 together.

Primary legislation will be required to give effect to the Government decision to combine the three galleries referred to, while retaining the separate brand identities and niches of the Museum of Modern Art and the National Gallery.

[Deputy Martin Cullen.]

As I stated in my reply to Questions Nos. 76, 77 and 84 of 19 November 2008, the corporate, legislative and accommodation positions of each of the institutions is being examined with a view to the drawing up of a plan of action to give effect to the Government decision. My Department is also investigating the functional and logistical requirements of each institution and the adjustments that will be required. The challenges are detailed and multifaceted and it would be premature at this point to give definite dates.

A consultative process with the directors of the institutions referred to above is under way under various headings, including governance, shared management structures, unified support services and resources.

Deputy Mary Upton: I wonder about the rationale behind all of this. Is it simply a cost saving exercise? Amalgamation of the Crawford Gallery in Cork, the Irish Museum of Modern Art and National Gallery appears, in many ways, a little odd. The Minister referred earlier to cultural tourism. I accept he has replied to this issue on a number of occasions but perhaps he will comment on whether co-ordination of the three cultural institutions will in some way dilute that value.

Deputy Martin Cullen: I agree with the Deputy. If the outcome of this were to dilute the value of the institutions, I would not proceed with the process. There are obvious synergies between the three galleries referred to. For instance, a question arises as to whether 40 board members are needed. That is probably not necessary.

Equally, I accept there are important brand issues between the institutions. The Museum of Modern Art is a distinct brand that has currency worldwide. Every country has a museum of modern art. People have their own expectations in terms of what constitutes a museum of modern art as opposed to a traditional national gallery. This is not about cost savings though if it throws up cost savings, we welcome them. Given the importance of cultural tourism to the whole tourism product and its increasing importance into the future, we are seeking to enhance the quality and ability of the three products to continue to be successful as a draw at home and internationally.

Deputy Mary Upton: I put it to the Minister that were it not a cost saving exercise this amalgamation would more than likely not be taking place. That they are located in three different areas, the Crawford Gallery in Cork and the two other galleries in different parts of Dublin, means there is no real rationale for amalgamating them. I appreciate what the Minister is saying about the board members, and I tend to agree with him that smaller numbers at board level can be quite effective. I have no problem whatsoever with a reduction in the numbers, but aside from that, I understand that significant legislation will be required to bring about this amalgamation. Can the Minister indicate what sort of timeframe is envisaged?

Deputy Martin Cullen: In saying 40, by the way, I was not casting any aspersions, and neither is the Deputy, on the quality of the board members who are in place. I was simply commenting on the size and unwieldiness in some respects of such large numbers.

Deputy Mary Upton: Not at all, absolutely.

Deputy Martin Cullen: Some countries have gone down this road quite successfully, in terms of having one overarching body, one national board, for example, the national galleries of Ireland, within which are the various other bodies such as the Irish Museum of Modern Art or the Crawford Gallery, in Cork. I am waiting to see the outcome of this exercise, and on that

basis we shall decide what legislation is necessary. However, I would prefer to get this right rather than opt for some simplistic cost-saving exercise.

Physical Education Facilities.

101. **Deputy Eamon Gilmore** asked the Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism the steps his Department has taken towards meeting the commitment contained in the programme for Government to promote sport in schools; the work his Department has facilitated with the Department of Education and Science; and if he will make a statement on the matter.
[2270/09]

Deputy Martin Cullen: The five year Agreed Programme for Government includes a series of commitments, in respect of sport, for achievement in the period to 2012. I am pleased to say that action is being taken in a progressive manner in these areas to ensure these targets are met in the lifetime of the Government.

As Deputies will be aware, many of the commitments on the promotion of sports in schools are a matter for the Minister for Education and Science. However, two specific commitments relate to the operation of the sports capital programme — the promotion of greater sharing of school and community sports facilities, making it a condition of the sports capital programme that facilities be made available to schools where appropriate; and encouraging more schools to apply for funding under the sports capital programme by collaborating with their local sports clubs or community groups.

Under the 2008 sports capital programme, schools making joint applications with local sports clubs were required to provide evidence of formal agreements with local clubs that guaranteed the clubs access to school facilities for at least 30 hours per week throughout the year. In assessing applications, extra marks are awarded to sports clubs that can show that they are allowing local schools to use their facilities.

I will be discussing with my colleague, the Minister for Education and Science, how his programme for the provision of sports halls in schools and the sports capital programme might be dovetailed to provide greater value for money and enhanced facilities both for schools and the local community users.

Work on the development of a national sports facility strategy is at an advanced stage in my Department. The aim of the strategy is to provide high level policy direction for future investment at national, regional and local levels. An inter-agency steering group was established to oversee this work and includes representation from the Department of Education and Science. The work of this group 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.

In addition, the Irish Sports Council, which is funded by my Department, has a statutory role in encouraging the promotion, development and co-ordination of sport. Through the Irish Sports Council, the national governing bodies of sport and the local sports partnerships, there are many programmes being funded which aim to increase participation in sport by children and young people. I would like to take this opportunity to compliment the people who are involved in this work on the ground in introducing our children to sport that will complement and enhance both our school and community sport programmes.

Deputy Mary Upton: Unfortunately the situation in many schools at present is that children receive relatively little physical education time. I appreciate this is primarily a matter for the Department of Education and Science, but it is very important that the level of co-operation the Minister is talking about is progressed, in terms of the shared facilities. It is crucial, given

[Deputy Mary Upton.]

the current economic climate, that the facilities which are available are shared, and shared easily. A major inhibitor in terms of sharing facilities seems to be insurance. I am not sure what the Minister's role could be in this, but it is very important that this is facilitated in every possible way. Schools which have facilities should make them available to outside groups and also community groups with sports facilities should make them available to schools. However, insurance is one of the key factors that presents a significant inhibitor in this case.

Deputy Martin Cullen: All Members will be aware of such problems within their local communities. Given the resources that have been provided through my Department and others in recent years, there is no doubt that the facilities available have been increased and enhanced enormously in recent years, and they should be maximised. There is nothing worse than seeing facilities being used a couple of times a week and remaining empty for the weekend, when others would like to use them. That is one of the issues we want to see resolved. We should like to see closer co-operation and co-ordination between local communities, schools and indeed local clubs to get better value in terms of usage from the facilities. We are trying to achieve this and it is one of the things I am examining.

Until one gets fully into the job, one does not always realise what is going on. I was at a number of venues throughout the country with the local sports partnerships, run either by the FAI or other organisations. The work they are doing, particularly with disadvantaged children, is remarkable. Having an iconic figure such as Packie Bonner involved in that programme and visiting schools has an enormous impact on children in terms of their desire to participate in some of these programmes. Where disadvantage and the number of young girls, in particular, participating in sport, is lower than we like to see, some really good programmes are being run in co-ordination with the Irish Sports Council and some of the national governing bodies. On the capital side, we clearly would like to see and will try to continue to get, more synergy between education, in its purest form, and sports, in terms of the use and maximisation of facilities.

Deputy James Reilly: I concur with the Minister's complimentary comments on those who are involved in this initiative to bring shared facilities to communities and schools. I want to ask him in particular about the swimming project at Skerries, which has been in place for ten years, with funding available from the Department, which could not be availed of. Will he confirm that the funding has now been transferred to the pool project at Balbriggan, an area which is sorely in need of facilities?

When the situation changes and the Skerries project is ready, perhaps he could look upon it favourably, once the economy has turned around.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: That is worthy of a separate question.

Deputy Olivia Mitchell: The Deputy will be a Minister by then.

Deputy Martin Cullen: I am trying to be as flexible as I can, because I want to see——

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: As I am, myself.

Deputy Martin Cullen: Does the Leas-Cheann Comhairle want me to answer?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Absolutely.

Deputy Martin Cullen: I am trying to be as flexible as I can. The answer to the Deputy is "Yes", as I wanted to facilitate that. It was quite clear, within the area, that one project could

not proceed. I did not want the area to be entirely without a pool. Quite clearly the other project was ready to run, and I thought that was the sensible approach. I must compliment all the local councillors and others involved because a unanimous approach was needed and that is what emerged from the local community. I am very pleased about that.

In the years to come we shall obviously be opening a second access programme on swimming pools, and I am clear——

Deputy Olivia Mitchell: Less of the “we”.

Deputy James Reilly: Who knows what the next Government will be?

Deputy Martin Cullen: The intention is, certainly, to continue with that programme. It has been fantastically successful. To go from nothing to more than 50 swimming pools around the country is great and is having a massive impact. In the Deputy’s area of special interest, health, the impact on children and young adults, as well as older people, is just phenomenal. We are very pleased with the programme and want to complete it in the next year or two.

Deputy James Reilly: Can I take it as confirmation that the project funding will transfer to Balbriggan?

Deputy Martin Cullen: The process is in place, and I do not have an issue with it.

Deputy Olivia Mitchell: I agree that the swimming pool programme is great. The tragedy is that it cannot continue this year, at any rate. The reality is that it is not 50 new pools, but nine. The rest were refurbishment projects. Just to clarify, the figure might be nine or 11, but it is nothing like 50.

Deputy Martin Cullen: I am not long in the Department, and I have opened nine already myself.

Deputy Olivia Mitchell: They may have been refurbished.

Deputy Martin Cullen: No, they were all brand new.

Deputy Olivia Mitchell: The Minister should go back and check it.

Deputy Martin Cullen: If there were refurbishments in some cases, one could not possibly call them such. They were literally——

Deputy Olivia Mitchell: I am just saying it is not adding to the total sum of swimming pools around the country. It would be wrong to say that.

Deputy Martin Cullen: ——entirely new. I would not consider €15 million on a project a refurbishment.

Natural History Museum.

102. **Deputy Paul Kehoe** asked the Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism when the Natural History Museum will reopen; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2379/09]

110. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism the progress that has been made to secure emergency funding for the refurbishment of the Natural History Museum; the reason no refurbishment was progressed in the 18 months from the time of the

[Deputy Róisín Shortall.]

first accident in this building; the expected timeframe for the reinstatement of this building; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2257/09]

Deputy Martin Cullen: I propose to take Questions Nos. 102 and 110 together.

An extensive refurbishment and redevelopment plan has been drawn up for the Natural History Museum at an estimated cost outside the scope and capacity of current budgets. In view of this cost and the extensive nature of the proposed plan and, as the reopening of the Natural History Museum is a priority, the Office of Public Works, at the request of my Department, is at present examining alternative approaches to facilitate reopening of the Natural History Museum at the earliest possible opportunity.

The National Museum of Ireland has commenced work on the documentation of exhibits in the Natural History Museum. The opportunity to address this work, which is provided by the closure of the museum, will be fully utilised. I also understand from the National Museum that it will display some of the natural history collection in the Riding School, Collins Barracks, from the end of April 2009. The style of the exhibition is intended to reflect the familiar vintage exhibition, using popular exhibits and some furnishings relocated from the Natural History Museum.

Deputy Olivia Mitchell: The Minister should not start me on Collins Barracks. I will stick to the Natural History Museum. It is more than 18 months since the stairs collapsed in the Natural History Museum and it was closed. Some €15 million was put into the national development plan for essential improvements in the Natural History Museum, namely, a small extension, a lift and a little coffee area. The lift was essential from a health and safety point of view to bring people to the second floor toilet. This was planned long before the stairs collapsed. The reason we were told 12 months ago that the work on the museum could not even begin was that the repair of the stairs was to be incorporated into the extension and refurbishment work. Now we are being told the refurbishment and extension work will not happen. Where is the €15 million? Is it gone? Can we take it that this will not happen? When can we realistically expect the work on at least making the museum safe to begin?

Deputy Martin Cullen: I hope the Natural History Museum will re-open this year. That is the plan. Obviously this is not in terms of the major investment which is part of the OPW budgets. If Deputy Mitchell puts down a question to the Minister responsible for that, I am sure she will get the answer. I am anxious that it does not remain closed. If we cannot proceed with the big project, let us do the next best thing. Can we get the facility opened? Can we get the visitor numbers back rolling through the property, make it safe, secure and presentable for the visiting public?

Deputy Olivia Mitchell: I accept all that, but there is a conservation issue in terms of the heat and lighting controls in that building and this must be addressed. It is an issue of conservation, cost control and safety. Is the €15 million gone? That is my question. The Minister's predecessor, Lord have mercy on him, promised a safety audit before that building would be reopened, and that is essential to establish confidence among the staff, never mind the visitors. Will that be done? Is the Minister satisfied the building can be reopened based simply on the repairs to the stairs?

Deputy Martin Cullen: The Deputy's questions are important and I suggest she will get a fuller and more correct response from the Minister responsible if she puts down a question to him. The budget for that project was in the OPW. It still has budgets, although they are scaled back like everybody else's.

Deputy Olivia Mitchell: Is the Minister telling me has not even spoken to the OPW? Ultimate responsibility lies with him.

Deputy Martin Cullen: I set out the situation in some detail. Of course I have spoken to the OPW, but the specific question the Deputy is asking me is not in my budget. I am directing her to where the answers to those specific questions lie. I am not trying to be evasive. I do not have that specific information. If Deputy Mitchell has put it down in the question I would have given her the answer.

Deputy Olivia Mitchell: The Minister knows nothing about the Natural History Museum.

Deputy Martin Cullen: Of course I do. I am the one who is getting it open, not keeping it closed.

Deputy Olivia Mitchell: What has the Minister done? He has not even spoken to the OPW and does not know what the plans are.

Deputy Mary Upton: It is very disappointing that this project has not been given a firm commitment. It is probably one of the most interesting and attractive tourist attractions, particularly for school children. Only this morning my colleague, Deputy Tuffy, told me her four year old daughter is very interested in dinosaurs and fossils and that she would particularly like to see them available. We have some other ideas on that.

Deputy Olivia Mitchell: Bring her in here.

Deputy Mary Upton: The natural history aspect of it is particularly significant. Are we happy about the conservation of the exhibits, given that this project is to be put on the long finger indefinitely? What happened to the part of the exhibition that was supposed to go to County Mayo?

Deputy Olivia Mitchell: I think it went.

Deputy Mary Upton: Did it go?

Deputy Martin Cullen: In April of this year an exhibition will be put on in the Riding School in Collins Barracks and that will be warmly welcomed by those who want to visit this type of exhibition. They will use the popular exhibits from the Natural History Museum. In light of the economic circumstances, if it is not possible to proceed, I do not want the place to lie dormant. I want the Natural History Museum back in its home next door and that will be possible, albeit not on the basis of a totally refurbished building. However, it will be of a standard that will be safe and accessible to the public; otherwise, it could not possibly be opened.

Departmental Bodies.

103. **Deputy Joe Costello** asked the Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism if he has instructed all of the bodies under his aegis to produce annual output statements; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2264/09]

Deputy Martin Cullen: As the Deputy will be aware, annual output statements were introduced in 2007 as a mechanism for Dáil scrutiny of the annual Estimates of expenditure of Government Departments, as part of the Government's ongoing budgetary reform measures. The output statements link budgets to performance targets and, from 2008, they report on progress made in achieving the targets set the previous year.

[Deputy Martin Cullen.]

Since 2007, and in accordance with the Government-approved template, the annual output statements of the Department have detailed budgets and associated targets over the three main programme areas of tourism, sport and arts, culture, film and archives. Responsibility for the implementation of policy across these three sectoral areas rests primarily with the relevant agencies under the aegis of the Department.

Accordingly, although budgets and targets for each of these agencies have not been separately identified in the Department's output statements, their performance-related budgeting is implicitly contained under each of the programme headings, reflecting the joined-up nature of policy implementation between the Department and its agencies. In its report on the Irish public service, the OECD was complimentary about the annual output statement approach, which is recognised as central to the core requirement for a more integrated, performance-centred approach to the management of resources. Nevertheless, the OECD called for enhancements to the output statement approach and this call has been reflected in the task force report, *Transforming Public Services*. In accordance with a recent decision of the Government, various specific proposals for enhancements, as recommended by the task force, will be implemented in the output statement for 2009 currently being prepared by the Department.

With specific regard to the recommendation of the task force that all State agencies should publish output statements relating the resources allocated to them with target achievements, I understand the Department of Finance is currently examining this recommendation with a view to issuing guidance to Departments and agencies on the modalities of its implementation. In particular, it is important to ensure consistency and complementarity among and between agencies and Departments. Accordingly, I have not as yet instructed the agencies under the aegis of the Department to produce their own output statements, pending the finalisation of arrangements at a central level.

Deputy Mary Upton: I welcome the progress in this area but have one key comment on it. Here we have agencies getting State money, but very much at arm's length from us, the elected representatives. While some of these agencies come in to committees and we have an opportunity to question them, not all of them do so. When we want information on a particular agency and put a question to the Minister, we are referred back to that agency. It is very difficult to track what is happening with them. The key point is that we need more direct access to and input from those agencies so we can see what is going on.

Deputy Martin Cullen: To some degree I agree with Deputy Upton. I have a view on many of these agencies. While the Deputy might think it is difficult to get information, I often find it hard, as the responsible Minister, and that is not healthy. As politicians we peddled a line for years, and others peddled it on our behalf, that everything has to be so-called "independent". Nobody is independent. Everybody has a specific point of view, to which they are entitled. I believe in far more ministerial responsibility and direct involvement with many of the agencies.

Many of the agencies can make the case in a very public way for funding. That is fine and I have no issue with that, but dare not any Minister question how this funding is distributed. I have issues with that; I do not like it. It is wrong that I, as an elected representative and appointed to Government as the Minister responsible for this area, sometimes find out what the agencies are up to through the national media. They show no courtesy towards the Department regarding what they are doing. I agree that there are issues which have gone beyond what the House might have intended in terms of answerability. A better balance must be found between independence as some people like it and responsibility for the substantial resources given to

many of these agencies, which is taxpayers' money. Some feel that they are answerable to nobody. I do not accept that and I do not like it.

Deputy Mary Upton: Will the Minister use his good offices to progress this matter? We would all welcome that and it would be in the interest of transparency and accountability for us to have access to that information. I am pleased to hear his reply and hope that he will move in the appropriate way to advance this matter.

Deputy Martin Cullen: This will not be popular in many quarters but after 20 odd years in this House I believe that the people on all sides of the House are more than capable of being responsible for taxpayers' money. I do not accept that outside agencies are more responsible than we would be.

Arts Funding.

104. **Deputy Richard Bruton** asked the Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism the level of funding allocated to the ACCESS programme under the national development plan which has been depleted to date; when he expects the next round of the programme to be announced; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2333/09]

Deputy Martin Cullen: The Arts and Culture Capital Enhancement Support Scheme, ACCESS, is a key element in the Government's regional arts strategy and has greatly improved access to and participation in the arts for many nationwide. The scheme has been widely acknowledged as a significant intervention in the provision of quality cultural spaces.

Facilities funded to date include integrated arts centres, theatres, galleries, studio, and creative and performance spaces. In this manner my Department provides the bulk of capital funding for building and refurbishing arts facilities around the country, mainly in the not-for-profit sector, while the Arts Council provides the ongoing revenue support for many of the facilities.

A total of €81 million has been included under the National Development Plan 2007 to 2013 for ACCESS. In 2007-08 grants totalling €42.7 million were allocated under the ACCESS II scheme and since the commencement of the current NDP €15.3 million has been drawn down.

While there are no plans to announce a further round of funding under the arts capital projects during 2009 the matter will be kept under review in the context of available resources.

Deputy Olivia Mitchell: The NDP is an historic document at this point but it allocated in the region of €83 million to the ACCESS programme. Am I correct in that?

Deputy Martin Cullen: It is €32.5 million in the current round.

Deputy Olivia Mitchell: That is the current round but in the NDP there was just over €80 million. I understand there was €32 million and then €10 million. Is that correct?

Deputy Martin Cullen: Yes, it was approximately €80 million.

Deputy Olivia Mitchell: Around the country people are asking what is to happen to the other €40 million. Is there to be an ACCESS III programme as included in the arts and culture plan?

Deputy Martin Cullen: I am not in a position—

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I have not yet called on the Minister to respond.

Deputy Olivia Mitchell: The ACCESS programme has produced wonderful venues and arts centres around the country but unfortunately in many cases they are struggling. The Minister is aware of this and following the cut in the Arts Council funding the touring programme will contract, which means the venues have less opportunity to generate revenue. The Minister gives them capital revenue and when the council has the funding it gives them current revenue but there is no money for mini-capital projects such as painting, lighting, heating and sound systems and because the centres cannot generate the revenue themselves they are deteriorating for lack of maintenance. If there is any money available it should be put into these mini-capital projects to preserve what we have invested in and to offer the opportunity for some construction work around the country.

Deputy Martin Cullen: I intend, as soon as humanly and economically possible, to open the next round of ACCESS. It will not happen this year but I have not given up on opening up the third round of a successful programme. I take the Deputy's point with regard to the excellence of the facilities and the need to find mechanisms to keep them alive and operating and to deal with normal maintenance. If issues arise in that connection I will examine them.

Written Answers follow Adjournment Debate.

Adjournment Debate Matters.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I wish to advise the House of the following matters in respect of which notice has been given under Standing Order 21 and the name of the Member in each case: (1) Deputy Leo Varadkar — noting that a commitment was given to provide a primary care centre in Corduff, Dublin 15 in the HSE capital programme and that little progress has been made to date, Dáil Eireann calls on the Minister for Health and Children to make a report to the house on the project and to use her influence to ensure that it proceeds; (2) Deputy Frank Feighan — to ask the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform for up to date information regarding the remand centre in Castlerea; to outline when will this centre be completed and how many staff will be employed there; and if he will he make a statement on the matter; (3) Deputy Joe McHugh — to discuss two matters relating to a ferry service in the north west, the Lough Foyle and Lough Swilly ferry services; the view of the Northern Ireland Executive that the Greencastle, County Donegal, to Gilligan, County Derry, ferry service is an international crossing; and the need for the North-South Ministerial Council to allocate joint funding to the north Atlantic passage initiative in order to secure ferry services on Lough Foyle and Lough Swilly; (4) Deputy Simon Coveney — to ask the Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources to outline in detail why promised Government funding to support the State's ocean energy programme has not been forthcoming to date and to make a clear statement on what funding will be available this year, and where that funding will be targeted, in order to actively support the growth and development of the ocean energy sector; (5) Deputies Tom Hayes and John O'Mahony and Seymour Crawford and Michael Creed — the payment of grants under the farm waste management scheme; (6) Deputy Timmy Dooley — the need for the Minister for Health and Children to outline what plans are to be put in place to reduce the waiting time for psychological assessment for children with suspected autism in Clare; (7) Deputy James Bannon — the need for the Minister for Health and Children to ensure that after a wait of 12 years a full complement of appropriate services for secondary care facilities is provided under phase 2B of Longford-Westmeath Hospital, Mullingar, County Westmeath, to ensure patient safety and best possible outcomes; (8) Deputy Finian McGrath — funding for the new centre for St. Joseph's for the Visually Impaired, Drumcondra, Dublin 9; (9) Deputy Ulick Burke — to ask the Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment, Deputy Mary Coughlan, to indicate her plans for FÁS apprentices who have been made redun-

dant by their sponsors and who cannot find an alternative placement in the current climate; (10) Deputy Paul Connaughton — the cessation of turf cutting on raised bogs; (11) Deputies Joe Carey, Noel J. Coonan and Pat Breen — the reorganisation of accident and emergency services by the Health Service Executive in the mid-west area; (12) Deputy Tom Sheahan — to ask the Minister for Health and Children to explain the decision to close the Rowen unit in St. Columbanus Home, with the loss of 21 beds for male patients in Kerry's premier geriatric nursing home and to make a statement on the matter; and (13) Deputy Thomas McEllistrim — to call on the Minister for Education and Science to establish a support system of laboratory technicians for secondary schools and to introduce this on a pilot basis in the towns of Tralee, Listowel and Abbeyfeale of North Kerry and West Limerick.

The matters raised by the following Deputies have been selected for discussion: Deputies Joe Carey, Noel J. Coonan and Pat Breen; Tom Hayes, John O'Mahony, Seymour Crawford and Michael Creed; and Paul Connaughton.

The Economy: Statements (Resumed).

Deputy Arthur Morgan: The front-line casualties in the economic crisis we are debating today are the thousands of workers who are losing their jobs every month, and hundreds of viable small to medium sized businesses which are going under because of the credit crunch.

In the past four weeks Dell has announced 1,900 job losses with a further related 4,000 jobs to go; Kostal has let 300 people go; 400 workers have been made redundant in Dundalk and last Monday it was announced that 750 workers in Ulster Bank will join the growing queues at our social welfare offices. While this is happening the Government is doing nothing. Everyone, including the dogs on street, can see that the Government has not done a single thing for Irish workers since this crisis started six months ago. The Government has also ignored small and medium sized businesses. The only noticeable measure the Government has taken has been to bail out its greedy property developing friends through the banking sector. I cannot think of one other move apart from that.

Thanks to this inertia, almost 300,000 people are on jobseeker's benefit and the Minister for Social Welfare, Deputy Mary Hanafin, admits that staff in welfare offices are "working flat out" to process welfare applications. While our dreadful economic circumstances are as clear as daylight, the Government's plan of action is as clear as mud. Over the past four months we have seen one woolly document after another proposing, and leading to, nothing. The Government has done a U-turn on almost every decision it has made and the poor Minister for Finance, Deputy Brian Lenihan and the so-called "excellent people" at the Department of Finance have got nearly every estimate they have made completely wrong.

We had been led to believe that the stimulus package produced last December would provide us with a clear path out of this mess. Instead we got a flimsy discussion document long on waffle and short on ideas. Despite the criticisms from all quarters, the latest framework document headings which were presented by the Department of Finance in the negotiations with the social partners have been described as "vague". According to reports this document did not even mention public sector pay cuts although the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform stated last Monday that nothing could be ruled out.

The confusion that the Taoiseach and the Minister for Finance have created through their mixed signals and dithering has reinforced the public perception that the Government does not know what it is doing. If it does know it is deliberately creating confusion so that it can implement the most severe cutbacks imaginable while the confusion still reigns. Amidst all this uncertainty we are now one of the last countries in the western world to implement a recovery plan.

[Deputy Arthur Morgan.]

There has been much talk over the last few weeks of “zombie banks” but the leadership comes from a zombie Government that has helped create our zombie banks. The Minister for Finance unbelievably claimed last week on BBC’s “Newsnight” programme that our economy is vibrant. If the Minister bothered to listen to the 5,000 Irish workers who are losing their jobs every week, he would hear a different story. It is this type of nonsense from the Government and senior officials in the banking sector that makes it far more difficult to get to grips with our dire circumstances.

The banking crisis is central to the Government’s failures to do anything right at the moment. Despite the Government’s claims, this banking crisis was very much of its own making. In the last four months, we have seen the disaster go from bad to worse and we still have no evidence that the Government has finally got on top of it. At this stage, I dread to switch on the news on Sunday nights in case I hear the Government’s latest bird-brained idea, probably cooked up by its friends in the banking and property sectors.

The Government’s guarantee scheme was described by the Minister for Finance last September as “the cheapest bailout in the world”. The taxpayer is now set to take on a €73 billion loan book on top of the Government’s €440 billion guarantee scheme and its €10 billion botched recapitalisation. The aim of the latest nationalisation scheme was to get a corrupt, debt-riddled bank and its cash-strapped builders off the hook. At the press conference about the Government’s botched recapitalisation scheme, the Minister stated that “nationalisation would be affirming that we have no confidence in the bank as a bank to survive”. He then went on to state that under State ownership, it will be “business as usual” for Anglo Irish Bank. The last thing we need is “business as usual” at Anglo Irish Bank. The latest news on the Anglo Irish Bank saga is that the bank will be transformed into some kind of skip for bad debts, which would enable other banks to get off scot free. Why should the taxpayer have to pay for the mess that the banking institutions created themselves, with the help of the Government?

While Irish workers are being asked to bail out the banks, the likes of Seán FitzPatrick and Roddy Molloy are riding off into the sunset with golden handshakes worth hundreds of thousands of euro and pensions worth more than €100,000 per annum. Does the Minister find that acceptable? These people are walking away without being sacked. They resign in advance and walk off with these golden handshakes and huge pensions, at a time when many workers across the private sector are threatened with losing their pensions. The workers at Waterford Wedgwood face the prospect of seeing their pension schemes wiped out, yet these characters are walking off with their huge pensions while the Government does absolutely nothing about it. The public cannot understand that. As a Member of the House, I cannot understand how that is happening and how the Government is presiding over such a catastrophe. I really believe it warrants an explanation.

When will we finally see legislation to outlaw the behaviour of the likes of Seán FitzPatrick? When will there be wholesale changes in our regulators to ensure that it does not keep on happening? While the Government gives golden handshakes to the likes of Roddy Molloy and others, it has shifted responsibility onto public service workers for the mess that it has created. Having listened to senior Government members, IBEC officials and even Fine Gael, one would swear the deficit in public finances is solely down to our public service. Over the past number of months, the attacks on the public sector from these parties have intensified and the public sector has been wrongly described as “inefficient” and “bloated”, while public spending is characterised as “unsustainable”. There are some inefficiencies in the public sector, but these can be dealt with and managed quickly.

As an economist stated in yesterday's edition of *The Irish Times*, the crisis in public finance was not created by the public sector, but rather by the property market. Successive Fianna Fáil led Governments, because of their cosy relationship with developers, made this country dependent on property taxes and encouraged a property bubble that continued to swell out of all proportions. With the bursting of the property bubble, which is what bubbles usually do, our revenue plummeted. The Taoiseach encouraged this bubble and it is he and the Minister for Finance who continue to prioritise those dodgy developers over our workers, our SMEs and our economy.

Why should the low paid workers in any sector take the hit for that level of incompetence and the incompetence of those around the Government? If there are savings to be made, why do we not start with the Government's friends who can afford it most? Everyone can see that the CEOs of State bodies from FÁS to Coillte are grossly overpaid, and if anyone must take the hit we must start with these people.

We all accept that there are efficiencies which can be delivered by the public sector but this does not mean taking an axe to it. With all the talk of efficiency and adopting a business model, nobody from IBEC to the Fianna Fáil Party has ever once looked at the horrendous waste of State resources as a result of outsourcing to private companies. We have all seen the bills for so-called consultants. I accept that is improving, but it is very late. In the health system, hundreds of millions of euro have been thrown away on subsidising for-profit health care companies which is only draining our public hospitals of resources. Despite all the claims of efficiency by the Minister for Health and Children, the reality is that private health care is inefficient. It is a complete waste of taxpayers' money and an inferior service to the public system. Numerous reports in the United States have proven that for-profit health care companies, of which the Minister and the Taoiseach are so fond, do not provide the same level of care as public hospitals.

Hundreds of millions of euro in tax is foregone by the State in exemptions for investors through the promotion of private hospitals. This is most evident in the co-location strategy that the Government has continued to pursue, despite the objections of those working in our health system. Why can the Government slap an income levy on people barely over the minimum wage and continue to shelter investors from being taxed on their rental income through private hospital adventures? These are not ordinary people, but extremely wealthy individuals who continue to avoid paying taxes despite our plummeting public finances.

How can the Government find the billions to bail out banks and property developers, when there is not a brass farthing for our schools or the elderly? There is not enough funding to hire midwives to allow them do their work properly. The midwife ratio should be one to every 25 births, but in the maternity unit of Our Lady of Lourdes Hospital in Drogheda, the ratio is currently one midwife to every 48 births. That means that the midwives are doing double the work they should be doing, and double the amount of work that is deemed safe, yet this has prevailed for several years. However, people still tell us that the public service is inefficient. It is surely these areas that need to be examined, rather than undermining our front line services and our low-paid workers.

Sinn Féin made a number of proposals in our pre-budget submission to find the resources to deal with the deficit. The Government did not do enough on a standard rate of tax relief, it failed to lift the PRSI ceiling sufficiently and again did nothing to address the litany of tax exemptions that allow investors to evade paying tax. These are the measures that had to be taken; not some sordid and mean-spirited attack on low-paid workers. Had these measures been acted upon we would be well on the way to meeting the €2 billion target set by the Government.

[Deputy Arthur Morgan.]

If the Government wants to get spending under control, it will have to change its “private good, public bad” mindset and put an end to this wasteful outsourcing of our public services. For example, this will mean an end to subsidising the private practice of consultants in public hospitals. The State will have to take control of some useful resources, such as the Corrib gas pipeline. I suggest that it should renationalise our telecommunications network. A major public State bank needs to be established to address these problems. This would involve the nationalisation of a major banking institution to offer credit to small and medium sized enterprises, restructure mortgages to stop families from losing their homes and restore confidence among the Irish people, workers and businesses who have the skills and knowledge to get us out of the current economic turmoil. If we are to encourage economic renewal and secure our public finances, the public will have to come first and property developers will have to follow behind, for a change.

4 o'clock

In the statement he made in the House earlier this afternoon, the Taoiseach argued that as the situation deteriorated, the Government introduced an early budget to make some difficult expenditure and taxation adjustments and give clear signal of its determination to respond to the various economic pressures the country was under. Perhaps some of the more interesting aspects of the Taoiseach’s statement need to be examined in closer detail. It is worth remembering that the Government was on holidays for most of the early part of this crisis last summer. It did not bother to come back. The Spanish Government came back to try to do something about the crisis, at least. In the absence of a prepared plan, the Government’s reaction to the pressure of the public, which had started to appreciate the gravity of the situation, was to introduce a rushed budget in October rather than December. Some people thought it was a good sign that the Government was about to take action, but that was not the case. It decided to take medical cards from older people. Its decision to slash the education budget affected teachers and students. It imposed a 1% income levy on people on the minimum wage. Those three disastrous decisions were reversed, thankfully, following public protests. That was welcome, even if the Government had been forced to back down.

If the Government had accepted the pre-budget submissions of organisations like the Conference of Religious in Ireland and my party, Sinn Féin, we would have made significantly more progress by now. The Taoiseach told us earlier today that the Government had clearly set out the measures it intended to take to support a return to sustainable growth and encourage job creation over the medium term. His contribution set out some vague aspirations, rather than any detailed or specific actions. I would have welcomed some detail. If we had got it, perhaps we could have supported it. We did not get that information, however, which is unfortunate.

In the comments I have made so far, I have dealt primarily with Fianna Fáil’s contribution to this crisis. The presence of the Minister of State, Deputy Sargent, reminds me to speak about the role of the Green Party in government. To be frank, I have not heard any solutions from the Green Party. It has not made any proposals on how to make our way out of the economic mess that has been created by 11 years of virtually the same Government. We may have got a hint of what the Green Party is doing when the leader of that party spoke in Drogheda, which is in my constituency, last Saturday. His contribution to solving the economic crisis was to say that he intended to examine the expenses and allowances of Deputies. The Ceann Comhairle will be more aware than most that Members on every side of this House have been in favour of the reform of the expenses and allowances processes for some time. I do not know why the leader of the Green Party was wagging his finger in Drogheda last Saturday, especially as the Houses of the Oireachtas Commission had announced significant changes to the system of Deputies’ expenses and allowances on the previous Tuesday. He was well out of touch. If that

is the best advice he can give as we try to get out of the economic crisis we face, that sums up the impact of the Green Party in government. It is extremely disappointing and unfortunate.

I hope somebody in the Green Party can remind that party's leadership that policy positions need to be drawn up to deal with this ongoing crisis. Perhaps some of the proposals that have been made by Members on this side of the House can be examined to see if they merit consideration. The Green Party needs to develop some policies if it is to deal with this problem. To completely ignore the biggest economic crisis the State has faced since its foundation is less than worthy of any political party. I will conclude on a constructive note by assuring the Government that if it produces a decent plan, we will support as many elements of it as we can. No plan has been introduced to date. It is about time for a proper plan to be developed and proper structures to be put in place to deal with the economic crisis. We have seen no such plan to date.

Minister for Transport (Deputy Noel Dempsey): I will start on the note on which Deputy Morgan finished. If we need Sinn Féin to come up with bright suggestions to resolve the current economic crisis, we will be waiting for a long time. Contrary to the protestations we heard this morning, this important debate gives Members on all sides of the House an opportunity to state clearly where they stand in the current economic crisis.

Deputy Arthur Morgan: This is not a debate — it is a set of statements.

Deputy Noel Dempsey: It is important that Deputies have an opportunity to offer suggestions and solutions. Deputy Morgan has recognised that this is a serious national crisis. There is nothing to prevent Members of the House from making constructive suggestions and addressing the various issues that have been clearly set out for their information. The only conclusion I can draw from the resistance of Opposition Deputies who have protested that they cannot make suggestions during this debate, because they do not know what the circumstances are, is that their paucity of ideas will be exposed over the next two days. This debate will expose that despite all the verbiage we have heard from the Opposition since last September, it does not have any real solutions. At the end of the debate, it will be interesting to analyse how many good, concrete suggestions will have been made by the Opposition.

I have already listened to some parts of the debate since it started earlier this afternoon. Having been a Member of this House for over 20 years, I have listened to frequent taunts from the Fine Gael benches, in particular, about the negative approach that was taken by Fianna Fáil when it was in opposition in the 1980s.

Deputy Kieran O'Donnell: It is still negative in government.

Deputy Noel Dempsey: I am often reminded of how great Fine Gael was when its former leader, Alan Dukes, initiated the Tallaght strategy in the national interest in the late 1980s. Over the last six months, during a more serious situation than that of the mid-1980s, Fine Gael has been far more negative than Fianna Fáil ever was in this House. I continue to have the highest admiration for Alan Dukes. It is clear that the attitude he took in the 1980s was not typical of Fine Gael, however. He is always cited by Fine Gael as a model politician who put the national interest first. I have often acknowledged in this House, and in person to Mr. Dukes, that he took the correct course of action. While his stance was a positive one, it is clear that it was an aberration from the norm in Fine Gael. His call to patriotic duty, if I can use that phrase, was warmly received in Fianna Fáil at that time. Unfortunately, most of Fine Gael remained true to its negative instincts and got rid of Mr. Dukes at the first available opportunity. Not much has changed in the Fine Gael Party in the intervening 20 years except perhaps that it is impossible to find even one person like Alan Dukes on the party benches.

[Deputy Noel Dempsey.]

I notice of late that Deputy Kenny is trying to portray himself as being more positive, offering all types of solutions to the current crisis. Clearly, he is getting the message from the public that it recognises the extent of the national crisis and that it wants positive solutions rather than the usual political point-scoring we have seen in recent years. However, all the solutions I have seen thus far from Deputy Kenny are either populist or totally ignore the size and extent of the problems we face. Yesterday, for example, he stood in the Chamber in his positive mode to propose a reduction in the VAT rate. He did not specify what that reduction should be but we may assume, given that he was referring to cross-Border shopping and the threat it poses to retail jobs, that he proposes to reduce it temporarily to the current United Kingdom rate. He may have used the word “concede” in this regard.

The issue of cross-Border shopping and the associated loss of retail jobs in the State is serious. However, the result of a reduction in VAT to the United Kingdom rate would be an increase in the revenue shortfall of €2 billion to €5 billion. If Deputy Kenny intended instead to propose that VAT be restored to the pre-budget rate, which was half a percentage point lower, the gap would be €2.5 billion. What type of solution is presented by either of these proposals? Deputies Kenny and Bruton and their Fine Gael colleagues criticised the Government at budget time for aiming at a budget deficit of 6.5%, arguing that it should instead be set at 5.5%. This would require at least an additional €1 billion of spending cuts at a time when Fine Gael opposed every single measure we proposed to cut expenditure. What type of solution is that?

We have listened for the last six or eight months to various Fine Gael spokespersons attacking the public sector, insisting that it is too large and that this and the previous Government were guilty of giving public service staff more money than they deserve. We have heard much talk from Fine Gael about reducing the number of public sector staff and reducing the pay bill. We were lectured consistently and insistently about fiscal rectitude until, lo and behold, decisions have to be made by the Government in regard to the public sector. Suddenly, Fine Gael discovers the public sector is not so bad after all and that its staff are not, after all, overpaid, with the possible exception of some of those fellows earning more than €100,000.

These are just some examples of the types of flip-flop policies pursued by Fine Gael. Instead of taking the realities of the current situation fully into account and putting forward balanced policy proposals, it will instead follow any populist notion. These examples underline how bereft that party is of authentic ideas and of the courage to make the necessary decisions we all face in the national interest in the coming weeks and months.

The proposals from the Labour Party are not much better. I have seen only two concrete proposals. The first is that we should have an election. If that is the best Deputy Gilmore can do after ten years in opposition, that is precisely where he should stay. Does he not remember the early 1980s when there were three general elections in 18 months, with the result that economic recovery was postponed for a decade? The other issue on which the Labour Party has focused is its suggestion that we should increase our borrowing. I will return to that point presently. We have heard the Labour Party make all types of sounds in the current difficult times but it is producing little by way of positive ideas or solutions. It opposed Government moves to protect the savings of thousands of workers and their families through the bank guarantee scheme. It opposed moves to provide capital for businesses so they could continue to employ people.

The Labour Party keeps talking about the necessity of getting the finances right to ensure the economy recovers, yet it has proposed to borrow more and more money. How is that for consistent economic logic? Its approach to current economic difficulties is dramatically different

from that of its erstwhile partners in Fine Gael. The Labour Party proposes more borrowing and more spending while Fine Gael accuses the Government of spending and borrowing too much. Fine Gael is — or was until recently — advocating massive cuts in public expenditure and in the public sector. The Labour Party is diametrically opposed to those policies.

In these circumstances, a general election campaign and its aftermath would serve no useful purpose other than to return us to the conditions of the early 1980s. It would lead to increased uncertainty and delay the necessary programme of recovery already begun by the Government and outlined today and previously. Recent opinion polls may have gone to Deputy Gilmore's head because it seems he now wants to be Taoiseach. The one telling figure in all those polls is that 67% of the electorate are of the view that an election would serve no useful purpose.

Deputy Kieran O'Donnell: I hope the Minister, Deputy Dempsey, will remain in the House to allow Members to respond to the points he raised. He has discussed everything other than Government policy. He did not mention the framework or any other of Fianna Fáil's proposals.

The Taoiseach's speech this morning was perhaps the most negative I have ever heard.

Deputy Noel Dempsey: Deputy O'Donnell obviously does not read any Fine Gael scripts.

Deputy Kieran O'Donnell: I listened quietly to the points made by the Minister and I ask that he do the same for me. The Taoiseach stated that there will be an additional 100,000 persons unemployed this year. What type of message does this send out to the public? It is indicative of failure and shows that the Government has no plans in place to deal with rising unemployment. The Government should be bringing forward policies to provide jobs. Instead, I am gravely concerned that it is using the framework for working with the social partners as a political shield rather than as a mechanism for bringing forward policies. The Government has yet to state what will form part of this framework. I see the Minister is leaving the Chamber.

Deputy Noel Dempsey: Yes, I apologise.

Deputy Kieran O'Donnell: This shows the contempt of the Government for the points made by the Opposition.

Deputy Trevor Sargent: I will convey the Deputy's points to the Minister.

Deputy Kieran O'Donnell: I thank the Minister of State.

This is a serious debate but it makes little sense to have it at this point. Instead, it should take place after the framework document is issued. The Minister, Deputy Dempsey, was in the Chamber for ten minutes and never mentioned in his contribution what the Government intends to do. He did not refer to any of the policies it intends to bring forward. Nor was there any mention of the difficulties people are experiencing in terms of losing jobs and being unable to meet mortgage repayments. There was no reference to the pressures being experienced by the owners of small businesses to continue to pay the wages of their staff. He spoke about good old fashioned bully-boy political tripe that serves no purpose for the people of Ireland in the context of the position in which they now find themselves. Furthermore, he has left the Chamber.

I thought this debate was about engaging in discourse on dealing with the economy as we now find it. Why are we in this mess? I will not attribute to the Government the problems prevailing in the international economy, but I will deal objectively with the Government pushing the growth of the construction sector. In 2001, growth in Irish exports was of the order of double digits. We are a small open economy. In 2003, our trade in exports was in a negative position, while the growth in the housing construction was going out of control. The Govern-

[Deputy Kieran O'Donnell.]

ment took the easy option. What is worse, it did not even have the confidence to assert how vulnerable we were in having everything reliant on the construction sector as we moved forward.

When moneys were flowing in, the Government was like a depot waiting for the cash to come in and then spending it, but it was spending money on services that were not sustainable into the future. It misled the people and provided services that were not sustainable. We now find ourselves in a position where the Government will have to borrow €18 billion this year. It can be compared to a business, it has an overdraft and the surcharges are beginning to hit in that we are paying nearly double the rate paid by Germany to borrow money abroad. The question is how long will we be even able to borrow money.

The Minister, Deputy Dempsey, spoke of issues that are of no relevance to the position in which we as a country find ourselves. I will call on the Government after next Tuesday, when the framework document has been agreed by the social partners, to allow us to debate it, go through it and deal with the issues that have been raised.

Positive measures are needed. Deputy Kenny brought forward one of the most practical measures needed this morning. He asked the Taoiseach to require the Department of Finance, together with the governor of the Central Bank and the Financial Regulator, to give a breakdown of all loans taken out by small businesses and all mortgages taken out by home owners who are experiencing difficulty making repayments to facilitate a valid discussion on how much it would cost to deal with the debts of these people. However, €7.5 billion of the National Pensions Reserve Fund or nearly half of it will be put into banks, one of them being Anglo Irish Bank, which effectively is a zombie bank. This is taxpayers' money. We do not even know how much it will cost us. Why has the PricewaterhouseCoopers report on the banks not been published? What we need are the facts.

In my previous career I practised as an accountant for many years. If a person in financial difficulty came to see me, I would ask him or her to fully outline their financial position to enable me to address the difficulties presented. The Government is not doing that. It is in denial. Clearly, it does not know what it is doing and it does not understand that people are worried about their security of their jobs. We are grossly uncompetitive. We have lost 33% in terms of national price competitiveness in the past eight years. The Government has no structure in place to address this.

A number of points are worth taking on board. A radical strategy needs to be put in place to ensure that the jobs of these 100,000 people in question are retained. If people have jobs, they can afford to pay their mortgages. Furthermore, they will not pose a charge on the State in terms of social welfare benefits. Neither will they have to worry about their children's education. If these people lose their jobs, they will lose dignity and hope. I did not see the word "hope" in the Taoiseach's speech, all we heard was negativity. He used the words "unexpectedly rapid collapse of the activity in the construction sector". The dogs on the street knew that the construction sector was in trouble. The Taoiseach used the word "unexpected" and he expects the people to take the Government seriously. The Government lacks credibility on an enormous scale as to exactly what it will do to address this matter.

We need to come up with a policy to protect the mortgages of home owners. People are worried about losing their homes. When the recapitalisation scheme is going through for the other banks, we need to demand that they provide measures to protect homes and that they provide funding to small businesses. Small businesses are not getting access to funding. If we recapitalise the banks for no reason other than to allow them to write off their bad debts, that will not be good enough.

People who are following this debate will note that Seán FitzPatrick had a loan of €87 million from the bank. In the 2007 accounts he was recorded as a non-executive director. He was not even working for the bank at that time and he received €413,000, nearly half a million euro, in director's fees. How can the Government expect people to take what it is putting forward as credible when it appears, on the surface, to be bailing out the banks, not looking after small business and mortgage holders and not protecting jobs?

Our challenge and that of the Government is to keep people in jobs. We must examine radical measures, be it through the social welfare system or otherwise, to enable employers to keep people in jobs. We must return to being competitive. We have a glorious opportunity during the next few years to restore our competitiveness. I did not see a reference to that in the Taoiseach's speech today.

I take grave offence at the Minister, Deputy Dempsey, insulting the House by not dealing with the issues in this debate. We are the fastest declining country in Europe. The position now is not like that in the 1980s when the debt was Government debt, now it is not only Government debt but private debt. The Government pushed our debt from the State sector to the private sector and now people are losing their homes and their jobs. In response to addressing these issues, we got a performance from the Minister, Deputy Dempsey, that put Ballymagash in the shade. That is not good enough. When the framework document has been dealt with by with the social partners, I want the Government to allow us to debate it, to restore dignity to the House and for it to act as a government rather than behaving in an insulting way towards this House and, by implication, towards the Irish people.

We are in this mess for two reasons. First, it is due to the Government's over-reliance on the construction sector. We were not able to withstand the external shocks in terms of the slowdown in the international economy and ours is now the fastest declining country in Europe. Second, the Government has not brought forward any measures in terms of job creation, job retention, mortgage protection or in terms of moneys flowing to the banks. Addressing this problem is not rocket science. It is about knowing about how business operates, dealing with the situation and ensuring that the Government does not use the social partners as nothing more than a political shield.

Minister of State at the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Deputy Trevor Sargent): Cuirim fáilte roimh an deis labhairt ag an díospóireacht thábhachtach seo. Mar a dúirt an Taoiseach níos luaithe, "global output is expected to decline . . . and . . . global export volume to be down for the first time since 1982". In the midst of that global picture, a point I, as Minister of State with responsibility for food and horticulture, probably do not need to make is that we all need to eat. Eating well keeps us well and health is wealth. There are different ways of measuring wealth. We are focused on the financial problems today, but there are also issues that affect us all in different ways in terms of our quality of life.

The agri-food sector continues to be of great importance to Ireland. It is our most fundamental indigenous industry, accounting for 10% of total Irish exports and nearly one third of net foreign earnings of our primary and manufacturing industries. Its resilience, capability and ability to adapt to changing circumstances have contributed to increasing the value of exports by €1.5 billion to more than €8 billion since 2002. The industry is important in every county and accounts for more than 8% of employment.

The resilience of everyone whose business is food is now to be tested as never before. The competition between large retailers brings to mind the old proverb "when elephants fight, grass gets trampled". In Ireland's case, it is the farmers who are feeling the pressure and as a result our means to feed ourselves as a country is unfortunately being undermined.

[Deputy Trevor Sargent.]

As people will know, I, like many Members, enjoy growing some of my own food in my garden, but the skill needed to produce a high quality consistent, low cost crop to order on a massive scale of tens or hundreds of acres is an enormous achievement requiring skills that all too often are taken for granted. It is sobering, therefore, but important to state that the excellent growers of the fruit and vegetables we all need every day must have our support. I am talking about the farmers who are still growing. I can document others, from County Cork to County Donegal to Dublin, and in between, who are no longer growing. In many cases they have left their land uncultivated which is a tragedy not only for them and their families, but for all of us, in terms of food security. My priority is to get those farmers back into production as well as to give hope and confidence to farmers who are still producing.

The development strategies implemented for the agrifood sector and the investment in marketing, food safety and traceability have given rise not only to an overall increase in exports, but also to the development of new consumer foods, dairy ingredients and beef markets in the EU. The sector has a solid future based on its land resources, further moves to higher value products, more efficient processing and application of the results of high quality investment in food research and market and consumer insights.

On the world trading front, we are determined to continue to press for strategies that will allow Ireland retain its agricultural production base to meet the future demand for food. The weakening of sterling against the euro is impacting on the agrifood industry's competitiveness in respect of its most important export destination. The UK accounts for almost two fifths of Irish agrifood and drink exports and remains our biggest market despite diversification to other EU markets and beyond.

The national development plan provides €289 million to support investment by the food industry in capital infrastructure as well as in marketing. In the past two years, €130 million has been announced in awards for capital investment projects, including €16 million announced as recently as December for projects that will support continued investment in the food sector, add value and improve competitiveness. Each business must be run in an efficient way, must watch its costs and must make a profit. It must have a strategy with regard to deciding its place in the market and differentiating itself from other similar businesses. Reviewing one's business energy costs and, where possible, employing renewable energy sources can lead to greater profit while at the same time preparing for a post-fossil fuel future and combating climate change.

Despite the tougher economic circumstances, the Government is committed to continuing its support for the development of the horticulture sector. Under the scheme for the development of commercial horticulture, which provides national funding under the national development plan, grants of almost €6 million were paid out to 137 producers in 2008. This year, we hope to continue this funding for development, if at a more modest level than last year. The scheme for 2009 was launched in December and the closing date for the applications was 16 January. These applications are currently being evaluated.

In addition, the EU producer organisation scheme can provide an important mechanism for growers to achieve greater bargaining power in the marketplace by becoming part of a larger supply base. The need for strong and effective producer organisations is clearly demonstrated by the current problems in renewal of contracts with the multiples. This year, the scheme has more flexible terms and I hope this will attract more growers to join producer organisations. Since 2000, some 20 such organisations have benefited from funding, amounting to over €29 million. In many cases, this is European funding. Although this funding is available, it requires administrative overheads in order to satisfy the funding criteria.

The essential point is that farmers need to be inspired again, by the can-do attitude that epitomised such persons as Michael Davitt, Horace Plunkett and Bulmer Hobson. Obviously times and technology have moved on but when one reads their work, as I do, having an interest in history, it is inspiring. They were active during a time of crisis and it was their can-do attitude that, in many cases, laid the legacy for the successes we look back on and hope to emulate.

By co-operating and organising together, the whole community must play a role, along with Government, in ensuring food security and developing viable food and farming enterprises. I shall mention a small example but it is important to give examples of hope and progress. Another farmers' market will take place in my constituency on Saturday week. I know it will give a certain amount of hope and confidence to producers and consumers alike. It shows there are alternatives to the traditional multiple retail route which, unfortunately, is not serving farmers well at present. This can be judged by the number who have had to call it a day because they cannot make ends meet given the low prices they received for their produce. We need more producer organisations and community-supported agriculture, more co-operatives and value-added enterprises that can find a place in the market which will give farmers the return they need.

I refer to the role another important growth area is playing in the agriculture sector, internationally as well as in Ireland, namely, the organic sector. In recent years, well-paid off-farm work has been available to many farmers. It may not be so readily available at present or for some time to come. Farmers will, therefore, be looking for ways to make their farming activity more profitable. I urge them to look at the opportunities that exist in the organic sector, even in these difficult times. I say this because it concerns employment. "Organic Works", a study being carried out in the UK by the Soil Association and the University of Essex, is about providing more jobs in farming and through local food supply. It mentions, for example, that in the UK organic farming provides 32% more jobs per farm on a per acre or per hectare basis than the equivalent non-organic farms. There are similar figures in this country but we must correlate them. It is heartening also to see that organic farming in the UK is attracting younger people into farming and more new entrants to agriculture. Overall, it has a €2.1 billion market in the UK. The UK customer sees Ireland as a local production base. This means, again, that there is enormous potential for Irish producers to feed into that market as well as into our own.

Bord Bia research, which is my source here, shows that, for many consumers, organic food items are no longer seen as luxury items, to be cut out of the shopping list when money is tighter. I see no reason to believe that the organic sector will not continue to grow, even if at a reduced level. It is still growing faster than other sectors and that must be pointed out. Sales of organic produce rose by 82% in the two-year period to July 2008 and now stand at €104 million. In 2006, the percentage retail spend on organic food was small, perhaps, at 0.9% of total food sales but, at that level of growth, anybody who is serious about getting into a market that is growing should look at that situation.

In spite of the economic downturn there is still determination in my Department to ensure that growth areas are supported so that they, in turn, can provide jobs and confidence and the economic spin-offs in communities, particularly those in rural Ireland which has taken a hit in the current climate and requires to be supported. We are doing this in the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food.

Deputy Simon Coveney: I wish to set the tone for what I have to say by quoting *The Irish Times* of 28 January 1982, exactly 27 years ago. Under the heading "The Price of Power", the editor wrote:

[Deputy Simon Coveney.]

Let no-one underestimate how vital the quality of leadership is to the country in this hour of present danger. Life cannot continue in the spendthrift fashion of recent years. Unless the community is prepared to accept voluntarily, a cut in its standard of living, that cut will be imposed with considerably more vigour from without. A flourishing democracy requires that those who populate it take responsibility — individually and collectively — for decisions taken in its name. That major mistakes were made in the recent past is undeniable; that the community can now shrug off the responsibility for them by refusing to pay up is impossible; the slate cannot be wiped clean at a stroke. Will the country rise to such leadership?”

How true that is 27 years later, as we re-live the same kind of challenges we faced then.

As we assess the challenges of 2009 and beyond, we need to be honest with people as to just how dire the current fiscal crisis is. Ireland as a State, as it currently lives and functions, is broken and is on the dark road to bankruptcy if we do not change direction quickly. In crude terms, we are currently spending so much more than the country can afford that we are forced to borrow €55 million a day to simply stay afloat. We have a broken banking system, blocking access to essential credit. We have an uncompetitive cost environment for business growth, difficult international trading conditions and exchange rates that are working against us. We have a collapse in consumer confidence, enormous personal debt levels and rapidly rising unemployment. Most depressingly, to date, we have political leaders who are seemingly so paralysed by the enormity of the decisions they face, they are unwilling or unable to give the direction needed to steer our country through the storm.

We have seen 15 years of economic growth, job creation and massive increases in public expenditure. With that came the confidence to borrow, invest, spend and fuel a growing economy. That period of prosperity began by developing an economy that was primarily based on export growth. We were competitive and flexible enough to attract significant investment from abroad and also be supportive of domestic business growth. However, as time passed, we began to take our prosperity for granted. We became sloppy, allowed cost competitiveness to dive and began to overpay ourselves. Overconfidence led to over-borrowing to purchase property and material goods, cheered on by irresponsible banking and Government policy.

We know now that we became overly reliant on a construction boom for employment and tax revenue, and as competitiveness fell in terms of export-based business, property took over as the new wealth generator. Those who predicted a crash landing and fired the first warning shots were dismissed as cranks and nay-sayers, but they have been shown to be right.

People are no longer interested in the blame game, nor am I. What people want now is a way forward and leaders they can believe in to take us forward. Most people are realistic enough to know there can be no recovery without some pain and sacrifice. If they do not know that, then we as public representatives have a responsibility to explain why collective sacrifice is now necessary. Simply punishing those who caused the mess may be satisfying and should happen, but it will not solve our country's crises to put bankers in the dock.

Everybody has a role to play but the Government must ensure that those who are most capable of bearing the load are asked to shoulder the most in order that the State can protect jobs and, above all else, protect the most vulnerable. It will take brave, honest and politically controversial decisions to limit the pain of recession and bring us back on course for recovery. The Government's approach, namely, to achieve a consensus with social partners, is the preferable route but may well produce the wrong results. My fear is that achieving consensus among social partners is the most important priority for the Taoiseach, above what actually needs to be done.

Achieving €2 billion in cuts in the most politically palatable way is not enough. The search for consensus can stifle the ability to make the necessary hard decisions. Those like David Begg and Jack O'Connor are good people who do a good job for the people they represent, but they are paid to represent their members and get the best deal possible for them in terms of pay and working conditions. They are not paid to govern the country. The Taoiseach, Deputy Brian Cowen, must do that, and must be answerable to this House for it.

The questions that need honest answers, not politically cute or consensus-based solutions, are straightforward, namely, what are the problems with Ireland right now and what specifically do we need to do to fix them in as fair a way as possible? I am afraid the answers are not as easy as the questions. We have a fiscal crisis to mend, competitiveness to restore, a broken banking system with a credit problem that needs to be fixed and we must try to rebuild confidence in a young nation.

Let me deal head-on with the most controversial of current political questions. The country can no longer afford our public sector wage bill. Some €20 billion per year is not affordable and there is simply no getting away from that fact. We either have to cut jobs or cut pay. There is no ducking this issue, despite the understandable anger of many good public servants, who did not cause this crisis.

The market is already forcing salary reductions and has forced 120,000 redundancies in the private sector in the past 12 months, so the Government needs to do what is necessary in the public sector. We need reform on a wide scale, but in the short term we simply cannot keep borrowing to pay increasing salaries. Wage increases are typically linked to increases in the cost of living but we expect deflation in the cost of living in Ireland this year of approximately 3%, so this is a good figure to use as a starting point. Fine Gael has made it clear that we would only accept public sector wage reductions in the context of higher earners being the first to shoulder the burden. Given what Fine Gael has proposed in terms of a public sector pay freeze for this year and next year is clear on the record, I do not need to repeat it.

In terms of competitiveness, this crisis offers an opportunity for reform. My colleague, Deputy Richard Bruton, has for four years been talking about the need for honest reform within the public sector which would reward people who do a good job and introduce a proper benchmarking model whereby pay is linked with performance and there is flexibility so public servants who are not needed in one sector can move to other sectors where they are needed. I am not one of those who believes there are too many staff in the public sector in Ireland but I recognise we have too much middle management in the HSE and not enough people working in schools. Let us remedy this.

My responsibility is with regard to energy and I will conclude by focusing on this area. The regulatory model in Ireland is no longer suited to the current recessionary situation in which the country finds itself. The way in which pricing is regulated for electricity and gas is essentially based on the need to encourage competition and new entrants into the Irish market and, therefore, prices are deliberately kept artificially high by the regulator. That is no way to prioritise regulation in time of recession.

The Commission for Energy Regulation should be brought into the Taoiseach's office and told that the basis for price regulation needs to change for the next two to three years to try to provide energy as cheaply as possible to businesses and households. While there is a climate change and green agenda which is affected by this, we need to take brave decisions to allow people to survive recession and come out the other side. The cost of energy is a key ingredient in trying to improve competitiveness and the cost of doing business in Ireland.

We can make one of two choices. The Government can either decide to take the politically safe route of trying to limit the damage, although in doing so it will risk a long recession and

[Deputy Simon Coveney.]

possible national bankruptcy, or it can take tough decisions now and front-load pain to try to reduce the length of time Ireland is in recession and get us out the other side as quickly as possible.

Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government (Deputy John Gormley): We are now at a critical point in our country's history. We are caught up in a global maelstrom that has felled some of the most powerful economic and financial entities of this age. Ireland is being subjected to the same negative forces as most other developed countries in the world — falling property prices, falling tax revenues, falling consumer confidence and a collapse in confidence in the banking sector. However, as one of the most open economies on this planet, we are experiencing those forces much more acutely than many others.

Much has been made in and outside this House of the recent international coverage given to Ireland. Some, indeed, have used this commentary as a political stick. We should remember that there has been a strong element of *schadenfreude* in some of that commentary, especially in Britain, which has been tinged in places by an element of colonial condescension. It has not been written with balance, but with malice in mind.

Deputy Olivia Mitchell: Everyone else is to blame.

Deputy John Gormley: Ireland faces a challenge equal to the greatest the country has faced since its foundation some 90 years ago. We must face it together and we must work together in the spirit of partnership that has worked so well for us previously in difficult times. We must face it collectively and that is why the Government is working towards an agreement with the social partners on tackling the public finances. The Taoiseach and the Government is prepared to allow the necessary time for an agreement to be reached, an agreement that will be in the interests of all. This is what good government and leadership is about.

The Green Party in government is playing an essential role in the sizable challenge facing Ireland at present. We have a perspective on sustainable, economic and social development, which has come of age. It is a perspective that is absolutely essential if we are to enjoy a solid economic recovery.

The green economy has been identified by leaders throughout the world, from US President Barack Obama to Prime Minister Gordon Brown, as an essential element to economic recovery. In Ireland, it is a policy the Green Party has been advocating for 20 years. More important, it is a policy we have been implementing in the past 20 months in government. This policy has already generated and sustained thousands of jobs, and will create thousands more, in every part of the country. Our vision for a green economy sees the protection and enhancement of our environment as an economic opportunity, not an economic cost.

Working towards a green economy will improve Ireland's competitiveness. The green economic outlook puts long-term gain for society ahead of short-term profit for the individual. However, it rewards and incentivises those who embrace sustainable business models.

My colleague in the Department of Communications, Energy and Natural Resources, Deputy Eamon Ryan, has undertaken a fundamental reform of energy policy, which will wean us off our oil dependency in the coming decades. He has set new prices for renewable energy, prompting a multi-billion euro investment by the ESB. This year he will also roll out an ambitious insulation scheme for homes throughout the country. Our Government colleagues are also working for the green economy. The Minister for Transport, Deputy Noel Dempsey, has increased investment in public transport infrastructure by more than 60%, to €1.3 billion since the Green Party entered Government.

I am hard at work in the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government for the green economy. In 2009, at a time of cutbacks, there has been a 19% increase in water services investment to €560 million. By the end of the year, some 150 separate water projects will be under way in towns and villages throughout the State. This will secure more than 4,500 badly-needed construction jobs. We will not slow down this investment until we have a world-class water infrastructure that protects the health of our people and our environment. These facilities will provide the essential infrastructure needed to enhance the competitiveness of the country, to enable us to attract and grow enterprises and industries.

In the waste sector, I have invested more than €27 million in the most advanced recycling plant in Europe, which opened this month in Dublin. The plant ensures a free green bin collection system for every house in the Dublin area. It has created 85 jobs. Today, I signalled my intention to introduce new rules for the segregation of biodegradable waste in restaurants and commercial premises later this year. This will ensure lower waste costs for those organisations, and it will also create and sustain an entire new composting industry, generating hundreds of jobs in the coming years.

The Department and the Minister for State with responsibility for housing, Deputy Michael Finneran, have been playing a crucial role in the housing sector. In the 2009 budget, more than €1.3 billion is being provided for the main local authority and voluntary programmes, including €190 million to support ambitious programmes of regeneration of social housing in extremely disadvantaged areas. These projects, which include the Ballymun and Limerick regeneration programmes, support the development of strong, economically viable sustainable communities by addressing underlying issues of poverty, deprivation, anti-social behaviour, social and economic need.

We are also embarking on a programme to green our existing social housing stock, to make those homes more comfortable and more economical to run. A full audit of the public housing stock will begin in 2009, to lay the foundation for a programme of retrofitting, where required, to deliver modern standards of energy efficiency. In parallel with this audit, a further €5 million, which will be increased to €30 million, is being provided to undertake several pilot retrofitting projects. The learning derived from these will play a major part in informing our approach to the wider roll-out of the programme, which will commence once the audit is completed. This programme will enhance the quality of life for thousands of low income families in the coming years. It will be an example of the green economy at work.

The green economy is also at work in private homes. The Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, and I have overseen the development of a new energy rating system, creating hundreds of new jobs and providing valuable information for homeowners, buyers and renters.

I have also embarked on one of the most ambitious reforms of our planning system to create a level playing field that favours sustainable development. I have published new guidelines on residential developments to ensure that when homes are built, they are alongside critical services such as public transport and schools. I have also produced new guidelines to prevent against opportunistic rezoning on flood plains.

I am drawing up major new planning legislation aimed at a fundamental overhaul of our planning system. It will reform how councillors go about rezoning in county development plans, and will make national planning guidelines mandatory for development plans. It will tackle the question of retention, streamline planning processes and will also reform our planning laws for ocean energy projects. A fair and transparent planning system is essential for a competitive economy. Developers willing to provide high quality, sustainable developments should have certainty that their plans are not undermined by cynical and opportunistic rezoning which have only profit and not people in mind.

[Deputy John Gormley.]

In these times when hard choices must be made and ambitious plans are deferred or curtailed, it is opportune that we concentrate on what we can do individually and collectively to pull ourselves out of this recession and make the most of the opportunities and advantages we have at our disposal. If we are to optimise the resources available, there must be clear and co-ordinated prioritisation of investment in those locations with the potential to drive regional and national competitiveness and which have the capacity to grow. The national spatial strategy must remain the principal basis for this policy. This view is shared by the National Competitiveness Council and the National Economic Social Council, NESCC.

There is robust analysis of the challenges and priorities for the gateway cities and towns and this analysis has contributed to the formulation of the national development plan. Given the significant economic and social change in the past six or seven years and the uncertain short-term and medium-term future, my Department is undertaking an update and refreshing of the national spatial strategy to assess where we are and, perhaps more crucially, to where we are heading. It is not a fundamental review or overhaul. Rather, the focus will be on how the strategy is being implemented and how it is realising the key objective to harness the development potential of all the regions. I intend to bring forward our initial analysis to Government in the coming weeks with a view to developing precise proposals on how this analysis can be used to prioritise the unlocking of these areas within what resources are available at central and local levels.

The Green Party is hard at work creating a green economy for the benefit of all people in the country and we will go further in that regard. The Green Party in government will ensure that investment will be increased, not decreased this year. The Government will also develop an ambitious green economy master-plan, to attract green technology jobs and investment into Ireland, and to support green technology innovation in the economy.

Of course, the Green Party does not have a monopoly on sound economic ideas. The economic challenge we face requires the efforts of every Member of the House. Since the Dáil returned, I have seen and heard Opposition Deputies vent and emote about the current economic situation rather than offer constructive debate or criticism. However, I would rather hear ideas and solutions than the negative rhetoric of opposition. I wish to hear from Fine Gael what measures it will take to ensure its local council-
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lors do not engage in reckless rezoning, which damages the local economy for the benefit of a small number of landowners and developers. I wish to hear realistic proposals on public spending from the main Opposition party, rather than proposals that would shave a mere €80 million off the public sector wage bill. I listened to Deputy Coveney in that regard.

Deputy Olivia Mitchell: We are waiting to hear those proposals.

Deputy John Gormley: Deputy Coveney referred to being politically cute. That sort of response is politically cute, it is populist and it is not brave. The main Opposition party has discussed the idea of a pay freeze, but such a proposal is going nowhere when considered in the context of the €2 billion cuts which are required.

Deputy Olivia Mitchell: We have not heard any proposals from the Government.

Deputy John Gormley: Although the Opposition has come up with proposals, they do not go far enough. We are going about our business. We are going to do it.

Deputy Olivia Mitchell: When?

Deputy John Gormley: The Government will make the brave decisions the Opposition has not outlined. It has not come up with such proposals.

Deputy Olivia Mitchell: Are the Opposition and the British media to blame for the current state of the country?

Deputy John Gormley: I also wish to hear how the Labour Party thinks we can incentivise the move away from fossil fuels without a carbon levy, the revenue from which could be used to lower other taxes. I also wish to hear a single proposal from the Labour Party to reduce the public sector wage bill.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Minister has exceeded his time.

Deputy John Gormley: Developing these proposals will require the Labour Party and Fine Gael to be honest with the electorate and workers. It will require them to acknowledge there is no painless way to secure Ireland's future in the current global economic crisis. We in the Green Party are brave and honest enough to say that. Moreover, we are confident that our role in Government will help Ireland out of this recession. We also are confident that we can deal with those in the banking sector who have brought it into disrepute. We will deal with them and will continue to ensure we have better regulation of the banking system because that is what people expect of us. Moreover, they expect all Members to work together in this House to come up with such innovative proposals.

Deputy Michael D. Higgins: I welcome the opportunity, even in the brief period of ten minutes, to make some comments on the economy. First, the Taoiseach, in his contribution suggested there was no merit in looking back. I profoundly disagree. He suggested there is little point in looking back at how some of this might have been anticipated or avoided. It is crucial to analyse how precisely we came to be in the position in which we now are. For example, we should analyse how it was, when it was perfectly clear that export performance was changing in early 2006, that no Government response was forthcoming.

Before he leaves the Chamber, I wish to make an immediate reply to the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government. The Labour Party has made a number of highly practical proposals in respect of job creation. Although not much time is available to me, I will give him one that is within the remit of his own Department. When 1,000 people in the local authorities were being given their cards, it was those with shovels or who were on short-term contracts who were told to go. The Minister does not appear to be terribly interested in ending the bonus system or the consultancies before letting go those who were in direct access with, and who provided a service to, the public. That was the case, for example, in County Kildare and several local authorities nationwide. It constituted an indiscriminate fall of the axe on those in short-term contracts and so forth without beginning at the top, as one might expect any socially minded person to do.

I wish to raise some questions because when responding to the economic crisis we are in, it is important to be clear as to what we are doing. There are two paths that one might take. One is a shrinking of the economy in a fairly indiscriminate manner, which would have the consequence of doing much more damage than the irresponsible inflating of the economy by excessive reliance on the building sector. The other is to restructure the economy entirely anew. If one had decent and original thinking, which I have not heard thus far from the Government side, it would concentrate on the shape of the new economy that might be created. The Labour Party will be entirely supportive of such initiatives as will be forthcoming on the Green economy.

[Deputy Michael D. Higgins.]

However, other aspects of the economy are not featuring in any of the speeches from the Government side and to be practical, I will provide one example. At a time when we were describing ourselves as the wealthiest or second wealthiest country in the world, not to speak of the European Union, we had the second lowest level of social protection within the European Union. If memory serves, Portugal may have been ranked below us. One therefore could, for example, have considered employment creation in the social economy. For instance, when we emerge from the present recession, one would like the shape of the economy to be one in which the world of work has been redefined.

While jobs should be protected and new jobs created in the Green economy, there also are jobs in the social economy. For example, instead of threatening carers with the cutting of their benefit as a form of welfare, their efforts could be included as being work, and should be recognised as such, in a form of the social economy. Moreover, there has been no discussion regarding forms of work sharing in which many people would have been willing to construct social time in a manner that would be more positive in respect of its contribution to the economy.

However, what is opening up, regardless of whether people like it, is a form of the social economy that will offer one option for coming through and out of this recession, which is well on its way to becoming a depression unless we are very careful. If those who have been trapped in cyclical employment become long-term unemployed, it will be a tragedy for the people themselves, their families and their communities.

I refer to the issue upon which we will be tested. When one is invited to a form of national solidarity, or as it is more crudely put for those who like to put it in a parochial sense, to put on the green jersey, one might reasonably ask, solidarity with whom? Is this solidarity to be with the most vulnerable citizens who are threatened or is it to be with the clique and the golden circle that have destroyed the country's reputation? When all the steam is blown away, we are paying between 2.5% and 3% more in terms of interest than the German Government to fund our normal borrowing to run the State. A great contribution in this regard has been the gangster activity of celebrity capitalism. I refer to people who liked to appear on the back pages of the Sunday newspapers, while consuming as though there was no tomorrow. The only competition was the notion of continually bidding up land. There is no point in suggesting this was not important and let me dispose of such a suggestion.

I accept there is an international dimension to a global economy that is reconstructing itself. One version of that is meeting at Davos as though nothing had happened. More than 2,000 people there are wondering how the old show can be got back on the road again without many differences. I note Vincent Browne's reference in today's edition of *The Irish Times* to the man from the Indian company, who now happens to be in jail, but who last year received an award last year in London, which I believe was called the Golden Peacock Global Award for Excellence in Corporate Governance. Perhaps our Government, as it meanders through next week and the week after, might bring into existence a Golden Ram or a Golden Tiger. It could hold a competition between the regulator and Seanie for the award. However, the reason it is wrong to imagine that one can simply move on from that point is that these people have destroyed the country and have done incredible damage. This is not simply a rhetorical statement, as it is expressed in percentage points in respect of what is required for the management of the country in a fiscal sense.

This is the choice. One cannot have any solidarity with such people. Part of my party's difficulties in respect of the economic side of this matter is that we do not know the extent to which their connections and claws are in the economy.

While there was an international dimension to the present circumstances in which we find ourselves, we created our own property bubble and this is something for which the Government must take responsibility. Members should remember the advice of our Commissioner in Brussels, which was to party on. He was the most irresponsible Minister for Finance of all time in respect of taxation policy and the shift, for example, from direct taxation to indirect taxation, which affected lower socio-economic groups more than those at the very top. Members should consider the transfer pattern at the time when the economy was flying. They need not accept my word in this regard as they can examine a series of different sources. The transfers were to the top quintile. While there was a lift in some different areas in an absolute sense, proportionately, the beneficiaries were located nearer the top. If that is the case, every adjustment in respect of wages, levies, job losses and so forth should concentrate on where the benefits flowed.

However, there is no evidence of this in anything Members have heard thus far. For example, there is a huge difference between somebody who regards it as vulgar to say he or she gets a salary, and others. If one is in the banking circles to which I have pointed, they regard it as compensation. One must get compensation of €3 million per annum to get out of bed and go off gambling in the bank. Regarding these gamblers in the banks, in many cases there is no evidence of from where any of that money will be clawed back.

Another example is what is being said about those who own different forms of property. Very few people I know confined themselves to a second house when they went into that area. They were actually getting into double figures. Why is the proposal floated in the newspaper not addressing the issue of the third, fourth, fifth and on up to the tenth and even the twentieth house? It is extraordinary. It would have been obvious from the different attempts, including those of the Labour Party, to try to bring forward a version of the Kenny report on what was happening in this property bubble. One was getting a growth rate — a continued climbing — at a time when exports were stable and falling, which meant that one was effectively revaluing the property base of the economy.

There will be a demand for all of us to become involved in positive suggestions, both in terms of the role of citizens and the nature of work, but particularly on social protection, but we will all be judged by the following fundamental test — with what did we have solidarity? Was it with something entirely new, a version of the social economy about which we can have a real political division, involving, on the one side, market economics unrestrained and, on the other, a social economy that expresses solidarity with citizens and is biased in favour of those most vulnerable and in the lower socio-economic groups? Frankly, the latter offers the best prospect for a sustainable economy for future generations. A more equal society offers the best prospect for economic growth, as the Scandinavian economies have shown. That is where we need to be, not protecting people who have been little less than traitors to the Irish people.

Deputy John Gormley: Hear, hear.

Minister of State at the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government (Deputy Michael P. Kitt): With the permission of the House, I will share time with Deputy John McGuinness.

An Ceann Comhairle: Is that agreed? Agreed.

Deputy Michael P. Kitt: I welcome the opportunity to contribute to this debate on the economy. This is a challenging time with difficult national and international economic circumstances and priority must be given to ensuring economic and environmental sustainability.

[Deputy Michael P. Kitt.]

I very much welcome what the Taoiseach said about stability in the economy and continuing the capital programme, which is important regarding those projects we all want to see come to fruition and also in terms of employment. The Taoiseach has stated that there is a five-year timeframe for this recovery programme.

The Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government is concentrating on expenditure on social housing and protecting the most vulnerable, while also investing in environmental protection in terms of water, waste management and local services. As my colleague, the Minister, Deputy Gormley, has contributed already to the debate on those issues, I will use my time to focus on the areas in which I have responsibility, namely, the rural water programme and local services.

At a time of national and economic recovery the funding provisions for the continuance of the rural water programme and maintaining the development of our fire and library services reflects continued Government support for these important programmes and the contribution they can make to economic stability. An integral part of the investment programme for water services in 2009 is the continued improvement and development of the rural water programme. The record allocation for 2009 will further advance our commitment to make good quality drinking water available to all rural water consumers, in full compliance with national and EU drinking water standards.

The main focus of my Department's rural water programme in recent years has been on solving water quality problems experienced by group water schemes that depend on private sources such as rivers, lakes and boreholes, and are without proper water treatment and disinfection. Some 728 such schemes serving over 88,000 domestic connections have been identified as falling within the remit of the drinking water regulations on the basis that they serve 50 or more persons.

At the end of 2008, improvement works had been completed on 570 of these schemes, with the result that over 73,000 households are now receiving a quality water supply. The Rural Water Programme 2009 will focus on completing this upgrading programme. The objective is to have the supplies serving 98% of households fully compliant with drinking water standards by the end of the year. As of today, works are under way on 62 of the remaining schemes with the balance of 96 expected to commence construction in 2009. The record funding for water services in this year will ensure that these schemes are brought to completion in the shortest possible time.

The rural water programme has been supported by Exchequer spending of some €698 million over the last five years. This substantial commitment, coupled with the positive co-operation and enthusiasm of everyone involved in the group water scheme sector, has guaranteed and underpinned the successful delivery of the upgrading programme. In June 2008, I announced significant increases in the subsidies payable to group water schemes towards the operational costs incurred in providing water for domestic use. The standard annual rates of subsidy were increased by over 36% and a new line of subsidy was introduced to cover the cost of paying a contractor to operate and maintain the new water treatment plants being put in place under the upgrading programme.

The Water Services Act 2007 provides for the introduction of a licensing system to regulate and develop the operations of the group water sector. My Department consulted widely with the sector when the Bill was being drafted and groups have given their full support to the licensing system.

Licensing will put the group scheme sector on a much more organised and business-like footing for the future. They will also benefit from major capital funding from my Department

for new treatment infrastructure under the rural water programme from the record €560 million for water services in 2009. Along with the new subsidies to meet running costs, the long-term viability of these community endeavours has never been as secure or as well supported financially.

Fire and emergency services are operated at local level by 37 fire authorities. My Department recognises the importance of a modern and efficient fire service to the community and strongly supports the valuable work being done on the development of both the full-time and retained fire service. The significant improvements achieved in recent years in all areas of the fire service were further built on during 2008. The Department's programmes in 2008 brought about marked improvements in infrastructure and equipment, further enhanced inter-agency co-operation and promoted the all-important fire safety message.

Last year saw the continuation of significant investment, almost €24 million, under the fire service capital programme. The programme continued to support local fire authorities in the development and maintenance of a quality fire fighting service. Seven fire station projects were completed across the country and a further four fire stations commenced construction. In addition, 25 fire appliances were delivered to fire authorities and a range of emergency equipment was purchased. This sustained investment means that the fire authorities are well equipped to address the full range of risks with which they must now deal.

I am pleased the Government is to maintain the high level of support for the fire and emergency services. As in previous years, a joint fire safety promotion initiative will be undertaken in co-operation with colleagues in the Northern Ireland fire service.

I am pleased, despite the severe economic difficulties we face, that the Government's commitment to the development of the fire services, and growth of the rural water programme, will continue this year. I believe the measures the Government has taken and the difficult decisions that have been made in these most challenging of circumstances will protect the public finances while at the same time ensure that environmental and economic sustainability and protecting the most vulnerable in our society.

Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy John McGuinness): I agree with some of what Deputy Michael D. Higgins said about our past, from which we can learn. If we are to make the correct decisions on policy and direction for the future, then we must reflect on what happened in the past; we must understand how we got there and be careful how we move on. To that degree, we are informed by what has happened.

Regarding the protection of the 800,000 jobs the SME sector creates, we need to focus carefully on the activities of enterprise boards. I am pleased that within my Department the funding of enterprise boards has been increased by 19% and their activities now range across funding mentoring, education, etc. They are being received quite well, both by small to medium enterprises and those about to go into business. There is an increased interest among people in becoming self-employed and I encourage them to look towards the enterprise boards.

The enterprise boards come under the remit of Enterprise Ireland and it is important that we look at our exports in that context also. For those companies looking to markets abroad, from my experience, there is a huge opportunity for us, despite what is happening at home. Different markets in countries such as Japan and the BRIC countries — Brazil, Russia, India and China — are interested in what we are doing here. They look on us as being an island of innovation and creativity, one that can bring new products and services to the marketplace, has connections with information through communication technologies and not only recognises the convergence of life sciences and so on with technology, but that a new space is emerging within that market. We must commercialise the creative activities with which we are involved,

[Deputy John McGuinness.]

get them to the marketplace and move them through companies and Enterprise Ireland to be sold abroad. Only by recognising what is needed abroad can we increase our exports.

In the context of the convergence of life sciences and, for example, functional foods, Ireland must capitalise on its recognised position as a country of good food, sound origins and so on. With companies, we must bring to the marketplace opportunities to fill orders from large foreign companies. For example, some of the large companies in Japan, which we visited recently, are interested in collaborating in respect of universities, businesses and research and development. We must exploit that interest to a greater degree.

We must also consider enterprises in terms of what they are doing, namely, cutting their cloth according to their measure. Companies and their employees are examining ways to save jobs, reduce wages and costs and work with one another co-operatively to maintain their current job levels. The Government cannot do this alone. Issues of competitiveness must be addressed by, for example, Bord Gáis, the ESB and our telecommunication providers. I do not know why the ESB or Bord Gáis would be unable to reduce its costs and bills by 20%. Given our telecommunication providers' commercial activities, there is a reasonable expectation that they will deliver price changes to the market in terms of, for instance, rolling out broadband, which will be essential if we are to deliver on economic activity targets in light of the new difficulties facing us.

Another issue for the SME sector, representatives of which I meet regularly, relates to local government charges. This may be a matter of how we fund local government, but it also relates to how the councillors of every political party represented in the House operate in the imposition of those charges.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Minister of State's time has concluded.

Deputy John McGuinness: It is high time that planning and development charges and rates be reduced significantly and for a new structure to bring about a uniform approach across the counties.

Much work can be done in our changed circumstances. There is an appetite for change, an understanding that we are in a difficult position and an acceptance that we can only get out of it by working together. I appeal to the sectors that understand their places in this market to play their roles within the changes and to deal with issues of competitiveness as quickly as possible.

Deputy Olivia Mitchell: May I share time with Deputy Creed? I would appreciate it if the Ceann Comhairle would let me know when I have spoken for approximately six minutes.

An Ceann Comhairle: Is that agreed? Agreed.

Deputy Olivia Mitchell: I join with my party leader and colleagues in deploring the contempt shown to the House and parliamentary democracy by the structure of this debate and by the level of information provided to us. Such contempt is shown again and again. Last week when we nationalised the country's third largest bank in what was probably the most important and expensive decision ever made by the House, our Taoiseach told us that we did not need to know the details because he had already made his policy decision and we could pass the Bill in the space of an afternoon.

Were I to give the Taoiseach advice, I would tell him not to confuse arrogance with leadership or stubbornness with decisiveness. Leadership and decisiveness are necessary now more than ever because they are the qualities that will inspire confidence, which is key to the econ-

omy because it will make consumers spend their money again, businesses invest and create jobs and the banks start lending again. Confidence is missing from the economy, but it is not coming from the Government.

Using the social partners as the Taoiseach's personal focus group for weeks does not inspire confidence. Instead, it creates the impression that he will do anything rather than make a decision. The people we all meet when we leave the House are in absolute despair about what will occur and about their children's futures because the man who told him that he was a safe pair of hands has been sitting on his hands since being elected. When the House broke for the summer recess, it became clear to us that a major recession was on its way. The Taoiseach was in denial about it, then published a feeble early budget hardly worthy of its name and has stayed behind the game in respect of the banks. In recent weeks, he has sat on his hands in the guise of seeking a consensus.

Recently, every computation and permutation of every possible tax, levy, freeze, cut, pension reduction, job loss, redundancy, overtime payment and so on has been trotted out and run up the flagpole to see who would salute in the hope that everyone would reach a consensus and that the Taoiseach need never make a decision on his own. It must be as obvious to every Deputy as it is to every member of the public that consensus on micro-details and precise measures will never be achieved. However, there is societal consensus in a way that was never previously the case, not only on the fact that action needs to be taken, but on what that action should be. The Taoiseach referred to resolute action, in respect of which there is a consensus.

The document under discussion by the Government and the social partners is so broad and woolly that one wonders what is being discussed. The dogs in the street know that there is consensus regarding many of the matters in question. We must take action and stop allowing ourselves to be victims of events. It is recognised that this is the moment in our history at which political leadership will make the difference between the abyss on one side and taking control of our destiny and that of our children on the other. It is not the moment for a tentative and timid Taoiseach.

There is even a consensus on the broad parameters of what must be done. While no one likes to suffer, we all know that we are facing five or ten years of austerity. The sooner we hunker down, get used to that fact and start the pain, the sooner we will come out the other end. We all know that those of us with good jobs and pensions will need to pony up more than those who are weak and vulnerable. We all know that the old sacred cows, special interests, monopolies, outmoded practices and endless agencies must be tackled mercilessly because we cannot afford or justify them. We must cut out wasteful spending and pare back current spending.

However, the measures cannot only be about what we cannot do and the spending we cannot have. There must be an investment plan that gives hope for the future, a plan that shows us from where jobs will come. The Minister of State, Deputy McGuinness, referred to the types of activity we should be doing, such as restoring competitiveness, an essential matter. He discussed the potential to drop electricity and gas prices. We all know of that potential, but why have prices not been cut? Control is on that side of the House; please, let us have those cuts. Alongside price reductions, we must also prepare to produce the goods and services that the world wants to buy from a relatively high cost and well educated economy with an efficient and productive infrastructure. We must scrap the national development plan, which was built for another world, country and future, and draft one that targets investment in emerging technologies, to which the Minister of State referred. Unfortunately, the necessary investment is not being made. I am referring to investment in broadband, energy and education, which will provide jobs in the service area.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy has four minutes remaining.

Deputy Olivia Mitchell: We should not reduce capital spending as the economy contracts. It would only reinforce and accelerate the downward cycle. The Taoiseach knows these facts, but he seems paralysed, hoping that the social partners will bite a bullet that he is unwilling to bite.

Confidence at home is key in encouraging consumption and investment. Even more crucial is the restoration of confidence abroad, namely, the confidence that we can tackle our problems. Currently, that confidence is tumbling and with every day that passes, it tumbles further. The cost of borrowing the €55 million, which the Taoiseach says we need every day, is soaring. Some commentators suggest we may not even be able to sell the bluechip Government bonds at any price. On behalf of the Irish people, I plead with the Taoiseach to take the resolute action of which he speaks often but never delivers.

Deputy Michael Creed: The past is a different country. The present is a country which borrows €55 million to meet the daily running costs of the Irish economy, which is unsustainable.

My colleague, Deputy Mitchell, pointed out that while there is a reservoir of goodwill from all sectors of society for decisive leadership, the Taoiseach and the Government are squandering that opportunity. People are realistic in terms of the state of the economy and the measures required to be taken. While I accept we will never see the agreement in detail, there is broad agreement on what needs to be done. It is imperative we do not delay or prevaricate further. It is contemptuous of the Government to provide time for this debate when we have no idea what are its proposals in this regard, months after the extent of the problem became apparent.

I wish in the time available to deal with a number of issues. To sustain public support for the type of action necessary, it is imperative that those who contributed to bringing us to our knees are seen to pay the price. I have no confidence in respect of key officeholders such as the Financial Regulator, the Governor of the Central Bank and the Office of Corporate Enforcement. People must be brought to heel in terms of the sins they have committed. It is almost two years since the Supreme Court issued its ruling in respect of the Fyffes-DCC case, yet no action in this regard has been taken by the Office of Corporate Enforcement. Are we expected to have confidence therein in respect of breaches of company law that have become apparent in recent days?

To sustain public support for what is necessary, we need to ensure those who have contributed to the mess we are in are held to account. I believe there is a weakness emerging in terms of the Government's softness in dealing with those involved owing to its close alignment with them in the past. We need collegiality and togetherness on this issue. We have shown from these benches that we are prepared to support the Government if it takes the appropriate actions.

I believe, because I represent a constituency that has been substantially devoid of any multinational presence, that the SME sector, and in particular the agri-food sector, will contribute to the regeneration of our economy. There is much talk of research and development, which is excellent and should be encouraged. However, it is more important that we focus on bringing research to production. This is where we are stumbling all of the time. We need to focus more resources on this area.

We invest approximately €100,000 in the creation of a job in the multinational sector. We should ensure similar investment in the agri-food and seafood sectors thus encouraging them to step up to the plate. We need to get the monkey off the back of the small and medium sector which previously created thousands of jobs but are currently haemorrhaging jobs owing to the excessive burden of costs and regulation foisted upon them. We need to slash and burn red tape in that area.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Seamus Kirk): The Deputy's time has expired.

Deputy Michael Creed: I wish to make two brief points.

Acting Chairman: Make them brief.

Deputy Michael Creed: It is ridiculous in the extreme that people are in danger of losing their homes, some of whom took out mortgages with subprime lenders. These people will end up on the merry-go-round of having to draw rent supplements to rent back those houses. We need to ensure we have in place statutory provisions which protect people in their family homes. This will not result in a net cost to the economy. People are in a position to pay some but not all of their mortgage. With assistance from the State — there are many creative ways the State can assist in this regard — people's homes will be secured.

Thousands of young people, seduced by the lure of easy employment in the construction sector, now in their mid to late twenties, left school with good leaving certificates but did not pursue further studies. We need to invest significantly in retraining and upskilling these people. Otherwise, they will be consigned to a lifetime of unskilled or semi-skilled labour, which is not the future. I implore my constituency colleague, the Minister for Education and Science, Deputy Batt O'Keeffe, to address this issue in terms of any blueprint on the way forward.

Minister for Defence (Deputy Willie O'Dea): The global economy is facing its most grim and uncertain outlook for a long time. As a direct result, Ireland is now confronted with a wide range of unprecedented difficulties on a budgetary and economic front.

The Irish economy has several distinctive and unique features. It is an exceptionally open economy. We do not have a sufficiently large domestic market to consume the goods and services we produce and are, therefore, heavily dependant on foreign trade. Consequently, the economic conditions of those countries to whom Ireland sells its goods and services is central to the health of the Irish economy. The United Kingdom and the United States, which represent the destination markets for approximately 80% of our exports, will remain mired in recession this year. This has consequences for the Irish economy which are all too predictable.

Unlike our EU trading partners, we conduct an unusually large amount of our business with the United Kingdom and the United States, both of which trade in a currency different to ours. This explains why the dramatic falls in the value of the dollar and sterling against the euro have had disastrous consequences for Ireland's competitiveness. A number of studies, the most recent by the National Economic and Social Council, have concluded that currency changes between the euro on one hand and sterling and the dollar on the other are the direct cause of 70% of Ireland's falling competitiveness.

Countries have reacted differently to the economic typhoon sweeping the world. Some have concentrated exclusively on fixing their public finances while others have thrown caution to the wind and indulged in an orgy of borrowing and spending to stimulate their moribund economies. Ireland has adopted two approaches, namely, we are spending massively in an effort to stimulate our economy and invest for the future. This year, we will borrow more than 5% of our GDP to invest in capital projects, which is enormous when compared with what other countries are doing in this regard. It is proportionately the largest capital programme in the European Union. If the Government were not borrowing this money the Exchequer figures would look much better and would move much closer to the Maastricht guidelines of 3% of GDP.

The Government has recently taken steps to refine this massive spending so as to reorientate it towards more labour-intensive activities. In addition, we have invested enormously in education, retraining, upskilling and so on, as suggested here earlier. Our capital spending is

[Deputy Willie O'Dea.]

focused on specific projects. Unlike other countries, we have not tried to revive our economy by an unfocused stimulus such as a general tax cut. From our point of view this makes perfect sense. Our economy is fundamentally different from that of the United Kingdom and the United States. It is reasonable to expect that in the US higher spending and lower taxes will benefit the domestic economy but the calculation is totally different here. We tried this fiscal stimulus approach previously. It constituted the Government's response to the oil shock of the late 1970s. The increased spending power given to the Irish consumer at that time was largely dissipated on increased imports, leaving us in an even worse position. There is absolutely no evidence to suggest that the same would not happen if this strategy were repeated today. In other words, that cure, instead of ameliorating the disease, would make it infinitely worse.

In the United Kingdom, where obviously the risk of such an outcome is much less, most of the respected economic commentary suggests that the significant risk that Prime Minister Gordon Brown is taking with the country's finances will inevitably end in disaster.

The second part of our strategy is to take firm control of our burgeoning budget deficit. This year, in the absence of action by the Government, it is estimated we would have to borrow €55 million per day.

The process of bringing this expenditure back in line with revenue will be long, painful and inevitably will involve a reduction in living standards. However, it is not a sideshow or an afterthought; it is vital to restore confidence in our economy. In a small open economy such as ours, confidence, credibility and sustainability are vital factors in both boosting domestic confidence and attracting foreign investment. The imperative now is to rebuild confidence in the economy both at home and abroad. The only way to do that is to be seen to be making a determined effort to put our public finances back in order by bringing expenditure in line with revenue. This applies especially to current public expenditure. Borrowing to run this country from day to day is not sustainable and it means that the interest to be paid will consume more and more taxation that could have been spent on paying for services.

The approach taken in the late 1980s focused on restoring stability to the public finances, increasing business and consumer confidence and restoring economic growth. It more than outweighed any direct impact on the economy from spending cuts. There is no reason to believe that this cannot and will not happen again. The very fact of stability being restored to the public finances increases business and consumer confidence and thus helps to restore economic growth.

Normally cutting expenditure slows growth because it takes money out of the economy. In the late 1980s, however, the opposite happened. While we are now in a very difficult international economic climate, the Government has taken, continues to take and will in the future take difficult decisions which will help lay the foundation for our future growth. We must not lose sight of the fact that we have strengths. We have a very low level of public debt compared to most of our trading partners. Our level of employment is at its highest in Ireland's history at some 2 million, 1 million more than in the late 1980s. Ireland is still a high income country by international standards. We have spent massively on infrastructural projects together with science, technology and education.

The difficulties we confront are great, but they can be overcome by taking the decisive action now to place this country in the position where it can avail of the inevitable improvement that will occur in the international economic environment.

Deputy Billy Timmins: One of the new catchphrases is "consensus". It strikes me as somewhat strange because it is the first time I have heard it in here in 11 years. There was no consensus when decentralisation was announced. No one looked for consensus when they were

trying to build the “Bertie bowl”, so it is strange that the Government is looking for it now. Fine Gael has always been constructive in putting forward proposals, but none of them has been taken on board. It is strange that the Government now wants consensus, but we welcome it.

Another word much in use is “global”. There are three issues, namely, the public finances, the banks and our economy. Deputy Quinn is in the House and he must be shell-shocked at the way the public finances have deteriorated since he left the Department of Finance several years ago. We have no one to blame but ourselves. We could claim that, due to the global economic crisis, there would be deterioration over a period in the public finances, but the dramatic fall has come about because of our policies. They are linked to the difficulties of the banking sector which also arose from our policies, with complete concentration on the construction industry and no regulation in the banking system. We cannot blame Lehmann’s or anyone else. We cannot blame the oil crisis. This was our own creation.

My good friend, former Deputy Charlie McCreevy, was the Minister for Finance for a while, and then we had the current Taoiseach, Deputy Brian Cowen. Regarding the export economy, competitiveness slid down the scale. It is not as if this issue fell out of the sky, six or nine months ago. In budget speech after budget speech, Deputy Richard Bruton outlined the catastrophe we were headed for, but no one believed him. It was a case of “eat drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die”.

The accusation has been made that we never come up with ideas, so I want to throw out a few issues. In my special area of interest, foreign affairs, the largest part of the budget is for Irish Aid. There is a great desire to achieve the budget target, which was meant to be 0.7% of GNP by 2015. This was very worthwhile funding, but, as the economy contracts, the amount of funding for Irish Aid will also contract. It happened in the last year, where funding was reduced by €40 million or €50 million. We have to explore every avenue to determine how we may assist the economy and yet keep the Irish Aid budget in place. I ask the Minister for Foreign Affairs, and the Minister of State with specific responsibility for overseas aid, Deputy Peter Power, to examine the concept of people employed in this country who have certain skills that might be beneficial to programme or Third World countries. Perhaps, instead of paying them unemployment benefit at home, they could be paid the same amount or an increase, based on the average industrial wage, if they wish to go and work abroad. They might be able to link in with the aid agencies or programme countries and use their skills abroad. That would assist Ireland while greatly helping the individual concerned and ultimately lead to a regeneration of our economy by using this funding in a more fruitful manner. I would like this examined.

From some private conversations I have had with aid agencies, however, it seems they might be reluctant to go down that road. They tend to be opposed to the whole concept of tied aid. Nonetheless, this is something that should be examined and the Minister should explore its possibilities.

As regards the private sector paying for the public sector, Fine Gael is often accused of putting the boot into the latter, which is not true. However, we must remember that, ultimately, the private sector actually pays for the public sector. We need a vibrant public sector and we cannot have an economy without it. It must be acknowledged that some reform has taken place, for example, in the Department of Defence. Great reforms have taken place within the Defence Forces over the past seven or eight years, which is very welcome. The Revenue Commissioners have been reformed and do an excellent job. They bring in much more money than they used to. I do not know what they were doing in previous generations, but they are now more active and very efficient. However, there are many other areas of the public sector that could improve and that is what we want. We want value for money and an efficient public

[Deputy Billy Timmins.]

sector, where people are paid a fair wage for carrying out fruitful work for the benefit of the economy.

Much legislation has been passed in this House which impacts on the efficiency of the economy. A time of crisis affords us the opportunity to look at this area, for example, regarding the services industry and the hotel and restaurant trade. The National Employment Rights Authority, NERA, is quite rightly implementing the legislation, but anomalies are sweeping this country like a black plague because of our laws. I know the Minister of State, Deputy Kelleher, is seeking to address the matter of agreements which were introduced several decades ago, long before the minimum wage agreement was introduced, that are actually hindering businesses. I am aware of some businesses where employers and employees on both sides of the industrial divide had to sign a document to the effect that they were happy with the *status quo* to protect jobs, keep costs down and maintain employment. However, this is not allowed by regulation. NERA stepped in and said it could not be done.

Regarding the funding of local government, while the number of businesses has increased, we must look at a fair and reasonable mechanism. It is unsatisfactory that a small sector of society, whether businesses or people building houses, with the development levy, are paying for benefits we all enjoy. Taxation will only survive if it is equitable over time. While we talk of public service cutbacks in this downturn, services and professions must also cut back. I know an individual who paid something in the region of €148 for a blood test in a well-established medical centre in this city. Within the last few days, however, he had to pay €192 for the same service.

The builder, baker, candlestick maker, solicitor, architect or whoever must look into his or her heart and take a cut. I would urge consumers to put it to them. It did not take long for inflation and costs to creep up. The same urgency is not being seen towards the lowering of costs, however. Consumers should put the case to their friendly doctor, or whoever.

An unemployed person may have a desire to make a contribution to society instead of lining up to get his or her money. It is humiliating for them. I am lucky enough never to have stood on a dole queue and hopefully I never will, but the day may come. I would love the opportunity to be a classroom assistant, assist the local authority or work in a local hospital for the same wage rather than be at home and queue up once a week.

We must be innovative and examine such ideas. It is not a right-wing economic theory. It is a socially minded policy that would keep people's integrity, keep their hopes up and allow them to make a contribution. We must examine that. It is an enhancement of the FÁS schemes. Our education system is crumbling due to the difficulties teachers have, particularly at primary school where children are creating difficulties. They are crying out for classroom assistants, not necessarily resource teachers or additional expertise. This is a way we could work on it.

Some 70,000 houses lie idle. I ask the Government to examine the concept of reducing VAT on them for a two year period. The VAT on 70,000 houses would bring in approximately €2.5 billion. If we reduced it from 13.5% to 10% the yield would still be over €2 billion if they were all sold. It might give that stimulus. We need to examine these possibilities.

I do not know much about nuclear power but it is a poor country that cannot explore the issue. We should examine energy. We need to cut the number of committees by half and examine our practices. Anything we apply to ourselves we should be willing to apply to the public sector. I am not into this populist self-sacrifice.

The public is sick of bad news. Today I saw the front of a newspaper that said Sebastian Barry's book was "flawed", despite the fact that he won an award. We need to be positive. Let us forget about moaning on chat shows. Let us send out positive information.

Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism (Deputy Martin Cullen): Hear, hear.

Deputy Billy Timmins: Some of those chat show hosts could brighten up the day of many of their callers or listeners by taking a 10% or 20% cut in their incomes, particularly those on big contracts that may be paid for by the licence fee. I am not trying to be populist but I get weary of somebody who works 30 to 40 hours a month lecturing me and others. I am a little sick of it. We politicians should stand up for ourselves. We have to examine our practices. I do not know how many days the Dáil sits per year, 80 or 90, but I could tell Joe Duffy or Pat Kenny they work perhaps six or ten hours per week for 30 weeks per year. Most politicians work morning, noon and night. We may not be as productive as we think we are, and we must examine that. Let us stop the moaning.

Deputy Martin Cullen: Hear, hear.

Deputy Billy Timmins: Let everybody take the cut and put our shoulders to the wheel. We will be over on that side of the House very shortly, and if the current Government does not do it, we will.

Deputy Martin Cullen: I wish to share time with the Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs, Deputy Ó Cuív.

Acting Chairman: Is that agreed? Agreed.

Deputy Martin Cullen: Ireland finds itself in the most challenging global economic conditions we have seen for a long time, however economies have always been subject to cycles. It is vital that as we manage the immediate challenges we face, we position ourselves so we come out ahead in the inevitable upturn. The framework for sustainable economic renewal outlines an agenda for reform and investment that will allow the country to emerge in a position to prosper when conditions improve. We can turn this time of difficulty into an opportunity as we did in 1958 and 1987.

The Government's framework document, *Building Ireland's Smart Economy: A Framework for Sustainable Economic Renewal*, builds on the national development plan, and, more recently, the National Economic and Social Council's report, *The Irish Economy in the Early 21st century*. The NESC highlighted the long-term potential of services supported by a strong culture of innovation. I was pleased to see the NESC report recognised the success of Irish tourism as a national champion among indigenous exporters of services due to successful marketing of holidays, conferences and other products to overseas visitors in a highly competitive international marketplace. The NESC also recognised the innovation achieved in tourism. The framework for sustainable economic renewal sets out how Ireland can become the innovation and commercialisation hub of Europe. The framework highlights how the smart economy rests on four pillars: developing human capital, building physical capital, securing social capital and protecting environmental capital.

Tourism can sustainably exploit our environment while adding to our human capital. Arts and culture provide intellectual capital for the smart economy. Sports and culture provide essential social and physical capital. Arts, sport and tourism sector are critical to achieving the smart economy across the framework. In securing the enterprise economy, prioritising investment in arts, sport and tourism infrastructure can help maintain activity and employment in the construction sector. Tourism maximises the return from high-end international financial services through business tourism and conferences. In building the ideas economy, tourism has proved its ability to respond to a highly competitive international market.

[Deputy Martin Cullen.]

The framework report highlights actions in tourism, including investment in marketing as well as tourism product and the scope for eco-tourism. The tourism renewal group, which I established in December, is examining tourism policy and programmes and will develop a framework for action in the first half of 2009 to maintain the long-term sustainable growth of Irish tourism. Fáilte Ireland is enhancing the skills of tourism workers and working with tourism enterprises to enhance their operational capabilities and business skills. Tourism Ireland is pursuing new and developing markets and is establishing a hub in the United Arab Emirates to drive the development of key markets such as India and China.

When there is a risk that ill-informed comment could have a negative effect on our international image, the work of Tourism Ireland in promoting a positive image of Ireland abroad is vital for tourism and our enterprise sector. The ideas economy is also about arts and culture. There is scope to leverage our cultural capital making better links between the cultural industries and the wider economy and strengthening business capacity in the culture sector. Cultural tourism has the capacity to highlight the attractiveness of the Irish social and cultural environment for knowledge workers and innovators.

Tourism will benefit from and contribute to enhancing the environment and securing energy supplies, and not only from eco-tourism. Enterprise is already being assisted by Fáilte Ireland as well as through tax incentives in reducing their energy and utility costs while environmental measures can also protect our core attractions of landscape and natural heritage. Investing in critical infrastructure will boost the already significant economic impact of tourism by making access easier, protecting our environment and investing in key elements of tourism and sports infrastructure.

In that context let us recall the economic impact of tourism. It delivers an estimated €4.7 billion including carrier receipts and service exports, sustains close to 300,000 jobs in approximately 17,000 firms and is estimated to generate almost €3 billion for the Exchequer. While indications that visitor numbers in 2008 will show a fall in the record set in 2007, they compare well with previous years. Irish tourism is holding its own against international competitors and can continue to do so with all of us working together: industry, tourism agencies and Government. This framework sets out a positive vision for a future Ireland in which the natural skills and aptitudes of our people to innovate, create and welcome others can deliver a secure, sustainable and prosperous future.

Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs (Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív): It gives me great pleasure to speak on this debate. We must recognise the great challenges our society faces. As somebody who worked in developing industry and enterprise during the 1980s, it is important that we do not dismiss the opportunities there. From my experience I believe sometimes when the challenge is greatest it drives one to look at opportunities one might have overlooked in the past. We have to encourage people to look around them for new opportunities coming our way. In every cycle as the world develops there are types of industry that wither while new developments come forward. Some 40 or 50 years ago nobody thought financial services, which are causing many problems, or computers and IT would become the major world industry and that we would have a total demise of traditional industries such as clothing and footwear etc. We must look for the next phase.

Often life takes unusual directions. Looking around, particularly in rural Ireland, in most communities we have great untapped resources. I hope we would encourage our educated and erudite population to avail of those opportunities. Deputy Quinn would share my interest in developing a world-class rural recreation product. There is no reason why our landscape and countryside could not become a European Mecca for people to come and enjoy.

We have made slow but steady progress with the various partners in dealing with many of the issues that have bedevilled development there. Access is not the only problem. We have never invested as other economies have in providing a full, comprehensive set of services for those who want to enjoy our countryside. There are many thousands of possible jobs there. Anybody with experience of visiting continental Europe knows that the backup services there far exceed anything that we provide. We have not realised the full potential of our marine leisure facilities. We have one of the most interesting coastlines in the world but it has not been developed.

Our greatest resource lies with those who have a good education and have worked in multinational industries, but have reached a point where they want to become entrepreneurs. They have technical knowledge on a par with anybody else in the world. We must unlock the potential of the indigenous resources of our people and look in new directions. The development of alternative energy using wind and wood involves significant technology. We need to combine the basic raw energy with development in the technology sector to tap these renewable sources. We need combinations of experts in many directions. Clean water technologies also offer potential to create employment and export knowledge to other economies because we could become leaders in this area. There are many things we can do. In this challenging time, when people are going through a transition, we must encourage them not to think that everything is over, but to see that often such situations are only a new beginning.

As the Minister responsible for rural development, I am delighted that this time coincides with the beginning of the new Leader round. This is by far the biggest rural development programme ever undertaken here. We have €500 million of European and State money to invest in rural Ireland. That should generate an investment of €1.5 billion in the economy. I hope the money will be spent in a creative way to develop all the resources that we have not yet developed.

It has become common in our society to play the blame game and to expect somebody else to solve every problem. Governments must lead, and we will do so and take hard decisions. We can only solve the problems, however, if the people are motivated and encouraged to become part of the solution. The next phase of our development will come from within ourselves.

There has been much ill-informed comment about our public service. As I said the day after the budget was presented, most public servants do a good job and most are needed. The idea that we could get rid of half the public service does not match my experience. There is no question that there are places where we must re-allocate staff. There is a small minority in the public service not playing their part but for everyone who is underperforming in the public service, there is at least one who is going beyond the call of duty and giving tremendous service to the State. We face challenges. The cost of the public service bill is an issue but to try to link that to public service performance or to downgrade the public service and its contribution to the State is wrong and unfair. The State has been well served by its public service. I have no doubt that it will work with us, recognising the problems and that we do not have the money we had last year, or in previous years, to solve problems. The commentary I hear all the time that seems to imply that most of our public servants are not doing a good job does not do any service to our country and the dedicated people who work in the public service.

Acting Chairman: I call Deputy Ruairí Quinn who is sharing time with Deputy Joe Costello. The Deputies have seven minutes and three minutes respectively.

Deputy Ruairí Quinn: This debate is taking place in a vacuum. The Government has put no proposals on the table. Is it any wonder that the country is frightened? The people are scared.

[Deputy Ruairí Quinn.]

They know that things are bad and believe they will get worse and they have been concerned since last July.

Last July, the *Sunday Independent* invited me to put into an article comments that I had made on the radio. I published the following on 13 July 2008:

The economic and financial crisis facing Ireland is much greater than the Government will admit. The Taoiseach Brian Cowen was Minister for Finance when the storm clouds began to gather. But he ignored the warning signals and the advice from independent commentators.

Decisive action is required immediately — above and beyond the timid measures which were put through the Dáil on Thursday. Honest leadership is now needed. This government has been basking in the sunshine of the economic success which it inherited 11 years ago. I am not sure it has the experience or management skills to get us out of the crisis.

But here is what has to be done. The Government needs to drastically cut current expenditure so as to bring it into line with the tax revenues which our declining economy is generating.

That will ensure that we will operate within the budgetary rules of the eurozone currency.

But it must also generate confidence and hope that our economy starts to grow again. This means substantial investment in our productive infrastructure.

The Government went on holiday for the whole of August. Its members played golf up and down the west coast, and were on beaches and elsewhere while other governments were dealing with the problem. They returned in September and realised that the country was in panic.

It introduced a stunt budget that backfired desperately on it. The Book of Estimates was rushed, inadequate, badly worked out and is out of date. The revenue figures it calculated for the budget for 2009 were ahead of the October and November figures that would have been available had the budget been presented in the first week in December. By Christmas, the end of year revenue figures marked the worst fiscal record in the history of this State.

The Government is in denial and we are wandering around frightened. That fear is compounded by the inaction this month. Today is 28 January. The Taoiseach said he wanted a month to sort things out. The discussions continuing with the social partners and the parade of people in and out of Government Buildings is compounding the fear because the Government seems incapable of acting. Today we should not be debating the fantasy programme launched in Dublin Castle on the day the Dáil adjourned before Christmas but the outcome of discussions with the social partners about what we, not the social partners, must decide. We are not having that debate.

We are running out of time. Every week the Government delays decisive action, the lack of confidence in its and the economy's ability to generate the measures necessary to correct our problems costs us money. When we joined the euro the cost of borrowing money was the same as that for the German Republic. That has spread by 2.5% for the same currency, borrowing in the same currency. That shows how little confidence the rest of the world has in this Government's ability to do the business.

I listened to the Taoiseach's contribution at the outset of this debate. He said: "The challenge is severe but the Government has a clear strategy which we will continue to implement." That is fantasy, lies or delusion, or perhaps all three because there is no clear strategy and it is not implementing anything. The Taoiseach went on to refer to the unexpectedly rapid collapse of activity in the construction sector in Ireland. That was not unexpected, as it has been predicted for the last four or five years. Some of the commentators were saying that it would be a hard

landing, and that it would have severe effects. This is a Taoiseach that is in denial. He then had the arrogance to state that there is little point at looking back at how some of this might have been anticipated or avoided. Who is in charge here? Who has been responsible for the last 11 years? Who rejected the valid, well-intended and constructive criticisms that came from this side of the House? Who asked the then Minister for Finance, Deputy Cowen, to wake up and smell the coffee? Who accused the Labour Party of talking down the economy?

We are dealing with a group of people who do not know how to solve our problems. Why should we trust the recovery of the economy with the people who got us into this mess? The Minister for Community, Rural, and Gaeltacht Affairs spoke about developing the resources of our rural economy to enhance access so that we could have rural tourism. He stated that legislation to bring that about is not necessary, yet we have the worst access of any European country to the uplands of this island, while the farming associations are blocking attempts to have reasonable access to them. The Minister, a pleasant and gentle man, is in denial. We have a fantasy Cabinet that thinks it is governing, when it is steering the ship of State to the rocks of destruction.

It is not about all shoulders to the wheel, because the people driving the car do not know how to steer it. We need a change of Government at the top, but we also need hope and creative thinking. In an article I wrote for the *Sunday Independent* on 11 January, based on an interview I gave immediately after Christmas, I stated the following:

But we also need new thinking and innovative ways of delivering public services. For example, why can't the surplus staff in the public service help out in the Department of Social and Family Affairs, so that the recently unemployed workers will not have to wait up to 12 weeks to get their Job Seekers Benefit, for which they have paid with their PRSI contributions?

Instead of introducing expensive redundancy packages for surplus managers in our health service, why can't they be transferred to our 800 post-primary schools to help with the administration and finance of those large organisations, so that qualified teachers and educational staff can stay in the classrooms and deal with the concerns of students?

I rest my case on that point and I know that Deputy Costello will continue in this vein. We have a Government that is in denial and that is incapable of generating the successful solutions that we need for the economy.

Deputy Joe Costello: Thomas Payne, the great 18th century philosopher who contributed to the French and the American revolutions, once said, "Never let a serious crisis go to waste". That phrase was repeated last week by Mr. Rahm Emanuel, chief of staff to newly elected President Obama, in responding to the US and global financial recession. The US is clearly on the ball. There can be no situation so desperate and dismal that does not provide a host of opportunities and challenges.

A new ethics and equity must be established at the heart of the financial sector. The old boys' network with its nexus of banking, the regulatory authority and the Central Bank is fatal and must be ended immediately. Self-enrichment of directors through internal sweetheart loans and inappropriate remuneration packages must be discontinued immediately. A new independent regulatory system must be established to prevent the excesses of private greed which have caused the crisis. Above all, the State must retain its involvement in the banking sector after the crisis is over in the interests of protecting the people's money and the country's economy.

The days of light or self-regulation in the financial sector are well and truly over. The golden circle of overpaid, underperforming irresponsible financiers and bankers, creating a cosy self-perpetuating cartel which has controlled the economies of the world in the interests of profit

[Deputy Joe Costello.]

and self-aggrandisement, must never be allowed to control the commanding heights of our economies again. The people have too much to lose. Millions of jobs are at stake, careers and lives have been destroyed and families beggared. The public sector must never allow itself to become so enthralled by the private sector again. National governments representing the public good must insist on a new banking system. It should be a mixed banking system consisting of part public ownership, part co-operative and part private. Each member state of the EU should have a designated financial institution, preferably a State controlled or co-operative bank, to draw down funds from the EU banking system.

In the case of Ireland, the newly-nationalised Anglo Irish Bank should be the vehicle for drawing from the €30 billion fund that was made available in October 2008 by the European Investment Bank to provide loans for small and medium-sized enterprises. These enterprises are the life blood of every economy. The existing private banks are not drawing down the EIB money and they are not lending it to those enterprises. The small and medium enterprises are thus starved of cash flow and their ability to operate effectively is greatly damaged, causing further small scale job losses across the length and breadth of Ireland. The Government is doing nothing about this.

Millions of people are losing their jobs in this unprecedented crisis. Every effort must be made to minimise the effect of those job losses. The key Government response must be to make every effort to ensure that those unemployed workers do not sink into long-term unemployment. Retraining, re-skilling, back to education, mechanisms to complete apprenticeships, community-based work programmes, a stimulus package to create employment in necessary projects such as school building, installation of homes and social housing are all essential Government actions. New technologies, particularly in the area of sustainable and environmentally-friendly energy creation and use should be targeted and resourced.

The financial institutions should not be allowed to foreclose on homeowners. There should be a moratorium placed on mortgage repayments for a number of years so that those who become unemployed do not lose their homes as well as their jobs. The State banking guarantees and re-capitalization of the major banks should provide sufficient leverage for the Government to insist on such a moratorium.

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Micheál Martin): I wish to share my time with the Minister of State at the Department of Education and Science, Deputy Seán Haughey.

Acting Chairman: Is that agreed? Agreed.

Deputy Micheál Martin: Since credit markets around the world seized up last August, we have seen unprecedented turmoil in financial markets, rising unemployment and increased economic uncertainty. In Europe, in the Americas, in Asia, economic growth has stalled or is in decline. Referring to lay-offs by multinational firms around the world, a British newspaper yesterday carried the headline “More woe as 72,500 jobs axed in one day”. In the United States, 2.5 million jobs were lost in 2008. Of these, over half a million were lost in December alone. In Singapore, the Government has cut its original growth forecast for 2009 to between -5% and -2%. Japan’s trade surplus plunged by 50% in 2008 as the yen rose in value and demand in international markets weakened.

As growth has stalled around the world, unemployment rates have gone up and Government finances have deteriorated. These are common stories and have their origin in common difficulties. Most of our major trading partners are in a recession. Global trade flows are slowing. The decline in value of other currencies, especially of sterling, has created significant difficulties. These external realities cannot be ignored. The problem is global and the solution must

also be found in a global context. The European Union will be fundamental to defining a global response to the crisis. The meeting of the G20 Group in London in April will have an important role to play in looking at a co-ordinated international response.

We would do ourselves a disservice if we do not recognise the strengths as well as the difficulties in our current situation. We have a low level of public debt. Our debt to GDP ratio stands at 41%. We have 2 million people at work, which is over 600,000 more than a decade ago. Our productivity levels are relatively high. We have a strong entrepreneurial culture and Government policies that support this. Membership of the EU provides access to an internal market of almost 500 million people, while membership of the euro ensures a stable currency. We remain a high income country by international standards with strong underlying growth potential.

We need to remind ourselves that much of the spadework for this country's recent development was carried out in difficult economic times. We need to bear in mind that a world in recession is not a world without opportunities. This crisis has had a global impact. Its pace and characteristics have reflected the local circumstances of each country. While Ireland is geographically an island, economically it is part of an integrated global economy. Our economic growth over the past two decades has resulted from our increasing willingness to engage with the global economy. Much can and will be done at national level to address the challenges posed by the international economic environment, the imbalances in the domestic economy and the loss in competitiveness.

Faced with unprecedented developments in the public finances, the Government took steps in mid-2008 to address the emerging budgetary pressures. The date of the 2009 Budget Statement was brought forward. More recently, a group was established to examine ways of further curtailing public expenditure and public service numbers. The social partners have been seeking to develop a consensus on the way forward. The Government will restore balance to the public finances by, *inter alia*, reducing and prioritising current expenditure and adjusting taxation levels to reflect the changed realities. Immediate action is required. The Government has given a commitment to make expenditure savings of up to €2 billion, or 1% of GDP, in 2009. Its work with the social partners in that regard is ongoing.

Since this crisis emerged, the Government has acted decisively to safeguard the Irish banking system. In September 2008, it guaranteed retail, wholesale and dated-term debt and secured borrowings and the inter-bank deposits of domestic credit institutions. In October of that year, the guarantee scheme was made available to certain banking subsidiaries in Ireland. In December, the Government decided to recapitalise certain credit institutions. In January of this year, the Government took steps to take Anglo Irish Bank into public ownership. We have demonstrated we will do what is needed to ensure the fundamental stability of the Irish financial system.

The Government is committed to maintaining and prioritising the public capital programme. Approximately 5% of national income is being invested in capital projects. This is one of the most effective ways of stimulating the economy. In light of our infrastructural deficit, this investment will generate significant returns in terms of enhanced infrastructural capacity and future improvements in living standards. The Government is keen to emphasise capital works that are labour-intensive. Along with addressing the deterioration in the public finances and seeking to improve the competitiveness of the economy, the Government is focused on developing the medium and long-term potential of this country. While the external environment is difficult, we are looking at those areas in which our actions have put us in a position to seize the opportunities that exist and prepare for the recovery that will come in international markets.

[Deputy Micheál Martin.]

On 18 December last, the Government launched its economic renewal framework, which outlines the priorities and actions that are required. A central part of the framework is its emphasis on building on the previously high levels of investment in education and the knowledge economy. It contains important initiatives to foster innovation and develop the research and development capacity of companies operating here. The key elements of this plan include strong supports for start-up companies, which will provide the employment of the future, enhanced research and development tax arrangements, details of infrastructural projects and the basis of the development of a green economy. This country's research and development capacity has been transformed over the last ten years. That will help us to develop and sustain new employment in the future. Our continued engagement at the heart of the European Union will be an essential aspect of this country's economic recovery and further development. We have the ability to work together and with others on the road to sustainable economic renewal.

Minister of State at the Department of Education and Science (Deputy Seán Haughey): In December 2008, the Government launched its strategy for the renewal of the economy. The strategy commits the Government to stabilising the public finances and restoring competitiveness. It also repositions the Irish economy in the medium to long term. The strategy involves investing heavily in research and development and implementing a new green deal. The economic renewal framework is a comprehensive plan that involves repositioning Ireland to avail of the new opportunities that will arise when the economic recovery comes. The aim of the framework is the development of a smart economy that combines the most favourable elements of the enterprise economy and the innovation or ideas economy. Such an economy will promote a better quality environment, improve energy security and promote social cohesion. The priority of the framework is to ensure that Ireland functions as an innovation and commercialisation hub in Europe.

As Minister of State at the Department of Education and Science, I have responsibility for lifelong learning. As Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment, I am responsible for co-ordinating the education and training policies of the two Departments. The interdepartmental committee that is responsible for the preparation of an implementation plan for the national skills strategy is of critical significance under the framework. The Government aims to improve co-ordination between the various Departments and agencies that are responsible for matters like access to jobsearch, training and education and community and employment programmes. It will provide a range of opportunities for upskilling and re-skilling. A number of lifelong learning initiatives will be supported. Under the strategic innovation fund, priority will be given to flexible learning initiatives that can be targeted at upskilling people in the workforce. The Cabinet committee on economic renewal will ensure that all Departments are giving this agenda their top priority.

This year, we celebrate the 50th anniversary of the appointment of Seán Lemass as Taoiseach for the first time. In difficult economic times, Mr. Lemass steered a new course through uncharted economic waters. He abandoned the old protectionist policies and replaced them with the first programme for economic expansion, which heralded tax breaks and grants for foreign firms wishing to invest in Ireland. This is an opportune time for a similar change of course. If we are to reposition the economy for the economic upturn, we should market Ireland as the island of new innovation. The economic renewal framework will help to reorient and reprioritise all Government activities, with the goal of building a smart economy. Issues like training, education and upskilling will form an important aspect of this process. I look forward to improvements in these areas.

Just as Seán Lemass championed Ireland's first application to become a member of the EEC, this Government recognises that Ireland's future lies at the centre of Europe. The ratification of the Lisbon treaty will be an important part of the success of the Government framework plan. Any uncertainty about Ireland's future position in the EU is a serious threat to all aspects of our economic performance, particularly direct foreign investment. This economic crisis can be seen as a threat or as an opportunity. I see it as an opportunity. I believe we have the skill and determination to ensure the successful implementation of the plan I have mentioned. We are well placed to reach new horizons. The tide always comes in and lifts all boats. Only those boats that are seaworthy, or focused on innovation in this case, will reach new shores.

The Taoiseach said at the launch of the Government plan last December that a national effort is required. For that reason, the social partners are an integral part of the decision-making process, as they were in 1987 when the necessary decisions were taken in the best interests of the future of the country. I am confident that they will not be found wanting on this occasion. For 20 years, social partnership has proved that it can be a workable and beneficial process. A little give and take on the part of all participants in this process can help to make the dream of an innovation island a reality.

We should not overlook the fact that this recession is a truly global one. Most of the world's advanced countries are in recession, or are close to recession. It has previously been pointed out that the countries that respond most favourably following an economic downturn are usually those that have restructured and transformed their economies to meet new challenges of the next wave of economic growth. The framework plan that was launched in December, along with the new economic growth measures aimed at stabilising the public finances that will be announced next week, represents the basis of our economic renewal.

Deputy Charles Flanagan: This debate is crucial in the context of democracy in this country. Unfortunately, this opportunity is being squandered. Rather than providing decisive leadership, the Government is giving headless chickens a run for their money. The Government's focus is on blaming the opposition and the media, rather than taking action. Sitting back and letting nature take its course may have worked when EU money and the global credit surge combined to create the Celtic tiger, but it is not an option on this occasion.

Fine Gael has offered solutions, including an alternative budget, to maintain, stabilise and improve the economic situation. The damage that has been done to Ireland's reputation by the incompetence with which the Government has dealt with the banking crisis cannot be underestimated. I have described the behaviour of senior management in the banks as "financial treason". Bank officials and the Financial Regulator have considered themselves — and still consider themselves — so utterly immune from accountability that they have come to the Parliament of this Republic and told bare-faced lies to Oireachtas committees. Some time later, these same officials arrived at Government Buildings demanding a bail-out, which is exactly what they received. They were given a blank cheque and not even a slap on the wrist from a compliant Government.

In the boom days the banks were tripping over themselves to hand cash over to developers. In these days of bust, the Government is tripping over itself to hand over our money to the banks, money the State can ill afford to part with. It was inevitable that Anglo Irish Bank would have to be nationalised, not least because of the scandalous behaviour engaged in by its senior management for years. Now that nationalisation has taken place, what lessons have been learned? Do we even know the full story in respect of the liabilities and bad debts of that institution or is that too to be swept under the carpet? I cannot imagine any other situations where the owners of an institution — in this case, Irish taxpayers — would be denied basic information about their property.

[Deputy Charles Flanagan.]

I have several questions which I hope the Minister for Finance will respond to at the close of this debate. How will the new chief executive officer of Anglo Irish Bank be appointed? What has been done to provide competent, accountable leadership at the helm of that bank now that it is the property of the Irish taxpayer? Will it be an insider appointment or will applicants be subjected to interview and the appointment subjected to Dáil scrutiny? Have the salaries of top bankers in Anglo Irish Bank been examined? Have new salary scales been set? Have the ridiculous criteria for bonuses been appraised? I suggest a maximum salary for any banker of €200,000.

Will the Government clarify what connection, if any, exists between Anglo Irish Bank and interests in the Channel Islands? Has the bank been writing new business since it was taken over by the taxpayer? Has it been signing new contracts with new liabilities? Fine Gael is of the view that Anglo Irish Bank must be wound down in an orderly way over a period of five years. We were proved right in our assertions about the banks to date but the Government prefers to close the stable door after the horse has bolted rather than deal with the realities of the situation.

The reaction of the Government to the chief executive officer's disgraceful behaviour and recent resignation is telling in regard to Fianna Fáil's attitude to the banking crisis. There seems to be a belief that no wrongdoing took place despite staggering evidence to the contrary. The Minister for Finance said he was "disappointed", while the chief executive officer of the Financial Regulator remarked that no law was broken. Legislation does not cover every aspect of modern life but we all know the difference between right and wrong.

I draw the attention of both the Minister for Finance and the Financial Regulator to the Companies Acts 1990 which lays down clear procedures in respect of loans. These procedures should be pursued in respect of possible breach in this instance. From a criminal justice perspective, certain provisions of the Act are particularly relevant. Section 30 deals with the penalisation of dealing by directors of a company in options to buy or sell certain shares in, or debentures of, the company or associated companies. Section 31 establishes a prohibition of loans to directors and connected persons. Section 41 states that substantial contracts with directors and others must be disclosed in accounts, while section 42 establishes the particulars required to be included in accounts.

Section 46 establishes the duty of auditors of a company in breach of sections 41 or 43 of the Act. Section 53 defines the obligation of the director or secretary to notify interests in shares or debentures of a company. Section 197 establishes clear penalties for false statement to auditors. Section 202 establishes an obligation on companies to keep proper books of account. Sections 203 and 204 detail the liability of officers of a company to penalty where proper books of account are not kept.

Section 242 relates to the furnishing of false information. Subsection (1) states:

A person who, in purported compliance with any provision of the Companies Acts, answers a question, provides an explanation, makes a statement or produces, lodges or delivers any return, report, certificate, balance sheet or other document false in a material particular, knowing it to be false, or recklessly answers a question, provides an explanation, makes a statement or produces, lodges or delivers any such document false in a material particular shall be guilty of an offence.

The law is not just for the little people. It applies to us all. The Director of Public Prosecutions should be asked to examine the behaviour of bank officials in the context of the Companies

Act 1990. Will the Minister inform the House whether or not the Director of Corporate Enforcement is taking or has taken action in regard to the banks?

Tom Wolfe's famous novel, *The Bonfire of the Vanities*, springs to mind when we recall bankers flashing their credit cards in the best restaurants in the best cities. This practice cannot continue in a bank that is the property of the taxpayer. Have we halted the sponsorship by Anglo Irish Bank of the top races at Cheltenham and other places? What is being done about the junkets of golf trips to the United States and the corporate boxes in luxury surroundings at sporting events?

The golden circle that characterises Ireland under Fianna Fáil has shown itself to be toxic. A cursory glance at the number of pies in which Mr. Seán FitzPatrick had his fingers shows that cover-ups and business based on winks and nods were bound to occur. While chief executive officer of Anglo Irish Bank, Mr. FitzPatrick was also chairman of Smurfit Kappa. Mr. Gary McGann, the chief executive officer of Smurfit Kappa, was on the board of Anglo Irish Bank and chairman of its internal audit committee. This man is also chairman of the Dublin Airport Authority.

Does the Government consider these arrangements appropriate in the circumstances? Apparently it does given that last week it appointed Mr. Maurice Keane to the board of Anglo Irish Bank. This person was a member of the board of DCC which voted confidence in Mr. Jim Flavin after the High Court had adverted to serious ethical questions in the Fyffes case. Similarly, the recent statement of Mr Brian Goggins of Bank of Ireland that he is to retire next June is bizarre. This announcement is akin to the Captain of the *Titanic*, on viewing the fatal iceberg, announcing his intention to step down when the ship reaches port. The arrogance of the banks was exemplified more recently by Mr. Eugene Sheehy's statement that he would rather die than accept Government equity.

The greed and incompetence of bankers combined with the greed and incompetence of successive Fianna Fáil Governments have combined to bring this country to its knees economically. We are an international laughing stock, referred to in *The New York Times* as "the financial Wild West", and hapless Ministers failing to take control of the situation has done nothing to dispel that view. The consequences of this international perception are evident. Our credit rating has been downgraded and we are now paying 2% more on Government borrowing than the German Government. Some €50 billion has been wiped off the share value of Irish financial institutions in just 18 months.

Today, we again witness Fianna Fáil's dirty linen being aired in public. For 11 years, that party has treated the public purse as its private piggy bank. It has stuffed boards with its supporters, put the interests of its friends ahead of the good of the nation and allowed its donors to get away with the most reckless behaviour. The catastrophic mess we are confronting today offers the chance to call a halt to the clientelism, cartelism, back-scratching and political ineptitude that have characterised Fianna Fáil's governance for the last 11 years.

The economics of the Galway tent must be removed once and for all. The people who plunged us into this crisis are not capable of leading us out of it. That has been made manifestly clear by the pathetic flailing in which the Government has been engaged since last October. There must be a clean-out at the top of the financial institutions and a clean-out at the top of the Government. It is time to say goodbye to incompetent bankers and incompetent Ministers. These people should examine their consciences and, for once in their lives, put the national good ahead of their own greed and arrogance.

It is appropriate, on the 200th anniversary of his birth, to recall Charles Darwin's statement that, "It is not the strongest of the species that survives nor the most intelligent but the one that most responds to change". This is an apt quotation for the situation we find ourselves in,

[Deputy Charles Flanagan.]

led there by the headless chickens who have overseen the governance of this State in the last six months. The required change is not possible under the current Government. People are angry and that anger is justified. The time has come for change and change in the banks and in Government must come about if we are to retrieve from this current situation.

Debate adjourned.

Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse Act 2000: Motion.

Minister for Education and Science (Deputy Batt O’Keeffe): I move:

That Dáil Éireann approves the draft Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse Act 2000 (Section 5) (Specified Period) Order, 2009, a copy of which was laid before Dáil Éireann on 22nd January, 2009.”

The operation of the Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse is governed by the terms of the Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse Act 2000 and the amended Act of 2005. Under section 5(5)(a) of the principal Act, the commission is statutorily obliged to publish its report to the general public within the specified period. The current specified period is due to expire on 31 January 2009 and this extension is required in order to allow the commission to comply with its statutory obligations and to publish its report during the specified period.

As prescribed by the Act, the Department has consulted the commission on the requirement and timeframe for the extension. The commission, which is independent of the Department in the performance of its functions, has requested an extension of four months to the end of May 2009 to allow for completion of the report and to make the necessary preparations for its publication and release to the general public.

The chairperson, the honourable Mr. Justice Seán Ryan, in a letter to the Department dated 19 January 2009, has confirmed that the commission is currently finalising the report, which is expected to consist of up to 3,500 pages. The current position is that more than 90% of the material is being given final approval by the commissioners and the remainder will be completed before mid-February. At that time, the report will be sent to the printers and the printing and proofing process will begin.

When the previous extension was sought in May 2008, the commission had indicated to the Department that it hoped to be in a position to forward the report to the printers by the end of November 2008, with a further period of two months being allowed in which to finalise the printing and proofing process. Consequently, the previous specified period was extended to the end of January 2009 on foot of those advices received from the commission.

However, the chairperson has now indicated that the work and time involved in the printing, proofing and publication of the report was underestimated. All focus to date has been on completing the writing of the report but the commission is now in a position to be more accurate about the schedule of work required leading to the publication of the report. Under the terms of section 5(5) of the Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse Act 2000, an order to extend the term of the Commission must be approved by both Houses of the Oireachtas.

One of the primary functions of the Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse is to provide those, who previously had no such facility, with an opportunity to discuss their experiences of childhood abuse to an experienced and sympathetic forum. For many former residents of institutions, this therapeutic process is all that they require of the commission. However, many others have sought to have their allegations of abuse inquired into.

To ensure that both strands could be accommodated, the Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse Act 2000 provided for two distinct committees, the confidential committee and the investigation committee. In providing these two separate fora, this has ensured, on the one hand, the right to confidentiality of those who wanted only to access the therapeutic role of the commission and, on the other hand, the right to natural justice of those persons accused of abuse.

The confidential committee has provided a forum for 1,090 victims of abuse to recount their experience on an entirely confidential basis. The investigation committee investigated complaints and allegations made to it and provided a forum for 900 victims to be interviewed or to attend hearings. Therefore, the investigation committee has a dual role in facilitating victims who wish to recount their experiences and to have allegations of abuse fully inquired into.

The investigation committee also held public hearings into a number of specific institutions. Evidence has also been submitted to the investigation committee, at public hearings in relation to various Departments including the Departments of Education and Science, Justice, Equality and Law Reform and Health and Children and the Irish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children.

On completion of its investigations, the commission will publish and release its report to the general public. The final report will be based on the findings and subsequent reports of both the confidential and investigation committees. The Act provides that, in its report, the commission may identify institutions in which abuse occurred and the persons responsible for such abuse and may make findings in regard to the role and responsibility of management and regulatory authorities. The report, however, following the recommendation of the commission, will not make findings on any individual case. The commission's report may also contain recommendations on actions to address the continuing effects of the abuse and actions to be taken to safeguard children from abuse in the future.

I urge Deputies to approve this resolution by supporting the motion. By doing so, they will enable the commission to fulfil its statutory obligations by publishing its report within the specified period. By supporting this motion, they will provide a legal basis through which the Government and this House have previously decided the commission would report.

An Ceann Comhairle: I must interrupt the Minister as the time allocated for this motion is limited.

Deputy Ruairí Quinn: We have got the message.

Deputy Brian Hayes: In the limited time available to me, I must register my protest at the fact that only 20 minutes has been allowed for the debate on this serious matter in the House tonight. When I last spoke on this matter last May, as did Deputy Quinn and others, I asked if we were giving the commission enough time to allow for its report to be published and printed. I was told on that occasion that the time stipulation, which at that time was the end of January this year, was sufficient. Under this motion, we will give the commission more time on the basis of a request from Mr. Justice Ryan, the chairperson of the commission, and I fully understand the reason for that.

The commission is a creature of this House. It has been caused to be established by this House and its terms of reference are a matter for this House. The notion that in 20 minutes Members can make their contributions on this motion is unacceptable.

Are we giving the commission enough time to complete this work by providing for an extension of another four months? I would like the Minister to reply to that question. What is the

[Deputy Brian Hayes.]

problem in extending the specified period even further? If the commission publishes its report within three or four months, that would be fine and if not, what would be the problem? Why does the Minister not set a date of the end of October, November or the end of the year for the specified period? There is nothing that precludes the commission from publishing its report before that date. I repeat a point I made last May, namely, that we are setting a time limit for this work that may well be unrealistic.

The second reason I cite this point, and this is the more substantial issue, is that the Minister must be aware that since the judgment of Mr. Justice Iarfhlaith O'Neill, the terms of reference of the commission have been effectively extended in terms of those who can now seek compensation, namely, those who were over the age of 18 in residential care at the time of this entire saga. I am aware the Government has appealed this matter to the Supreme Court and it is a matter for it to determine, on the basis of legal argument and judgment, the veracity of the O'Neill judgment that was given last October.

By giving the commission an additional four months to complete this work, are we flying in the face of a serious judgment given by Mr. Justice Iarfhlaith O'Neill in the High Court? His argument in that judgment, which is currently law, is that those persons over 18 years of age — between the ages of 18 and 21 — should have been included in the terms of reference because at that stage, in terms of Irish law, they were regarded, effectively, as minors. Are we putting the cart before the horse? By the granting this restrictive additional four months, which the Minister is proposing to the House, are we saying, effectively, that case is null and void? We cannot make that judgment, I submit, until such time as the Supreme Court has come to a determination on the High Court ruling. We cannot make that judgment until such time as the Supreme Court has come to a determination on the High Court ruling. I understand the Minister's dilemma on this issue but I suggest to him, and I ask him to reply to this substantive point, that it would be more sensible to allow us more time than the four months.

We are in a financial crisis. If ever there was an example of the most reckless, disgraceful, Fianna Fáil cute hoor deal in this country it was the deal struck by Deputy Michael Woods and the Fianna Fáil Government in 2002. That deal effectively allowed the religious orders to walk away with a liability of €128 million. I understand that at last count the total cost of this will be in excess of €1.2 billion. We are looking for cuts of €2 billion this year and already, in this case, the State stands liable for €1 billion because of the disgraceful deal that the Minister's Government negotiated in its dying days in 2002, a deal about which the Department of Finance of the time had severe reservations. It was railroaded through for some reason nobody has been able to explain. I submit it was a disgraceful deal and the people have been paying the price ever since.

Deputy Ruairí Quinn: I wish to share my time with Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin. I shall take four minutes and perhaps the Ceann Comhairle might let me know when one minute remains. I very much support the comments made by my colleague, Deputy Hayes. I will address my comments as quickly as I can in order to facilitate my colleague in Sinn Féin.

This motion gives me the opportunity to discuss another State agency created to respond to the outcry over child abuse in State institutions, namely, the Residential Institutions Redress Board. As Deputy Hayes said, the deal signed by the then Minister for Education, Deputy Michael Woods, is unacceptable in terms of what we now know. In view of time constraints I do not wish to repeat what he said. It is worthy of my support.

I will say the following in support of this motion, which my party will support. The Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse is a worthy effort by the State to provide explanations and accountability in respect of abuses which happened under its authority. The involvement by

the Catholic Church in these abuses is a legacy of the particular dynamics of church-State relations during most of the 20th century. However, although efforts have been made to overcome this legacy, there is still, sadly, plenty of evidence in modern Ireland to show that this complicated relationship fails to put victims of abuse first. For example, we have had the recent revelations in the diocese of Cloyne where the bishop clearly failed to report cases of child abuse. We have also seen the case of Louise O’Keeffe, where the State claimed it was not responsible for the abuses she suffered. These are signs that even ten years after the Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse was set up by the State, the State still has a lot of soul searching to do when it comes to accepting responsibility for the abuses caused by the church-State relationship.

It is reasonable to grant time with regard to this matter although I am in line with Deputy Hayes that there should be some flexibility. Perhaps this will spur those concerned to act. I do not get any sense that the modern church has learned from mistakes of the past. I would like the Minister to indicate in his response what course of action, if any, he and the Minister of State with responsibility for children and young people, Deputy Andrews, propose to take with regard to the non-compliance with State law by members of certain dioceses.

Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin: I thank Deputy Quinn.

Sinn Féin supports the motion that will allow an extension of the specified period for the Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse. We are conscious that the report that will be produced by the Commission is on a subject whose complexities should not be taken lightly, or rushed. The difficulties of conducting such investigations are not underestimated by me or by my colleague Deputies. Although the Commission has offered a forum for victims of abuse to recount their experience and avail of counselling through the health services, the report will not solve the issues arising out of abuse in this State, including the fact that many people who were abused during the decades of collusion between the State, the church and the Garda are not entitled to compensation under the residential institutions redress scheme.

Sinn Féin welcomed the recent High Court ruling that those who were abused in residential institutions up to the age of 21 will be entitled to seek redress. We believe, however, it is equally immoral that we are still witness to cases where people are excluded from redress schemes due to the location of their abuse, such as the case of Marie Therese O’Loughlin, who embarked on a hunger strike outside this building in order to have the Morning Star hostel added to the list of qualifying institutions under the Act. I wish to send good wishes from this House this evening to Marie Therese.

We call on the Government to take note of this, and to implement the long overdue robust scheme of child protection and prevention of child abuse, in order that such commissions will not be required in the future.

Minister for Education and Science (Deputy Batt O’Keeffe): I thank all the Deputies who contributed and I shall try to respond as best I can to some of the issues they raised.

The judgment which Deputy Hayes mentioned refers to the Residential Institutions Redress Board and not to the commission. With regard to the report and the four-month extension, that request came from Mr. Justice Ryan. He indicated clearly that over 90% of the report has been completed and that he is satisfied he can complete the rest of it by mid-February. It will then be sent for printing. At this stage he is happy that the report will be ready at the end of May and indicates that this period will give sufficient time to the Commission to complete its work. In terms of people working on the report, Mr. Justice Ryan indicated that during that period paralegal people will be employed in finalising the work. He feels justified in looking for the four extra months which will give him more than adequate time to complete the report.

[Deputy Batt O’Keeffe.]

With regard to the Louise O’Keeffe case it is appropriate to say that the court held there was no employee-employer relationship, de facto or otherwise, between the teacher and the State defendants. I advise the Dáil that the issue of costs is to be heard this week.

Deputy Ruairí Quinn: Will the Minister give an undertaking that the Government will not press them?

Deputy Batt O’Keeffe: I beg the Deputy’s pardon.

Deputy Ruairí Quinn: The Government will bankrupt this woman.

Deputy Batt O’Keeffe: Let us hear what the courts decide and we will then look at that issue.

The interpretation section of the Act defined the term “child” and other cognate expressions as somebody who had not attained 18 years. This operated to exclude the applicant who was over 18 when initially placed in the institution. However, at the time the applicant was placed in the institution, she was regarded under the prevailing law as a minor as the age of majority at that time was 21 years. “JD” subsequently took a judicial review to appeal the decision of the board’s review committee. The State is appealing this case to the Supreme Court and we are awaiting confirmation of a date for the hearing. In the circumstances I believe the Deputies will understand it would be totally inappropriate for me to comment on any detail of the case pending the outcome of that appeal.

In the report produced by the Committee of Public Accounts in March 2005 on the indemnity agreement, it was noted that the Government decided to establish a statutory redress scheme regardless of whether the religious orders would contribute to that scheme, and that in securing a meaningful contribution from the congregations, the Government achieved its baseline level of €128 million.

Question put and agreed to.

Private Members’ Business.

Child Protection: Motion (Resumed).

The following motion was moved by Deputy Alan Shatter on Tuesday, 27 January 2008:

“That Dáil Éireann:

expressing its serious concern at:

- the shocking and disturbing revelations of neglect and physical and sexual abuse suffered by six children in Roscommon; and
- the failure of the Western Health Board to appropriately intervene at an early stage;

calls on the Government to:

- appoint an independent commission pursuant to the Commissions of Investigation Act 2004 to examine all of the family circumstances relating to the six Roscommon children whose mother was convicted of incest and other offences of child abuse and neglect in Roscommon Circuit Court on Wednesday, 21st January, 2009;

- ensure that such investigation has specific regard to the actions and child protection practices and procedures of:
 - the former Western Health Board and the Health Service Executive;
 - all school and religious authorities and personnel who had contact with the children;
 - doctors and nurses who had contact with the children; and in addition
 - has regard to the actions, if any, of other relevant persons and organisations which affected the approach taken by the Western Health Board or who were in a position to report child neglect or abuse;
- ensure that the terms of reference of the commission also require it to investigate the action taken by Government and more particularly by successive Ministers for Health and Children and Ministers for Children to ensure the effective implementation of the Children First Child Protection Guidelines of 1999, and to implement the outstanding relevant recommendations contained in the Report of the Committee of Inquiry into the death of Kelly Fitzgerald, published by the Oireachtas Joint Committee on the Family in April 1996; and
- ensure that the Minister for Health and Children and the Minister for Children both take all necessary and immediate action to ensure that all children at risk receive the protection to which they are entitled under our current law and that our Child Protection Guidelines are effectively and uniformly implemented throughout the State.”

Debate resumed on amendment No. 1:

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

“in expressing its deepest concern at the circumstances surrounding the case of incest, severe child abuse and neglect involving six children heard before Roscommon Circuit Court last week:

- welcomes the HSE’s setting up of an independent inquiry into these appalling events to:
 - examine the entire management of the case from a care perspective;
 - identify any shortcomings-deficits in the care management process; and
 - make a report on the findings and learning arising from the investigation;
- acknowledges the extremely difficult and complex work carried out by HSE staff in the area of child protection in particular;
- recognises the HSE’s work to reform child and family services which includes commitments to:
 - put in place national standards relating to social work and its practice; and
 - work with the Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs to advance social work practice and organisational reform in the context of the Government’s overall policy for children’s services — the ‘Agenda for Children Services’;
- acknowledges the steps being taken by the Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs in co-ordinating and leading policy development and actions to bring

about improvements in the delivery of services for children within its specific policy remit and across the public service;

- commends investments in the provision of services for children which have been made by recent Governments since 1997; and
- commends the work of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on the Constitutional Amendment on Children, chaired by Mrs. Mary O'Rourke, T.D., and, in particular, the recommendation included in the committee's interim report of 11 September 2008 with regard to the preparation and publication of legislation to give legal authority for the collection and exchange of information concerning the risk or the occurrence of endangerment, sexual exploitation or sexual abuse of children."

—(Minister of State at the Department of Health and Children, Deputy Barry Andrews).

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

An Ceann Comhairle: Is that agreed? Agreed.

Deputy Jan O'Sullivan: I agree with my colleague, Deputy Brendan Howlin, who said in the House last night that we should, if at all possible, be able to agree, as legislators, on how we respond to this dreadful case and to other cases of child abuse that, unfortunately, we have heard about over the years. Deputy Howlin referred to the Kilkenny incest case which occurred in 1993 and to the recommendations of the resulting report. Unfortunately, that report bears a great deal of resemblance to what will come out, quite possibly, from the recommendations of the investigative group that has just been established under the direction of Norah Gibbons in respect of the dreadful case in Roscommon.

Since the Kilkenny incest case in 1993, we have had the Kelly Fitzgerald case and Sophia McColgan's book, which would cause anybody's heart to go out to that family and commend the courage of Sophia McColgan and her siblings. Unfortunately, their story is very much replicated in many aspects of the current story. These children were crying out for help, and although they were in school, and in hospital on one or two occasions, there was no intervention for many years.

Reference has just been made to the Louise O'Keeffe case. I understand the State is going after Louise O'Keeffe for costs even though she was abused in a national school. While teachers are paid by the State, the actual management of the school is not the State's and, therefore, nobody appears willing to take responsibility. We have also had the Ferns case, the Cloyne diocese case and the Dublin diocese is shortly to report. The Sexual Abuse and Violence in Ireland, SAVI, report, indicates that more than a quarter of men and women have experienced some level of sexual abuse yet we do not appear to be making any kind of progress in regard to these dreadful issues.

As legislators, we must look at ourselves and ask what we can do as a society. We cannot simply become outraged every time there is a case like this when we have not seen any significant progress since the Kilkenny incest case back in 1993. We must ensure that we act, whether that be in terms of changing the Constitution, introducing the legislation that has been recommended, particularly in regard to so-called soft information for the protection of children, or in general updating our legislation with regard to the protection of children. Otherwise, we will have a repetition of these cases.

We need to amend the Constitution, or at least we need to put to the people an amendment to the Constitution to protect children. The heart of this issue is the balance between the rights of the family and the rights of the individual child. We must grasp that nettle, and we must come down in favour of the rights of the child. There is a long-established core of support for

the family in Ireland. We need to make a cultural shift in order to ensure the protection of children. We need to ensure the protection of the child is the most important issue with regard to these cases. Until we do that, we will have the kind of delays we see in terms of intervention where it is obviously right for the children to be taken out of the family home. Whether a child is being abused by a stranger, a schoolteacher, a priest, a family member or anybody else, we must be absolutely clear that it is the welfare of the child that counts.

We need to take these measures quickly. We have done a huge amount of research into this area. I was a member of the last All-Party Committee on the Constitution which considered the rights of children. We have had enough debate, consultation and consideration. We must act now in the interests of children.

I welcome the fact Ms Norah Gibbons is the person in charge of this group. I welcome also the statement she made which indicated she could expand her committee, that she felt she had the appropriate powers and that she could, if necessary, bring in more expertise. We need to ensure there is full confidence in this investigative group but the most important point is not just to find out what has gone wrong but to learn from it and do something positive and real to protect children in the future.

Deputy Mary Upton: In the course of this debate, it has been reiterated that child protection is everyone's concern. While that is easily stated, it is primarily the responsibility of the State to ensure the services and facilities are in place to leave it beyond any doubt that children are protected. None of us believes there is a simple formula or set of procedures that can be cast in stone and put in place to ensure there will never again be a case of child abuse or neglect. However, there are simple procedures that, given everything we have heard, need to be reconsidered, restated and reinforced. We must tackle the legislation and find what needs to be done to ensure every possible procedure that can be activated to ensure children are safeguarded is in place.

The horrific events in Roscommon are of a nature and scale that I had hoped we would never have to hear or read about again. There is nothing any of us in this House can say that will change the awful conditions and circumstances for those children and the impact this is sure to have on them. All we can hope for is that all the services and facilities that are now available to them will be put in place efficiently and sensibly to ensure they do not suffer more.

It is a fair observation that there are many other cases of child abuse out there in families and communities. They may not be of the same scale or extreme but child neglect and abuse is certainly still occurring in many homes and communities. It is too late for the children we have referred to in Roscommon to be protected but their future welfare must be dealt with and supported in every possible way. For the other children out there who are still potentially at risk, every support and intervention that is necessary and available should be put in place and provided for. Whatever about the economy and cuts, there is absolutely no set of circumstances in which penny-pinching should apply when it comes to the welfare of children.

What services are required? Is the Minister satisfied, for example, that there are enough social workers available to deal with the potential number of cases? Are there enough resources to ensure social workers at the coalface are given every legal back-up needed to allow them to carry out their responsibilities? Is the Minister satisfied the children of parents who are known to have alcohol problems or drug-related addiction, for example, are given the support or, if necessary, the intervention to protect their welfare?

On a number of previous occasions in the House, I raised from a slightly different perspective an issue that concerns me, namely, the situation of at-risk children who are safe and secure

[Deputy Mary Upton.]

when they attend school but who return home to a dysfunctional environment where there is no order, security or food. These are children who only know fear, neglect and violence. Perhaps these cases are not as acute as those involving the Roscommon children but, undoubtedly, they leave many innocent children damaged, neglected and harmed by the failure of a parent to cope and, in turn, the failure of the State to put in place the supports and interventions that are needed, call them what one wants.

There is a need. We are all aware of situations, although we perhaps cannot categorically say there is a problem. However, there are people at the coalface whose responsibility it is to ensure those kinds of events are tackled and that the environment and conditions are changed to ensure the security and safety of those children. When we do not intervene and put in supports, we wonder later on why we have damaged children, teenagers and young adults who resort to drug abuse, crime and anti-social behaviour and drop out of school. Perhaps the investment we require now to tackle this problem seems major, but in the long term if we do not get to grips with this issue and invest whatever resources it takes to make their lives safe and secure, everybody, particularly those children, will pay an incalculable price.

It has been a horrific saga for the children who suffered in the Roscommon case. It is crucial the review of this case is independent, thorough and prompt. I welcome the appointment of Ms Norah Gibbons to chair the committee.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I call the Minister of State, Deputy Michael Finneran. I understand he is sharing time with the Minister of State, Deputy Mary Wallace, and Deputies Mary O'Rourke, Niall Blaney and Niall Collins.

Minister of State at the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government (Deputy Michael Finneran): As one who represents the constituency where the national focus has centred, I can say we are all deeply troubled by the severe maltreatment, sexual violation, emotional devastation and extreme neglect which have surfaced in this case. There is no doubt that on whatever side of the House we sit, the health and well-being of our children is something about which each of us cares deeply. The history of abuse in this case is extensive and appalling. This is a painful and deeply disturbing tragedy that has left us shocked and saddened and we are still trying to understand how such levels of degradation and deprivation could occur in our midst over such a prolonged period of time.

As a society, we must teach our children that they are valued and teach them to value others also. To paraphrase an American spokesperson on the issue, namely, Ms Tipper Gore, we must turn our national consensus on abuse prevention into a national conscience, where every member of our society nurtures the fact that our children are the most precious resource we have, and we all have a stake in ensuring they receive the care and support they need. It takes more than good government and public servants; it takes good people on the streets working every day to reach out and help those who are least able to help themselves.

The Roscommon case highlights the need to examine existing legislation and child protection procedures. The decision of the Minister of State with responsibility for children, Deputy Barry Andrews, to launch an immediate, independent investigation to examine the management of the case and to compile a report on its findings is the most sensitive and expeditious way of dealing with these issues.

It is imperative that we establish the facts holistically. We cannot fix a system without simultaneously addressing every interconnected problem, and we cannot implement any legislative changes until this is achieved. The appointment of Ms Norah Gibbons, director of advocacy for Barnardos, to chair the inquiry, along with Ms Leonie Lunny, former chief executive with

the Citizens Information Board, and two senior Health Services Executive staff is the most effective way to get the facts as soon as possible. It must be understood that the appointment of two senior HSE staff is a platform to ensure that the team will have complete access to the HSE system and staff, up to and including the chief executive. The investigation team will have access to independent legal advice, which will be available throughout the investigation. The Minister of State, Deputy Barry Andrews, also has the right to carry out any further investigation where he deems it necessary.

It is part of the duties of a civil society to protect vulnerable citizens and others from harm, and I believe the appointed team will compile a transparent and conclusive report which will enable us to implement the legislation and corrective measures that have come to our attention in such a terrible manner.

The terms of reference for the investigation team are to identify any shortcomings in the care management process, to examine the entire management of the case from a care perspective and to make a report on the findings within six months, should there be no unforeseeable obstructions. The Minister of State, Deputy Barry Andrews, fully reserves the right to carry out any further investigations necessary.

As parents, teachers, health care professionals, Government officials and concerned citizens, we must take responsibility through collaborative efforts to reach out to those at risk. Everyone must be part of the solution. Unfortunately, not every child in Ireland is raised in a safe and loving home. More often than we realise, children become the victims of abuse and neglect from the very people they should be able to trust. We must further educate children to avoid situations where abuse can occur and not to fear the authorities who are entrusted with their interests. As a community, we need to be diligent and observant and we must be intelligent and effective in that regard. Child care protection and welfare guidelines must be implemented in full and they must be implemented consistently throughout the country. This horrific case has shown us that we must think of children in every policy decision we make and implement to ensure that this cannot happen again in our society.

Minister of State at the Department of Health and Children (Deputy Mary Wallace): I welcome the opportunity to speak in this important debate. The revelations surrounding the case heard in the Roscommon Circuit Court last week have shocked all of us and have placed a focus on child protection. It is important that we keep in mind our deep concern, as the Minister of State at the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government, Deputy Michael Finneran, has done, regarding the circumstances of the case of incest, severe child abuse and neglect involving six children heard before the court in Roscommon last week. I join the Minister of State at the Department of Health and Children, Deputy Barry Andrews, in welcoming the establishment by the HSE of an independent inquiry into these appalling events. The function of the inquiry is to examine the entire management of the case from a care perspective, to identify shortcomings and deficits in the care management process and to make a report on the findings and learning arising from the investigation.

To properly examine the issue we must be mindful of the work being done by the Government. This includes the work of the Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs and the HSE and the many developments of recent years in this area. The Childcare Act 1991 and Children Act 2001 form the backbone of child protection legislation in Ireland. The Childcare Act 1991 places a legal obligation on the HSE to promote the welfare of children who are not receiving adequate care and attention. The primary emphasis of the Act is to provide services aimed at prevention and early intervention and, where possible, supporting children in their family situations and in the community. In the case of serious problems as judged by professional social workers, appropriate, alternative care services which place children outside of

[Deputy Mary Wallace.]

the home are provided. The Act allows for a child at risk to be taken into care on a voluntary basis, or pursuant to a court order. As well as supervision, interim and full care orders, which are the responsibility of the Health Service Executive, the Act provides for urgent intervention by the Garda under section 12 and by the HSE under section 13. However, in serious cases of neglect or abuse, it may prove necessary to take children out of dysfunctional home environments. Social workers must make these difficult judgments and it is the responsibility of everyone to report concerns so that appropriate responses can be made to reduce risk and address the need. It is important that such reports are dealt with in a timely and effective manner.

There are a range of key child welfare and protection policy documents and related documents. These include the national children strategy, the Children First guidelines, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and, most recently, the agenda for children services. That document represents the overarching policy document of the Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs and was launched in December 2007. It requires a focus on outcomes and integrated service delivery.

In recent years there has been a re-balancing and readjustment of child welfare services towards early intervention and support for families to reduce the numbers of children who may become dependent on State care. This reflects the policy of emphasising a preventive and supportive approach to child welfare. In many cases, this is done in partnership with agencies where the focus is on building capacity in vulnerable communities. The springboard family support programme, a specific example of this policy, is designed to improve the well-being of children and families in Ireland. All springboard projects have a general strategy of being openly available to all families, parents and children in their communities in addition to a more specific strategy of working intensively with those who are most vulnerable.

The HSE is aware of the need to work with well-defined information and evidence and not with unconfirmed anecdote. It realises the need to ensure that the evidence used is robust and valid. However, recent instances of social work reform have shown the importance to success of communication and timely flows of commonly understood shared information.

The child care information project, which is initially implementing the standard assessment and referral methods and, thereafter, will progress to improve standardised national child protection procedures is very important in this area. This project and other initiatives, such as the review of the Children First child protection guidelines and the publication by the HSE of the child protection framework, will work with the knowledge management strategy for child welfare and protection. They will ensure availability of better information and improved communication.

I am confident that the my colleague, the Minister of State at the Department of Health and Children, Deputy Barry Andrews, and the HSE can together significantly improve and better integrate child welfare and protection services for all children who need them. The work I have described indicates how much is being done to realise this objective. However, everyone has a role to play in identifying difficulties and notifying the appropriate authorities in an effective and timely manner to deal with such reports to ensure the protection of all children everywhere.

Deputy Mary O'Rourke: I am pleased to contribute to this debate. Before discussing the main part of the issue, I wish to state how we abhor what occurred in this rural village in a rural county in Ireland. The depravity which it exhibited is forever etched in our minds. However, I am very much afraid that outrage fades. People may be outraged today, but then a fresh disaster may arise, whether it be something of this nature or something of a more technical nature. If this occurs, then the utter depravity of what we have heard in the courts last week can fade

from our minds and, with that, the urgency which should accompany the investigation into those awful acts may fade also.

This was not merely depravity, as every vestige of innocence and dignity was taken from those six children. Professionals who were in the court that day tell me the six children are broken people. What they now face in their lives is terrible and no matter what counselling or help they receive, they forever are injuriously marked by what happened to them.

While there is absolutely no excuse for what happened, life will go on and the outrage will fade. Therefore, it is extremely important that the committee which has been set up to investigate this matter does so expeditiously, professionally and with a clear mandate regarding what it must do. I have every faith in the fine woman who will lead the investigation and have every faith in the professionals. While it is very easy for Members to throw brickbats at the HSE, in this case the personnel who have been selected will do their job. Moreover the chairperson has stated that if she requires further powers, she will revert to the Minister, who presumably then will revert to the Oireachtas, to set up, if required, further powers to investigate the matter fully.

There was much comment over the weekend in various newspapers, journals, as well as on radio and television, about what must be done. I am chair of the Joint Committee on the Constitutional Amendment on Children, which has been mentioned in the amendment to Deputy Shatter's motion. As the Leas-Cheann Comhairle and Deputy Shatter are aware, it has met 33 times and its members have worked mightily and well. I fully commend each member of the joint committee. They are a remarkable group of people, who bring their professional expertise and knowledge of people. One serves on a committee of this House because one brings to it one's strengths as a public representative, as well as whatever professional experience one might have built up over the years. Last September, the joint committee issued an all-party recommendation on soft information, an issue which heretofore had proved intractable. It has gone to the Government and to the Attorney General for compilation in legislation and the Minister for State, Deputy Barry Andrews, tells me it is in gestation. It will remove an issue that recently has arisen in respect of the church's investigations, namely, a fear expressed by its representatives in respect of some matters to the effect that they cannot exchange information. However, once this proposal is in legislative form, this issue should be rectified and I am glad of that.

At present, the joint committee is finalising the second part of its report and I hope it will be ready within the next few weeks. Thereafter, its members will embark upon its agenda of dealing with the rights of children as individuals. Children have rights within the ambit of their families, which also is correct. While everyone might wish that every child would have a happy family life, no matter what one does, it is not always so. While some things happen occasionally that are not of much import, to subject six children to living in that house in that rural County Roscommon village and to expect they could be left there and that this would be their experience of childhood because they are members of a family, is mind-bogglingly wrong and is no way to treat a family.

Members of the Oireachtas should be aware that the way ahead for bringing forward a constitutional referendum on the rights of the child will be very troubled. Although the wording to be used in the referendum has yet to be decided, no matter how one tries to do this, no matter what words are employed, no matter how the words are used and no matter how fairly they are couched, they will be perceived by many as an attack on the family. There is a belief that what goes on beyond the hall door should remain there, within the privacy of a family and that this is the best place for it. This is not true if children are being abused or being neglected, as they were in this case. While I do not wish to say more, I understand there will be more to follow.

[Deputy Mary O'Rourke.]

I hope the sense of outrage does not fade. Perhaps, in its summing up, this investigation may find there was a lack of cross-agency interaction or a need for greater resources. I do not know. It may find that methods of work should be further explored in a different fashion. If it is found that there is a lack of cohesion or completeness in how the various monitoring regimes are put into effect, and I am sure this is the case, then this matter must be attended to immediately. This House has done a good job to debate this issue. As the Leas-Cheann Comhairle is aware, this issue has been debated at the Joint Committee on the Constitutional Amendment on Children and the more this issue is discussed and highlighted, the better the chance that such occasions will become fewer in number.

Deputy Niall Blaney: I thank my colleagues for sharing time. I am glad to have this opportunity to offer my thoughts on the issue of child welfare and protection. As a child, it is a basic human right to be protected from hurt. Unfortunately, hurt comes in many forms, both physical and mental, and it is all too common for young innocent children to be harmed, sometimes by family members and sometimes by outsiders.

A horrendous case of abuse came to light in the media in particular last week, in which children were subjected to many forms of abuse by their mother. When such a case hits the headlines, there is a public outcry regarding the disturbing details of the abuse, and rightly so. One should be outraged because it is absolutely unacceptable that any child should be obliged to suffer to that extent. However, I welcome the launching of an independent investigation into the case. The Minister of State, Deputy Barry Andrews, has taken seriously the issue of the lack of information provided to him. I was glad to learn that he has appointed Ms Norah Gibbons to head that investigation. I believe she has made a highly forthcoming statement in respect of the investigation's terms of reference and her willingness to extend those terms, if necessary. This case also is of great concern to the Minister of State from that constituency, Deputy Finneran. This has not been an easy time for these people.

Many people find it difficult to comprehend that a mother, father, any family member or outsider could subject a child to such horrid abuse. However, this is happening and it is up to everyone in society to realise this and to be prepared to do something about it. While it is easy to point the finger here and there, the solution must come from society upwards. Unfortunately, family breakdown is a common occurrence in modern society, which causes untold hardship for children and the adults involved, not to mention the extended families. Family life is a hugely important factor in the emotional stability of a child. However, family life does not have to be defined by mother, father and children. There are many formats of the family unit in existence and regardless of the format, the important element is that the adult or adults who have responsibility for the children are capable of carrying out their role as carers for those children. Caring is the key word when talking of children. Those in the caring role must be able to take care of the children, thereby meeting the children's physical and emotional needs.

Being a parent or a carer for children is not an easy task and no book provides the answers to all the difficult questions and choices faced. While there will be days when parents or carers will make the wrong decision regarding minor requests from their children, this is what shapes a parent or carer, as it is learning from the wrong decisions that already have been made which is important.

Regrettably, those in the role of parenting or caring are not always capable and that is when responsibility comes to the door of the public service. It is at this point that community, clubs, gardaí, courts and schools must also play their part. There is an onus on everyone to ensure that those children who need help are brought to the attention of the authorities. It is only then that hope is introduced to those children's lives.

There is a negative vibe in society about child protection and, in particular, social workers. There is a belief held by many that if social workers get involved in a child protection case they will take the children away and put them into care. This could not be further from the truth. Social workers are there, first and foremost, to help families in need who cannot cope with their responsibility of rearing children. It is only if children are feared to be in danger that they will be removed from the family home, but this is a last resort.

Social workers are providing a fantastic service all around the country in somewhat difficult circumstances. They need co-operation from the general public in order to carry out their duties as effectively as possible. There has been a call for out-of-hours social working services of late and I believe that there is a very strong case for such a service. I wish to commend the Minister of State, Deputy Barry Andrews, who is capable and committed to his role in the Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs. He fully understands and is aware of the difficulties arising in the area of child protection and no doubt he will continue to ensure that the child is always at the top of the agenda.

I also want to use this opportunity to commend foster carers. The service they provide in their own family surroundings is remarkable. It takes incredible courage and kindness to offer oneself up as a foster carer. I do not believe that they could possibly get enough recognition for the work they do. There are more than 5,000 children in the care of the HSE, more than 4,500 of whom are in foster care.

I also commend those who work in the area of care through the HSE in residential units. These people have great courage and conviction in their efforts to provide a caring role to children in need, and it is a tough job.

The Government first set up the Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs in 2005, formerly known as the Office of the Minister for Children. That move represented the level of seriousness we believe is necessary for the protection of children and their rights. Under the stewardship of the Minister of State, Deputy Barry Andrews, it will take whatever steps are necessary to ensure that a case like the one in Roscommon of which we heard last week does not occur again.

The Twenty-Eighth Amendment of the Constitution Bill 2007, which resulted from extensive consultation and discussion by a former Minister of State with responsibility for children, Deputy Brian Lenihan, contains a number of proposals to amend the Constitution with regard to children. Much work has been done in the interim in an effort to ensure that child protection is to the fore. I understand the Joint Committee on the Constitutional Amendment on Children is working with a view to presenting a final report to both Houses of the Oireachtas by April of this year, and I look forward to seeing that report.

Deputy Niall Collins: I welcome the opportunity to participate in this important debate.

The details unfolding of the events from Roscommon represent for all of us a case of extreme depravity. Unfortunately, it is not the first case that we have had to endure and deal with in this country but I hope it will be the last. We will recall that during 2008 we got the detail of an extreme case which unfolded in Austria, involving a father and daughter. What should and, I am sure, does unite all of us is a search for the truth and the background of the Roscommon case which will come out in time to ensure that lessons can be learned and that measures can be put in place to ensure that it does not recur.

From my point of view, there are many questions. There are questions for us as legislators, for society as a whole, for the educational authorities, for the church, and, obviously, for the HSE.

[Deputy Niall Collins.]

There has rightly been a bottom-up approach to child protection adopted by many voluntary groups such as sporting organisations and clubs throughout the country where they have put in place child protection policies and procedures and, indeed, subjected their staff, volunteers and club officers who interact on a real-time basis with children to training on how to behave and interact on a proper basis.

I also acknowledge the work being done by Deputy O'Rourke and her all-party committee on the important area of child protection. She gave us a brief insight into the difficulty the committee is experiencing in trying to come up with an adequate wording. She outlined the difficulty and, hopefully, in time we will have a formula of words which will address the situation.

The question we find ourselves debating is what form an inquiry should take. While a tribunal or a commission of inquiry has many advantages and may get to the truth, it would not be my first favourite option. If one looks at the experience of commissions and, indeed, tribunals over the years in this country, in general there have been many difficulties, although I am not saying all of them were the same. There is often a row about the terms of reference, then there is the issue of who gets representation and, indeed, who pays for that representation, and then there is usually a wrangle about discovery and privilege of documents. Most of it gets overtaken by lawyers and moves from the arena where the commission or tribunal is sitting into the courts where, unfortunately, it remains for a long period of time. This costs a great deal of money, frustrates the process and often hinders the evolution of the full story.

Deputy Denis Naughten: That is why the 2004 Act was introduced.

Deputy Niall Collins: I favour the option set out by the Minister of State, Deputy Barry Andrews, to establish the independent inquiry within the HSE chaired by Ms Norah Gibbons. It is to report within six months and the report will be published. It is a four person inquiry team, with two external and two highly qualified internal persons. With that in mind, the internal inquiry of the HSE will not have any of the difficulties that a tribunal of inquiry or, indeed, a commission of inquiry may have, and that is an important point. It may help to get to the truth in a more timely fashion.

I welcome Ms Gibbons's statement earlier today. It is worth pointing out what she emphasised, that the terms of reference are sufficiently robust in order to conduct a broad and detailed investigation. Should they prove restrictive to the investigation, she said she will review the terms of reference in order to ensure that all necessary aspects of the case are covered and investigated thoroughly.

Ms Gibbons also emphasised the composition of the investigation team provides expertise in child welfare and protection issues and provides the knowledge and experience to navigate a complex system; should supplementary skills be required additional members can be co-opted to the inquiry team. In addition, she stressed that independent legal advice will be available throughout the investigation.

There have been many debates in this House on the HSE and its service delivery. Everything in the HSE should not be painted negatively. We must remember that over the years, during the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, the health services in this country suffered from a funding deficit, a human resource deficit, an infrastructure deficit and even a strategic deficit. All those areas are being addressed in a catch-up fashion, and rightly so.

There are many improvements which have been delivered within the health service and never get spoken about or highlighted. There are many fine people working within the health service who are doing a good job and often get painted with a generalisation that everything

is wrong with and bad in the health service. I want to acknowledge, from my point of view, that there are many fine people delivering that service.

Deputy Denis Naughten: With the agreement of the House, I wish to share time with Deputies Enright, Brian Hayes and Feighan.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Agreed.

Deputy Denis Naughten: The case involving the abuse of six children in County Roscommon is an extremely difficult one which every Member of this House hopes will never happen in their constituency. As one of the local TDs, I am deeply concerned by this case and appalled by the abuse that continued for so long without the appropriate action by the authorities. I take this opportunity to praise the bravery of the family members who were prepared to come forward and to expose this abuse, and express gratitude to those who secured the conviction.

This is, first and foremost, a tragedy and our thoughts and prayers must be with the children who lost the opportunity to grow up in a loving home. At the least, we must ensure that all of the State's resources be made available to help the children to come to terms and cope with their terrible experiences.

From media reports, there would seem to have been a failure to comply with the various child protection guidelines in place during the period of the abuse. As articulated by my colleague, Deputy Shatter, it is imperative that this matter be independently investigated to ensure that something similar does not recur. There is no doubt that the children have been failed appallingly. The case first came to the attention of the former western health board in 1989 and the children were placed on the neglect register in 1996, the year in which the report on the Kelly Fitzgerald case made the headlines. The western health board promised to implement the report's recommendations, but it seems that Kelly Fitzgerald's death and the subsequent investigation was all in vain.

We should not be looking for scapegoats. Rather, we need the truth. For this reason and in light of the disclosure of the prolonged period of abuse of those six children by their mother and the gross inadequacies of our child protection services, it is imperative that an independent commission of investigation be appointed under the 2004 legislation. It is my understanding that no such investigation dealing with the cost concerns raised by Members on the Government side has occurred. The commission should be appointed to inquire fully into the case's background and the actions taken by all of the professionals who came into contact with the family. The current investigation is only independently chaired, a fact acknowledged by the Minister of State with responsibility for children in his contribution last night. Half of the investigative team is employed by the HSE, the organisation to be investigated.

Furthermore, the local community has been tarnished by the claims that, while the abuse was clearly evident, nothing was done. Is this the case? The terms of reference are too narrow. Not only must the investigation review the actions of the HSE, the health board and the social workers, but also those of the education and health professionals. There were people who tried to take action and have their concerns pursued, but the system let them down and failed the children.

Last night, the Minister of State, Deputy Barry Andrews, stated: "It is the responsibility of each and every individual in Ireland to play their part in protecting our children from harm." He went on to state: "Child welfare and protection is a major concern for everyone in society, not only those individuals who work in these services." I acknowledge this point, which has been made by many contributors, but these issues are not being considered in the context of the investigation. People who expressed their concerns have a right to have their claims vindi-

[Deputy Denis Naughten.]

cated and efforts acknowledged. They deserve an explanation as to why their concerns were never followed through by those who should have done so.

After the birth of the sixth child, a voluntary agreement to take the children into care was reached in September 2000. We know an injunction was subsequently granted restraining the health board from acting, but the fundamental question remains, namely, why did the health board not pursue its original intention to take the children into care in 2000. Did it seek to have the injunction lifted or varied? Media reports state that the HSE has refused to reveal whether it challenged the High Court order preventing it from taking the children into care. Were there a need to take the children into care in September 2000, the health board should have challenged the order immediately.

The Children's Rights Alliance, an organisation representing 80 child advocacy NGOs and agencies, has written to the HSE and the Minister stating that the investigation established by the HSE is not independent, its terms of reference are too narrow, it cannot compel witnesses to give evidence and it has no independent legal support. It is imperative that the investigation be given resources. Not only should it be independent, but it should be seen to be so. It should investigate all aspects of the case and highlight where the system fell down, who must be called to account and acknowledge those who advocated on the children's behalf. There is no such role within the current investigation.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Deputy has one minute remaining.

Deputy Denis Naughten: Statistics revealed this week are troubling, as they highlight the fact that the HSE western area has the fewest children in care, yet the most children on its list of welfare concerns. This seems to be a contradiction in terms.

The circumstances of this case cannot be allowed to be repeated. For this reason, an independent investigation must be conducted without further delay, not in six months time as the Minister of State intimated last night. I commend the motion to the House.

Deputy Olwyn Enright: Normally when I begin a contribution on a Private Members' motion, I welcome it, but I regret that we needed to table this motion. However, I thank Deputy Shatter for proposing it and support his call and that of the Fine Gael Party for an independent investigation.

I agree with and support Deputy Naughten, who outlined the concerns of the Children's Rights Alliance. The investigative team is not independent, as its terms of reference are too narrow. Of concern is the fact that it seems to focus on how the health service managed the case from a care perspective and does not extend into wider areas. I want to reiterate my colleagues' comments on the power to compel witnesses. After one report on this matter, I do not want to need to seek another, thereby prolonging the agony and distress of everyone involved, particularly the children, some of whom are now adults and have the wherewithal to understand that they have a right to an adequate response to what happened to them and that the State failed them.

What came to light in Roscommon last week was appalling and horrific. Six young children had their youth, innocence and lives shattered by their own mother and a system that, wherever the responsibility is deemed to lie, failed them completely. I was surprised to hear Government representatives describe what occurred as a watershed and to hear people express shock that a mother could fail her children in this way. Before Christmas, I walked into a book shop on Nassau Street and saw an entire section dedicated to books written by children whose parents, society, church and others had failed, abused and neglected them. Sadly, many of those books

were written by Irish children. While this case is appalling and horrific and its facts are shocking, similar situations are still occurring. There have been too many watersheds where we have told the House that we would learn from them and where we passed minor legislation, after which we moved on and sat back to await another watershed when we would repeat the same procedure. This case may be one of the most serious imaginable, but sadly other children in this country have been victims of abuse of varying degrees, with devastating consequences. It is often said that the measure of a civil society is how it treats its most vulnerable, and children are our most vulnerable. Yet, again children have been failed by a system that was unable to protect them.

In 1993 Ms Justice Catherine McGuinness in the Kilkenny incest report recommended that consideration be given to amendment of Articles 41 and 42 of the Constitution to include a statement on the rights of children, a recommendation which she reiterated this week, which is hard to believe. It is important to impress upon everyone involved the importance of an amendment to the Constitution. Also, it is important to re-iterate the point made this week by Ms Justice McGuinness that while doing so will not necessarily stop something dreadful happening, it will at least change the approach. She also said: "There would be more of an atmosphere of putting the child's right first, rather than thinking of the parents' rights and the family rights first." I do not believe anyone could in all conscience accept that a family should have greater rights than children who are being neglected and abused.

Deputy Shatter leads the Fine Gael group in respect of matters relating to children. Any amendment will be meaningless unless reform is matched with resources and services. I believe the vast majority of our social workers work extremely hard but that they cannot cope with the workloads they face. Neither the level of training received prior to taking up a position nor the level of in-service training provided is necessarily enough in terms of assisting young people, with no life experiences, in dealing with the complexities of the cases before them.

A foster parent who comes into regular contact with the social work system recently told me that while new staff are enthusiastic and willing to bend over backwards and do all they can, they are often broken by the system and their workloads. She also said that despite this they visit her at all hours of the day and night, often at weekends and on bank holidays and that one of her social workers had offered her a personal loan to help her out while waiting for the HSE to issue her with a cheque.

I have spoken to many foster parents who stress the integrity of social workers but criticise the system. I will give an example of a system that is in crisis, is bureaucratic, cumbersome and full of different agencies. This example involves a young foster child, aged approximately eight or nine years, with extreme behavioural problems, described by social workers as among the worst they have ever seen. The foster mother was seeking a school placement for the child. The school would not accept the child unless the National Education and Psychological Service guaranteed support from the special needs service and so on. Staff at the school were afraid they would not get the help they needed to cope with the child, as had happened in other cases in the past. NEPS would not guarantee support unless the school accepted the child. The child, who is not even ten years old, has since left the foster family concerned and has been placed short term with another foster family with a view to being moved to residential care. His social workers tried their best but neither they nor the foster family could navigate the system.

We are all asking why various groups failed the family in Roscommon. The reality is that it is impossible for people to identify to whom they can turn. I know of a child, again with diagnosed behavioural problems, who was expelled from school last year and whose mother was trying to get him a place in another school. She had to deal with six different agencies, including the Department of Education and Science, the Health Service Executive, special

[Deputy Olwyn Enright.]

education needs organiser, National Educational and Psychological Service, National Education and Welfare Board and home-school liaison and local politicians to get her child a place in a school, which she eventually did. It is unacceptable that people have to go through such hoops before they get what they need.

If we want to make this the final Irish family to be described as a watershed, we must act now on these issues. I welcome that the Government has finally decided to deal with the issue of soft information following publication of the report of the Oireachtas committee. However, I remind the Government — I thought a great deal about this issue over Christmas when the Cloyne situation was being discussed in the media — that in December 2003 Fine Gael brought before this House a motion, supported by the Labour Party and the Green Party, which is now a partner in Government, dealing with the issue of soft information. I am not suggesting we had all the answers. However, we outlined the criteria in regard to how this could be addressed. The relevant legislation was only published last Monday or Tuesday, some five years later. A lack of action is what is creating the watersheds that young people in this country must face.

Deputy Brian Hayes: I commend Deputy Shatter for bringing this motion before the House. I want to reply to the charges made earlier on the other side of the House that this motion attempts to establish a tribunal system. My understanding of the 2004 legislation, brought forward by former Deputy, Michael McDowell, is that it sought to establish a commission of investigation and to ensure most of the investigative work was done *in camera* and not in the public domain, involving large numbers of legal representatives on both sides. Effectively, the net issues in any terms of reference set by the House could be adjudicated upon and some conclusions brought in a speedy fashion. We have seen one example of this under the Act. The Act was of some use in the Rossiter case in terms of bringing to a conclusion some of the issues involved. I reject the notion that we are proposing a tribunal; we are proposing a new and more effective device which will bring about accountability in terms of what went so horribly wrong in the case concerned.

8 o'clock

In the time available, I would like to deal with education and the role and responsibility of schools throughout the country in dealing with these issues. In many instances, schools are the first port of call. Our response in this area has been lacking. We are lucky to have in this country well qualified and dedicated teachers educating our young. However, if anything has been highlighted by this tragic case in County Roscommon, it is the need to ensure that every precaution is taken to protect children at every step of the process to avoid even the slightest risk of their being exposed to abuse or neglect.

It is extremely worrying that given the amount of time children spend in a school environment during the most vulnerable years of their life, many of those employed in the education system have not undergone the most basic requirement of a background check by the Garda Síochána. There are more than 55,000 teachers working with children. Also ancillary staff work in close proximity with children on a daily basis. However, vetting has only been carried out in respect of teachers and staff appointed since 2006. Those already in the system are being retrospectively vetted on a phased basis. Unfortunately, a loophole in the existing legislation, which to date has not been addressed by the Minister, allows approximately 1,000 untrained substitutes who have not been vetted to teach in our schools. The only limited vetting they receive is from the board of management of schools by whom they are employed.

The Minister suggested as far back as April 2008 that he will bring forward amending legislation to amend section 30 of the Teaching Council Act which would set limitations on a school's capacity to engage other qualified teachers. However, this will not happen for some time as there is not sufficient numbers of qualified substitutes available. Aside from the issue

of vetting, a number of issues require to be addressed to ensure teachers are adequately prepared to deal with a situation of suspected abuse and to respond accordingly.

Schools are obliged to appoint a designated liaison person to report allegations of abuse to the HSE or Garda Síochána. This responsibility lies, in the main, with the principal of the school. We all know that principals are busy people. This is another job they are required to take on. Is it appropriate that principals be required to take on this additional responsibility?

The Minister may be aware that in late 2008, the INTO carried out an extensive survey across the State in respect of designated liaison persons. At that stage they reported that less than half of those designated as liaison persons in schools had received formal training. I understand the situation has improved dramatically since then but given that the guidelines have been in operation for some years, it is astonishing that one in two of the persons we charge in our schools to take responsibility for this issue had yet to receive the training that is required. It is also significant from that survey that of those who received training, some 70% found it to be inadequate and 69% believed they needed further training to be able to properly deal with the situation. Even though the training has been rolled out, there is a sense of inadequacy concerning it. That is very worrying.

The survey highlighted the very poor communication and co-ordination between the HSE and our schools. Experience on the ground, dealing with the reporting of cases of abuse suggests that support services available to the designated liaison person and schools are far from adequate. There appears to be a lack of understanding and co-ordination between the agencies involved as to the role of the school and this often amounts to very poor levels of communication. There are also cultural difficulties. We have seen a very large influx of people from other nationalities in the last few years. There are different attitudes when it comes to discipline, within families, and notable differences as between nationalities in this regard. We have not done sufficient to disseminate information between those different groups to ensure people are fully aware of their obligations as what may be termed “Irish parents” under our law, regardless of background.

Other serious criticisms were made in the INTO survey last year. Some 60% of the dedicated liaison persons surveyed suggested that the relevance and effectiveness of supports provided by the HSE was fair to poor, and 71% reported that the follow-up of feedback provided by the Executive was very poor. We need to resource and invest in our school system to ensure that where cases come to the attention of teachers, principals and boards of management, action will be taken.

Deputy Frank Feighan: I commend Deputy Alan Shatter for tabling this motion. As a Deputy for the area, I feel very uncomfortable, unqualified but compelled to highlight this most shocking revelation of neglect and physical and sexual abuse suffered by the six children in Roscommon. I am calling on the Government to appoint an independent commission to investigate this matter. It is completely inappropriate that the HSE essentially investigates itself. Many of those employed by the former Western Health Board now form part of the HSE structure and I believe many of the issues will not be investigated unless an independent commission is appointed.

Last year, when the terrible Joseph Fritzel incest case was uncovered in Austria, many Irish people found it difficult to understand how this abuse could have been allowed to continue. I was in Austria on vacation last summer and I recall sitting in the square of a small village where there were very neat houses in evidence, young children at play, everything organised, traffic calming, schools, churches, etc. People appeared to be extraordinarily friendly and competent, so that one wondered how this could have possibly happened. The village in west

[Deputy Frank Feighan.]

Roscommon is exactly the same. People all over the country are wondering how this could have happened in a village such as this.

There was a catalogue as regards serious concern and neglect in 1996. The emotional abuse question was raised with the social services after the birth of the family's fourth child. The health authorities provide periodic family support and home help as well as public help nurse and social worker support. I find it hard to understand the fact that the health authorities unsuccessfully sought to have the restraining order lifted and the High Court, seemingly, made a decision that appears to have run in the face of common sense. One area I have difficulty with is the role of the campaigner, who objected to the health board's approach and said that the mother needed support, not intrusive action. Part of the proposed investigation should examine what is referred to here as an ultra right-wing conservative Catholic campaigner. I do not know, but I find it very difficult to believe. Mr. Gannon, speaking on behalf of the health board, said he believed that this lady's organisation had given financial and other support to the mother of these children. Regardless of whether it is appropriate, I believe this should be investigated.

The local Garda sergeant believes the full truth may never come out, but we have to ensure that it does. He believes that the children, although they have been so courageous, may not be able to deal with the full truth. People are pointing the blame at HSE officials, the school board of management etc. As a politician for the area, I must accept some of the blame because I believe we are all in this together — parents, teachers, the HSE and the Garda. As a politician, I must accept some of the blame for what happened. I believe we have to ensure that an independent commission is set up to investigate all the matters pertaining to these horrible and sickening incidents. I do not want to lay the blame on Government politicians but I am very uneasy speaking on this subject.

The locals, who put their faith in the system, talk about the lovely children and say their heart is broken on their behalf. For members of the community their heart is broken too at not having done anything about the situation. They felt helpless, being reluctant to intrude on the rights of the family. They put their trust in the system, which we all represent, and it not only let down the community but, more importantly, the children in this horrible incident.

Minister for Health and Children (Deputy Mary Harney): I want to say how gratified I am to have an opportunity to discuss this matter in the House, and I express my deep concern over what happened to this unfortunate Roscommon family. Regardless of what side of the House one is on, child abuse is in a league of its own. It appals, disgusts and frustrates us, offending our very sense of humanity. It is significant that the normal human instinct is to nurture, care and love children. Children who are very vulnerable are entitled to expect from those among whom they should be most secure the greatest level of protection and support. We do not know all the facts in relation to this case. We know some. We know that these children have been in care since 2004. In my view it is important to establish the facts.

Sometimes we become obsessed with the route to establishing such facts. Like other Members, I am long enough in the House to remember the Kerry babies tribunal. I recall many Members of this House saying we would never have another tribunal. However, a couple of years pass, there is another controversy and suddenly we want a tribunal. To be fair, if we were to look back now on the matters that were the subject of two tribunals 12 years ago, we would seek a different way to try and establish the facts.

Deputy Alan Shatter: This is not a tribunal issue.

Deputy Mary Harney: I will come to that in a moment. By their nature, they are expensive and take a long time. I established a commission of inquiry into Leas Cross but only following the report by Professor Des O'Neill. After his report it was clear that there were unanswered questions that could only be dealt with through a commission of inquiry. That inquiry was established 19 months ago. We recently extended the term in which it was to report. Notwithstanding the fact that we have an outstanding sole member who has all the support he would wish, these matters take a considerable length of time. The purpose of the inquiry route that has been established by the HSE, with the support of the Minister of State, Deputy Barry Andrews and me, is to establish the facts within a six month timeframe.

The inquiry team will be chaired by Ms Norah Gibbons, whom I may have met but do not know personally. However, those who know her reputation know her to be a person of the highest integrity. Yesterday, she said: "I will conduct a thorough, open and expeditious investigation into the circumstances surrounding the neglect and abuse of the children involved." She went on to say:

If my terms of reference are not broad enough I have the freedom to expand them. I will have access to independent legal advice and should supplementary skills be required additional members can be co-opted to the inquiry team by me.

We have put in a mechanism that can establish the facts as quickly as possible because we all know medicine is not an exact science, but when we deal with abuse in a family it is an impossibly inexact science.

We know from health care professionals who, unfortunately, deal with child abuse all the time that there are always questions of balance. Should one leave the child in the family or take him or her away? I will contrast a different case. I am not blaming anybody here. A couple of years ago, shortly after I became Minister for Health and Children, a young family was taken into care. I want to quote what was said in this House. The response was "overkill", the family had been "treated brutally through an act of bureaucratic vindictiveness", "these children have unnecessarily been removed from the house" and it was described as a "grossly excessive abuse of authority by social workers". I remember taking those comments seriously and meeting the social work team involved. I cannot but tell the House the passion with which its members felt that in going to court to remove those children they were doing the right thing. Many of them feel they are damned if they do and damned if they do not. That is why decisions about removing children from a family are not made by single individuals but are made in a case conference environment where the expertise of others is brought to the table, and that is as it should be.

This inquiry team will report within six months. Earlier Deputy Brian Hayes mentioned what is broadly called in the media this "right-wing group" which seems to feel that no matter what happens in a family, the children should be left there. We must challenge those who constantly support this point of view, who seem to be more obsessed with unborn children than with those who are born. Health care professionals have to deal with individuals and groups of that kind day in, day out, notwithstanding the unsavoury matters that come in.

Deputy Alan Shatter: The Minister's inquiry cannot identify who they are. That is a fundamental flaw.

Deputy Mary Harney: I do not accept that this inquiry cannot get the facts.

Deputy Alan Shatter: It cannot identify them.

Deputy Mary Harney: There are references to legislative deficiencies here and they may exist. The 1908 Act was drafted at a time when it could not be envisaged that a mother could inflict such abuse on her children. This abuse is not ring-fenced according to gender, geography or class. I know from social workers that terrible abuse takes place in some of the best resourced families in the country from time to time. If we are to put in place the appropriate State mechanisms, recognising that no matter how many resources and how much law we have, there will always be the potential in Ireland, as there is in other countries, even those that share our values, for parents in a minority of cases to abuse their children. This mechanism with the people involved will deliver speedy answers so we can get the facts and very quickly learn from them.

The Minister of State with responsibility in this area, Deputy Barry Andrews, has my full confidence. Not only is he a father and the Minister of State with responsibility for children, he is a barrister and before that he was a teacher. He brings to this job a passion for child protection and I have every confidence that working with the authorities, whether the HSE or the other authorities that have responsibility for children, we will have in place in Ireland an appropriate regime that will guarantee our children the safety and protection they deserve.

Deputy James Reilly: I wish to share time with Deputy Shatter, whom I thank for affording me the time and for bringing this motion to the House.

Yet again, this country has been shaken to the core by a shocking case of child abuse that took place over a protracted period of time. What makes this case so disturbing is that relevant authorities were made aware of it and that the children were on an at risk register, yet the terrible abuse inflicted on them was not avoided.

As a GP, I know child abuse can be difficult to detect and very often comes to light when those children become adults, having survived the horror of what they have endured, and manage to build their self-esteem again to the point where they feel that they can complain and seek justice for themselves. The whole point of a child protection programme is to identify people at risk and intervene early to prevent or to at least stop ongoing abuse. We must accept that we failed miserably on this occasion.

The Minister, Deputy Barry Andrews's, acknowledgement that society failed these children conveniently ignores the failure of his Government and the HSE to protect these children and the least I would have expected was an apology from him to these children on behalf of the Government. The awful thing about this is that we have had terrible cases of abuse in the past, to some of which the Minister for Health and Children, Deputy Harney, alluded. These have been followed by outpourings of sympathy for the family and the victims. We also had investigations and reports which made recommendations but were then shelved and not acted upon. We had the Kilkenny incest case and the Kelly Fitzgerald case to mention but two, yet we find ourselves here again.

There is a recurring theme here. The health service generally, as well as in this area specifically, has a long history of investigations and reports being compiled and then left to gather dust on a shelf, never to be implemented. I share my colleague, Deputy Shatter's, astonishment at the Minister of State with responsibility for children, Deputy Barry Andrews. I remind this Chamber that this very Minister of State told us before Christmas that, as Minister of State with responsibility for children, he did not feel that the vaccination of children against cancer was an issue for him. I remind the Chamber that this is the Minister of State who had presented to him last July the report on the handling of abuse in the Diocese of Cloyne and not alone did not read it, but passed it out of his hands, as quickly as he could, like a hot potato, and on

to the Health Service Executive. This is the Minister of State who sits before us here, having admitted that the first he heard of this case or anything about it was in the media a couple of weeks ago.

Strike one was the Minister of State's attitude to vaccination; strike two was his handling of the Diocese of Cloyne report; and strike three is his handling of this case. This pattern of commissioning reports and then ignoring them is replicated throughout the Health Service and we only have to look to the history of reports and recommendations in the north east to verify this. If the Minister of State's job is not to oversee his Department, then what is his function? I will say no more on that — the facts speak for themselves.

The main thrust of this motion is to seek that this inquiry be independent, and clearly it is not. While we have excellent people in appointees such as Ms Norah Gibbons and Ms Leonie Lunny, we have also on the inquiry board two members of the HSE. Therefore, this is not an independent inquiry and cannot be construed as such. The days of the HSE investigating itself are long gone. Nobody will have belief in it. If it is necessary, as the director of the PCC said in his statement, to have members of the HSE to hand to navigate the complexities of the HSE, which is an astonishing admission of the chaos that presides in that organisation, then by all means make these people available to the inquiry but not as an integral part of the board.

Members of the extended family have asked that the HSE should not be on the board of inquiry as they have no faith in it, and the Children's Alliance today stated clearly that it opposes the presence of HSE members on the board. In a letter to the Minister of State, Deputy Andrews, it states that the investigation team is not independent; the terms of reference are too narrow; the team does not have the power to compel individuals to give evidence or to procure documentation; and contrary to the statement of the Minister for Health and Children, the team does not have independent legal support. The parts of the motion outlining the areas where the terms of reference need expansion are self-evident and it is important that all who are involved and engaged with this issue play their roles.

This is not intended to be a blame game but to find out why this happened and why it continued when people had raised concerns. Deputy Naughten mentioned that members of the extended family were among the first to raise concerns about this issue. Why did it go on for so long?

This requires finding the weaknesses in our system and putting in place procedures to prevent their recurrence. It proposes an independent inquiry that will make recommendations resulting in protocols that will be put in place and acted upon. We must not allow this report to be thrown on a shelf like so many others because if that happens we will have failed our children once more and there will be little point in our beating our breasts when the inevitable happens again a year from now.

I commend the motion to the House.

Deputy Alan Shatter: I thank all of those who have contributed to this debate. Like some of my colleagues I regret that we had to have this debate. There have been too many tragedies, too many children in families that were clearly dysfunctional who should have been provided with services that ensured their protection, where there should have been early intervention but this did not occur.

I regret the Minister of State, Deputy Andrews', speech last night. It was particularly crass that he referred to the children being failed "by society". These children were identified at an early stage as being parented within a dysfunctional family. The family was known to the

[Deputy Alan Shatter.]

Western Health Board in 1989 when it had only one baby. We are told it was on the at-risk register in 1996. Between 1996 and 2004 social work personnel apparently visited these children extensively. That is what we have been told. When the report is published the case may turn out to have been different.

It is incomprehensible that these children were not taken into care. The Minister for Health and Children, Deputy Harney, had responsibility particularly for this area, as the senior Minister, until the Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs was established three years ago. She had a junior Minister also dealing with children but this fell within her remit. I am shocked that in her speech tonight it was evident that she did not even understand the legislation for which she was responsible.

The Child Care Act 1991, section 8, conferred on the health board all the power it needed to seek to have these children taken into care. If it doubted whether a care application could succeed it could have used a later section and had a supervision order made. Had the supervision order been obtained it would have become evident that a care order was needed. There is no indication that any such procedure was undertaken at any stage.

My concern about the terms of reference derives from something the Minister of State said last night which compounded that concern. He referred to the fact that because care orders are made *in camera* he could not reveal anything about them. I suspect he does not know whether any care orders are made. I am concerned that because of the type of inquiry he has established we will receive a report with all sorts of information blacked out to preserve *in camera* rules from children's proceedings or court applications that may have been made, with names of people blacked out in the interests of natural justice because they are not parties to this case, and with no conclusions on important facts because there is no power to subpoena and people do not have a right to ensure that their names are properly protected as allowed for under the 2004 Act.

There are major defects in the procedure but the Minister of State should have admitted last night not simply that our society but also our child protection services failed these children. He should also have the decency to admit, as should the Minister, that the Government failed these children. I do not say this to score petty political points. I said last night and have said elsewhere outside the House that I am heartily sick of the fact that there have been so many reports about children, who did not have the help to which they were entitled, the recommendations of which are ignored and that we are back in these circumstances with these six tragic children whose position has been so well publicised. I am amazed that the Minister for State knew nothing about this until last week.

The Kelly Fitzgerald report published in 1996 made one simple recommendation, that the Department of Health adopt a proactive approach in monitoring health boards' child care developments in order to ensure consistency on a national scale, both in provision and in respect of procedures and practice. That does not happen. Crucial recommendations relevant to the Western Health Board, and to Government, made in this report, have not been implemented. It was in part the responsibility of the Western Health Board to implement them and later that of the Health Service Executive.

Deputy Barry Andrews: It was the responsibility of the Government of the day.

Deputy Alan Shatter: It was also the responsibility of the Government. The Government parties have been in power for over 12 years. Deputy Brian Cowen was the Minister for Health in June 1997 when the new Fianna Fáil-Progressive Democrats Government was established.

He remained Minister for Health from June 1997 to 26 January 2000. What did he do to implement this report? He did nothing to ensure that the Department of Health had oversight of our child care services. As Fine Gael spokesperson for health I marked him then. He was just as incompetent a Minister for Health as he proved to be a Minister for Finance and as he is today as Taoiseach. Deputy Micheál Martin replaced him from 26 January 2000 to 29 September 2004 when Deputy Harney took over. Throughout their remit child care was the central responsibility of those Ministers, until Deputy Brian Lenihan became the first Minister of State with responsibility for children in the new super office. They did not meet their responsibilities. This is a roll call of shame. They should have met their responsibilities. The speech of the Minister of State with responsibility for children is quite astonishing for the extent to which it admits the Government's incompetence, his lack of knowledge and the dysfunctional nature of our child care services. He said "far from not learning the lessons spelled out by previous reports into other tragic cases, as has been suggested, these feed into the constant development and updating of policy in this area". They may "feed" but nobody is eating. No one is changing his or her habits. There has been a plethora of reports but very little has happened. The Minister of State admits that the 1999 child care protection guidelines are not uniformly applied across the country. He says there is a knowledge deficit. We have new trendy terms, the Minister for State is engaged in a "knowledge management strategy". He hopes to put in place the information necessary to allow him to know what is going on in the child protection services at some stage this year or next.

Deputy Barry Andrews: Does the Deputy have nothing positive to contribute?

Deputy Alan Shatter: No such information service was put in place for the 12 years of Government led by his party.

Deputy Barry Andrews: After three hours of debate the Deputy has nothing positive to say.

Deputy Dara Calleary: What did Deputy Noonan do?

Deputy Alan Shatter: The Minister of State who was appointed only last May said: "I became acutely aware that communication difficulties, deficits in information and the absence of standardised procedures can impede service responsiveness with potentially serious consequences for some children." Why did none of his predecessors discover that was a problem? How long will it take to put that right?

I greatly regret that this House will divide on this motion and that we have terms of reference that are widely acknowledged to be inadequate. The independent chairperson — she is independent, unlike two of the other people appointed — has said that if the terms of reference do not work out, then she will have them extended. We should have terms of reference that are so comprehensive that the group appointed to conduct this investigation is able to cover all areas and know its remit from the start, and not be inhibited in the work it does. If need be, the group should be able to subpoena people to attend before it to give evidence so that we can ensure the full story of this is known.

That will not happen. The sad reality is that whatever report is produced by this group, there will inevitably be a need for a further investigation. It is unfair to the family and the children involved. It is unfair to children across the country who may be at risk tonight. It is unfair to the general public and it is contrary to the public interest that we have two forms of investigation that go on endlessly.

[Deputy Alan Shatter.]

I urge the Minister to change his mind, to accept the motion before the House and let the commission of investigation proposed by Fine Gael be formulated, so that it can get on with its work.

Amendment put.

The Dáil divided: Tá, 81; Níl, 67.

Tá

Ahern, Dermot.
 Ahern, Michael.
 Ahern, Noel.
 Andrews, Barry.
 Andrews, Chris.
 Ardagh, Seán.
 Aylward, Bobby.
 Behan, Joe.
 Blaney, Niall.
 Brady, Áine.
 Brady, Cyprian.
 Brady, Johnny.
 Browne, John.
 Byrne, Thomas.
 Calleary, Dara.
 Carey, Pat.
 Collins, Niall.
 Conlon, Margaret.
 Connick, Seán.
 Coughlan, Mary.
 Cregan, John.
 Cuffe, Ciarán.
 Cullen, Martin.
 Curran, John.
 Dempsey, Noel.
 Devins, Jimmy.
 Dooley, Timmy.
 Finneran, Michael.
 Fitzpatrick, Michael.
 Fleming, Seán.
 Flynn, Beverley.
 Gallagher, Pat The Cope.
 Gogarty, Paul.
 Gormley, John.
 Grealish, Noel.
 Hanafin, Mary.
 Harney, Mary.
 Haughey, Seán.
 Healy-Rae, Jackie.
 Hoctor, Máire.
 Kelleher, Billy.

Kelly, Peter.
 Kenneally, Brendan.
 Kennedy, Michael.
 Kirk, Seamus.
 Kitt, Michael P.
 Kitt, Tom.
 Lenihan, Brian.
 Lenihan, Conor.
 Mansergh, Martin.
 Martin, Micheál.
 McEllistrim, Thomas.
 McGrath, Finian.
 McGrath, Mattie.
 McGrath, Michael.
 McGuinness, John.
 Moloney, John.
 Moynihan, Michael.
 Mulcahy, Michael.
 Nolan, M.J.
 Ó Cuív, Éamon.
 Ó Fearghail, Seán.
 O'Brien, Darragh.
 O'Connor, Charlie.
 O'Dea, Willie.
 O'Flynn, Noel.
 O'Hanlon, Rory.
 O'Keeffe, Batt.
 O'Keeffe, Edward.
 O'Rourke, Mary.
 O'Sullivan, Christy.
 Power, Seán.
 Roche, Dick.
 Ryan, Eamon.
 Sargent, Trevor.
 Scanlon, Eamon.
 Smith, Brendan.
 Treacy, Noel.
 Wallace, Mary.
 White, Mary Alexandra.
 Woods, Michael.

Níl

Allen, Bernard.
 Bannon, James.
 Barrett, Seán.
 Breen, Pat.
 Broughan, Thomas P.
 Burke, Ulick.
 Burton, Joan.
 Byrne, Catherine.
 Carey, Joe.
 Clune, Deirdre.
 Connaughton, Paul.

Coonan, Noel J.
 Coveney, Simon.
 Crawford, Seymour.
 Creed, Michael.
 Creighton, Lucinda.
 D'Arcy, Michael.
 Deasy, John.
 Deenihan, Jimmy.
 Doyle, Andrew.
 Durkan, Bernard J.
 English, Damien.

Níl—*continued*

Enright, Olwyn.
 Feighan, Frank.
 Flanagan, Charles.
 Flanagan, Terence.
 Gilmore, Eamon.
 Hayes, Brian.
 Hayes, Tom.
 Higgins, Michael D.
 Hogan, Phil.
 Howlin, Brendan.
 Kehoe, Paul.
 Lynch, Ciarán.
 Lynch, Kathleen.
 McCormack, Pádraic.
 McEntee, Shane.
 McGinley, Dinny.
 McHugh, Joe.
 McManus, Liz.
 Mitchell, Olivia.
 Naughten, Denis.
 Noonan, Michael.
 Ó Caoláin, Caoimhghín.
 Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.

O'Dowd, Fergus.
 O'Keefe, Jim.
 O'Mahony, John.
 O'Shea, Brian.
 O'Sullivan, Jan.
 Penrose, Willie.
 Perry, John.
 Rabbitte, Pat.
 Reilly, James.
 Ring, Michael.
 Shatter, Alan.
 Sheahan, Tom.
 Sheehan, P.J.
 Sherlock, Seán.
 Shortall, Róisín.
 Stagg, Emmet.
 Stanton, David.
 Timmins, Billy.
 Tuffy, Joanna.
 Upton, Mary.
 Varadkar, Leo.
 Wall, Jack.

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Pat Carey and John Cregan; Níl, Deputies Emmet Stagg and Paul Kehoe.

Amendment declared carried.

Question put: "That the motion, as amended, be agreed to."

The Dáil divided: Tá, 81; Níl, 67.

Tá

Ahern, Dermot.
 Ahern, Michael.
 Ahern, Noel.
 Andrews, Barry.
 Andrews, Chris.
 Ardagh, Seán.
 Aylward, Bobby.
 Behan, Joe.
 Blaney, Niall.
 Brady, Áine.
 Brady, Cyprian.
 Brady, Johnny.
 Browne, John.
 Byrne, Thomas.
 Calleary, Dara.
 Carey, Pat.
 Collins, Niall.
 Conlon, Margaret.
 Connick, Seán.
 Coughlan, Mary.
 Cregan, John.
 Cuffe, Ciarán.
 Cullen, Martin.
 Curran, John.
 Dempsey, Noel.
 Devins, Jimmy.
 Dooley, Timmy.
 Finneran, Michael.
 Fitzpatrick, Michael.
 Fleming, Seán.

Flynn, Beverley.
 Gallagher, Pat The Cope.
 Gogarty, Paul.
 Gormley, John.
 Grealish, Noel.
 Hanafin, Mary.
 Harney, Mary.
 Haughey, Seán.
 Healy-Rae, Jackie.
 Hoctor, Máire.
 Kelleher, Billy.
 Kelly, Peter.
 Kenneally, Brendan.
 Kennedy, Michael.
 Kirk, Seamus.
 Kitt, Michael P.
 Kitt, Tom.
 Lenihan, Brian.
 Lenihan, Conor.
 Mansergh, Martin.
 Martin, Micheál.
 McEllistrim, Thomas.
 McGrath, Finian.
 McGrath, Mattie.
 McGrath, Michael.
 McGuinness, John.
 Moloney, John.
 Moynihan, Michael.
 Mulcahy, Michael.
 Nolan, M.J.

Tá—*continued*

Ó Cuív, Éamon.
 Ó Fearghail, Seán.
 O'Brien, Darragh.
 O'Connor, Charlie.
 O'Dea, Willie.
 O'Flynn, Noel.
 O'Hanlon, Rory.
 O'Keeffe, Batt.
 O'Keeffe, Edward.
 O'Rourke, Mary.
 O'Sullivan, Christy.

Power, Seán.
 Roche, Dick.
 Ryan, Eamon.
 Sargent, Trevor.
 Scanlon, Eamon.
 Smith, Brendan.
 Treacy, Noel.
 Wallace, Mary.
 White, Mary Alexandra.
 Woods, Michael.

Níl

Allen, Bernard.
 Bannon, James.
 Barrett, Seán.
 Breen, Pat.
 Broughan, Thomas P.
 Burke, Ulick.
 Burton, Joan.
 Byrne, Catherine.
 Carey, Joe.
 Clune, Deirdre.
 Connaughton, Paul.
 Coonan, Noel J.
 Coveney, Simon.
 Crawford, Seymour.
 Creed, Michael.
 Creighton, Lucinda.
 D'Arcy, Michael.
 Deasy, John.
 Deenihan, Jimmy.
 Doyle, Andrew.
 Durkan, Bernard J.
 English, Damien.
 Enright, Olwyn.
 Feighan, Frank.
 Flanagan, Charles.
 Flanagan, Terence.
 Gilmore, Eamon.
 Hayes, Brian.
 Hayes, Tom.
 Higgins, Michael D.
 Hogan, Phil.
 Howlin, Brendan.
 Kehoe, Paul.
 Lynch, Ciarán.

Lynch, Kathleen.
 McCormack, Pádraic.
 McEntee, Shane.
 McGinley, Dinny.
 McHugh, Joe.
 McManus, Liz.
 Mitchell, Olivia.
 Naughten, Denis.
 Noonan, Michael.
 Ó Caoláin, Caoimhghín.
 Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.
 O'Dowd, Fergus.
 O'Keeffe, Jim.
 O'Mahony, John.
 O'Shea, Brian.
 O'Sullivan, Jan.
 Penrose, Willie.
 Perry, John.
 Rabbitte, Pat.
 Reilly, James.
 Ring, Michael.
 Shatter, Alan.
 Sheahan, Tom.
 Sheehan, P.J.
 Sherlock, Seán.
 Shortall, Róisín.
 Stagg, Emmet.
 Stanton, David.
 Timmins, Billy.
 Tuffy, Joanna.
 Upton, Mary.
 Varadkar, Leo.
 Wall, Jack.

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Pat Carey and John Cregan; Níl, Deputies Emmet Stagg and Paul Kehoe.

Question declared carried.

Adjournment Debate.

Accident and Emergency Services.

Deputy Joe Carey: Prior to the last general election, the then Taoiseach, Deputy Bertie Ahern, gave a public commitment to the people of County Clare. Fianna Fáil candidates in that election gave the same political commitment in all debates that 24-hour accident and

emergency services would be retained at Ennis General Hospital and that the hospital would finally receive a capital development allocation of €39 million. These commitments have been given by the Government since 2000, and they ring hollow in 2009.

The people of Clare should have the best possible health care service delivering the best possible medical outcome. Placing 44,000 Clare people outside the reach of golden hour cover is not the answer. Asking people to travel 60, 70 or 80 miles to an accident and emergency department is not the answer. This argument aside, there is insufficient capacity at the Mid-Western Regional Hospital in Limerick to cope with the extra workload. Where are the 135 beds promised for Limerick? Where are the new ambulances? The new plans provide for eight accident and emergency consultants based in Limerick. There are currently only three with a potential for five, but the two additional posts will not be filled for 18 months.

Instead of creating a centre of excellence in Limerick, a centre of chaos will arise. One need only look at the result of the Government's attempt to centralise services in the north east. In recent weeks, sick people have been lying on trolleys for three days in Our Lady's Hospital in Drogheda. Surgery has been cancelled, there are insufficient beds and medical staff are extremely frustrated.

I plead with the Minister for Health and Children to listen to those at the coal face, to GPs, consultants, nurses and ambulance crews. All these staff groupings have expressed serious concern about the situation, with one consultant threatening to resign. The Minister must learn from the mistakes made in the north east instead of pushing more patients towards the Mid-Western Regional Hospital in Limerick, which is already bursting at the seams. The Minister must abandon her plans for the mid-west and abandon this general slash and burn approach. Instead, she must honour the political commitments made by the Government to the people of County Clare.

Deputy Noel J. Coonan: Taking services out of a community before putting alternative services in place is a classic case of putting the cart before the horse. The Teamwork report estimates it will cost €380 million to implement this change. However, only €6 million has been allocated to Mr. Paul Burke, the person charged with implementing it. The services are simply not in place at the Mid-Western Regional Hospital in Limerick. The promised additional 135 beds have not been provided and the additional ambulance and paramedical staff are not in place.

I regret the absence of the Minister of State with responsibility for older people, Deputy Hoctor, from the Chamber. I appeal to the Minister of State who is in attendance, Deputy Moloney, not simply to make new claims that funding is promised for various services. The public has grown tired of the broken promises of Fianna Fáil and the Minister for Health and Children, Deputy Harney. A 20-bed long-stay facility for Borrisokane was included in the capital funding programme last year. This funding was withdrawn on 31 December 2008 and must be reapplied for. The ambulance spaces promised for Thurles and Nenagh — as part of the Government deal with Deputy Lowry, as we were told — have not been delivered. The promised paramedical staff have not been trained and an air ambulance has not been provided.

The Minister of State, Deputy Moloney, is aware that parts of north Tipperary are not accessible to Limerick within the golden hour. This is of great concern to the people of that area and they will not accept it. We will fight tooth and nail on this issue. To paraphrase the words of the Bull McCabe to his son Tadhg, "Do not do it, Minister". Laois people have always been decent to the people of Tipperary and we ask the Minister of State to support us in our battle to retain vital services in north Tipperary. The theory of such proposals is fine but the

[Deputy Noel J. Coonan.]

reality is entirely different. If the services are seen to be in place and operational in Limerick, the people of north Tipperary may reconsider.

Deputy Pat Breen: The engineers who designed the *Titanic* said it was unsinkable but it sank on its maiden voyage. The Teamwork report will also sink on its maiden voyage because it is based on a perfect world and a perfect health service which do not exist. The report makes no reference to funding. In the current economic climate, nobody believes the Government has any intention of providing the necessary funding.

If the Health Service Executive proceeds to implement this report without the full capital expenditure, people will die. This is not scaremongering. One life lost as a result of the implementation of this report without the provision of the necessary funding will be one life too many. This report is not concerned with putting the patient first or reshaping local services in line with the needs of the local population. Rather, it is concerned with cutting costs and removing services from Ennis and Nenagh hospitals. No sooner was the ink dry on the report than the implementation team was put in place. Another plan is being hatched as we speak to remove services from Ennis as soon as possible.

Not one hand was raised in support of these proposals when GPs from Clare and Tipperary met yesterday. These are the people who work at the coal face of the health service and who understand the issues. The Minister, Deputy Harney, said yesterday in her response to a parliamentary question of mine that detailed plans are being formulated by the Health Service Executive in regard to emergency care, critical care and surgical services and that certain changes to current arrangements for the provision of some acute services will be made.

The people of Clare want a 24-hour accident and emergency service to be retained at Ennis General Hospital. There is genuine fear and concern among those living in west and north Clare that they will be further isolated from the provision of vital life-saving services. If this report is implemented in full, Ennis General Hospital will become a minor injuries clinic. A group of six advanced paramedics based in Ennis will be expected to deliver a 24-hour emergency care service throughout the county. The existing ambulance service is already starved of resources. If the Health Service Executive and the Minister are serious about providing funding, they must increase the number of proposed advanced paramedics and install them on a 24-7 basis at each of the ambulance stations at Kilrush, Ennistymon, Scariff and Ennis.

My colleagues and I are elected to represent our constituents and we demand answers on their behalf. The Minister, Deputy Harney, has the ultimate responsibility and she must come clean with the public. If we cannot obtain answers in the Chamber tonight, we will persist in our efforts to oblige the Minister to debate this issue in the House. I am disappointed she is not here for this debate. She should be in attendance to answer our questions.

Minister of State at the Department of Health and Children (Deputy John Moloney): I am responding to the Deputies on behalf of the Minister, Deputy Harney, who cannot be here.

The Government is committed to ensuring the delivery of the best quality health services possible, in an effective and efficient way, and ensuring patient safety is of paramount importance in order that people can have confidence in the services and the best possible patient outcomes can be achieved.

There is significant international and national evidence that acute complex health care, particularly for emergency medicine, complex surgical services and critical care, should be provided in hospitals which are suitably staffed and equipped and which undertake sufficient

volumes of such activity in order to maximise clinical outcomes and, more important, ensure safe services. At the same time there is a significant range of less complex care which can continue to be provided safely in smaller hospitals.

Reorganisation of services must occur in consultation with the key stakeholders and on an incremental basis.

Deputy Seymour Crawford: That never happens.

Deputy John Moloney: It does. I have seen it happen in the midlands and I am quite certain it also happens here.

Deputy Joe Carey: The GPs were not consulted.

Deputy John Moloney: I make the point that reorganisation will occur in consultation with all the stakeholders, which would include the GPs. The Minister believes that it is important to work with health professionals and other interested parties to secure an increasing set of improvements over time. She is confident this approach will produce the best outcome for patients.

It is also important to note that the HSE has commissioned a number of reviews on how acute hospital services should be organised, including the Teamwork-Horwath report on the mid-west region, which the executive has recently published.

The Teamwork-Horwath report on the mid-west highlights the need for changes to be made in the provision and organisation of acute hospital services across the region, particularly in regard to accident and emergency services, critical care, acute surgery and medicine. It is also worth noting that the report found that the services are too fragmented, carry increased risks for patients and staff and are not sustainable in their current form.

The HSE has also indicated that certain changes to the current arrangements for the provision of some acute services, including accident and emergency services, must be made, in the interests of patient safety and also to make best use of the clinical resources available within the mid-west region. The HSE has been engaged in a consultation process with key stakeholders as it formulates detailed plans in regard to emergency care, critical care and surgical services in the region.

The HSE plans will involve the reconfiguration of acute hospital services into a network and their better integration with primary care services across the region, with a regional centre at Limerick Regional Hospital that will deal with complex and specialist cases. The plans will also provide for the development of significant and effective local hospital and community services. These will include important roles for Nenagh General Hospital and Ennis General Hospital which, for example, will involve the expansion of day surgery and diagnostic activity.

Deputy Joe Carey: The Government is closing them.

Deputy John Moloney: If the Deputy follows the script, he will note the position is otherwise. The Minister emphasises and confirms that there will be important roles for Nenagh and Ennis.

Deputy Noel J. Coonan: They are like the centre of excellence in Portlaoise in the Minister of State's constituency, the Government did not invest the necessary funding in it.

Deputy John Moloney: No, the Deputy is wrong about that. I supported the then Minister who selected Tullamore. The funding is in place and the service is up and running.

Deputy Noel J. Coonan: Portlaoise was designated a centre of excellence.

Deputy John Moloney: In regard to accident and emergency services, it is important to appreciate that, although these departments are staffed on a 24-hour basis, the number of attendances in Ennis and Nenagh between 8 p.m. and 8 a.m. is low.

Deputy Joe Carey: Some 21,000 people attended the accident and emergency department in Ennis.

Deputy John Moloney: That does not stack up with the facts I have here. In Nenagh the average number of attendances in this period is 7.6, while the corresponding number in Ennis is 9.2. Most of these cases would be more appropriately dealt with by GP out-of-hours services.

Deputy Noel J. Coonan: Some 19,000 people attended the accident and emergency department in Nenagh.

Deputy John Moloney: The HSE plan will reorganise the arrangements in Ennis and Nenagh so that these hospitals will provide an urgent care service for 12 to 14 hours a day as part of a regional accident and emergency structure. These hospitals will also continue to admit appropriate medical cases. The HSE has identified the enhancement of emergency ambulance services as an essential element of the new service delivery arrangements for the mid-west.

Deputy Noel J. Coonan: Where are they?

Deputy John Moloney: Agreement has been reached with the ambulance service that all trauma, paediatric and obstetric emergencies will not be brought to the local hospital but will go directly to the major tertiary centre, which includes the regional maternity unit.

Plans are under way to introduce a 24-hour advanced paramedic service in Clare and north Tipperary.

Deputy Pat Breen: There are only two paramedics on duty at any stage. How can two cover an area?

Deputy John Moloney: Plans are under way to introduce a 24-hour advanced paramedic service in Clare and north Tipperary.

Deputy Pat Breen: Six are assigned for the entire county, but how can that number cover the county if one of them is out ill?

Deputy John Moloney: Advanced paramedics are trained to a standard that equips them to provide more complex pre-hospital care than ordinary paramedics. This includes the administration of a wider range of drugs and the urgent assessment and resuscitation of patients.

Deputy Pat Breen: The Minister of State should tell that to someone from Kilbaha or Carrigaholt.

Deputy John Moloney: The strategy is all about providing the best care for patients.

Deputy Paul Connaughton: It is all about money.

Deputy John Moloney: In regard to capital development, the Minister has asked the HSE, in the context of the development of its capital plan, to consider the requirements of the mid-west arising from the planned reconfiguration of services in the region.

A Deputy: What about patients who died when they had to pass Monaghan——

Deputy John Moloney: Deputies will also be more than satisfied to realise that discussions on the HSE draft capital plan are ongoing between the executive and the Department. The Minister is satisfied that the measures being taken by the HSE are necessary and appropriate in order to ensure the provision of safe and effective health services to the people of the mid-west region.

Deputy Pat Breen: We believe she is wrong.

Farm Waste Management.

Deputy Tom Hayes: I thank the Ceann Comhairle for allowing me to raise the important issue of the farm waste management scheme. It is a good scheme and has had a positive impact not only for agriculture but for the environment. People were shocked when they heard that the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food could not add the number of farmers who applied for grants under the scheme. The number of applicants went through Teagasc, the farm development service. The Department must have known the number of applicants, given that the number of planning permissions granted throughout the country could have been checked with the county councils. People are shocked, as am I, that the Department underestimated the number of applicants or the money required to cover the payments. However, that is the position and there is nothing we can do about it now.

In the limited time available, I want to impress on the Minister the hardship being experienced by farm families throughout the country and their concerns about farming. They are worried about milk prices falling to as low as 19 cent or 20 cent per litre this year. Farming is changing. The applicants under this scheme have borrowed a large amount of money from banks or other financial institutions. They had to meet high standards that were laid down in respect of these projects, which they did. I stress the worry, fear and the anxiety they are experiencing.

I appreciate the Minister coming into the House to listen to what we have to say. I cannot understand why a Department would underestimate the figures in question to such a degree. The Minister should give us a commitment tonight that these grants will be paid within the time specified. Banks, other financial institutions and, in some cases, contractors who carried out the work are waiting for the payment of this money. I implore the Minister to give us an answer that properly addresses this matter.

Deputy John O'Mahony: I thank the Ceann Comhairle for allowing me, along with my colleagues, to raise this important issue. It is an important but a simple one. Thousands of farmers around the country had to work day and night to meet the deadline of 31 December for the completion of the work on the projects under the farm waste management scheme. They took out loans based on the grants to which they are entitled. The Minister and the Government voted down the motion introduced by Deputy Creed and other members of the Fine Gael Party last October to extend the date for the completion of the works.

On making representations on behalf of our constituents in recent weeks, we were told by Department officials that the Minister had suspended payments under the scheme. The reasons for this were revealed in *The Sunday Tribune* last weekend when it emerged that the Minister totally underestimated the money needed to cover payments in respect of the approved applications.

How could the Minister have got it so wrong? I heard him state on "Morning Ireland" on Monday that he underestimated the late rush of applications. Given that he was well aware of the number of applications approved, how could he have underestimated the cost involved? For the Minister to say that the large demand took him by surprise can be compared to a

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person selling 20,000 tickets for a football match and then being surprised when 20,000 people turn up. If the deadline had been extended, the irony is that the work could have been done in a more orderly fashion and the Minister would not have been hit with all of the costs coming down the tracks at the one time.

The Minister said he will honour his commitments by way of some form of deferred payment. With banks putting pressure on farmers, deferred payments are not acceptable. Farmers need their money now in order to get the banks off their backs. The perception on the ground is that the Minister's Government bailed out the banks for their misadventures. All we ask here tonight is that the farmers get what they are entitled to get. I call on the Minister to do the honourable thing and pay the hard-pressed farmers the money to which they are entitled.

Deputy Seymour Crawford: I thank the Minister for coming to the House. The payment of grants under the farm waste management scheme is an extremely important issue. In spite of a three-hour debate in the Dáil some months ago, the Minister refused to allow time for the people to finish the job, thus putting increased costs and pressures on the farmers concerned to have all the necessary paperwork in by 31 December 2008.

The only answer we and individual farmers can get from the Department is that no payments are available, even for those applications received long before the December deadline. This is an extremely serious situation and cannot be ignored by the Government. Nobody denies that this was a generous scheme but it had to be allowed so that farmers could meet the necessary regulations with regard to preserving the environment. The Minister explained last week that this came about as a result of a legal situation in Brussels. This only happened because for many years a Fianna Fáil-led Government ignored the problem and the regulations until the matter went to law, but that is no excuse for the hold up in payments today.

The Minister, Deputy Smith, and his Department knew exactly how many farm grants had been sanctioned and they knew especially how many applicants had sent in their cards showing clearly that work was in progress. However, the Minister and his Department totally failed to budget for this, as recently as the much heralded October budget in which so many other figures were completely inaccurate.

When this scheme was announced by the then Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, Deputy Mary Coughlan, who is now Tánaiste, I specifically asked her in the House how she intended to fund the payments as it was clear to me, even at that early stage, that her Estimates were completely flawed. She assured me in no uncertain terms that money would not be a problem.

Farmers entered this scheme in good faith and bankers lent them significant sums of money on the clear understanding that the grants would be paid according to the agreed charter of farmers' rights. Many of the jobs cost more than farmers had originally budgeted for, due to weather conditions and pressures of time. It is vital that this money be paid immediately.

It is interesting that the prices of both ready-mix and steel have fallen dramatically within one month of the scheme ending. This proves that farmers were forced to pay over the odds in an unjustified rush to finish this work. Farm incomes are dropping. Farmers are under pressure. Farmers from the Minister's own county as well as my own contacted me in desperation. I urge the Minister to ensure that farmers are paid now or within the next two months at least.

Deputy Michael Creed: I thank the Ceann Comhairle for permitting my colleagues and me to raise this matter and I thank the Minister for being here to take the debate in person.

There is very little I can add to what has been said by my colleagues. To say that applicants who are awaiting payment are alarmed is an understatement. It must be emphasised that in complying with the nitrates directive and in availing of this grant scheme, there is no financial gain for the farmers who have borrowed significant amounts of money. They are merely complying with their legal obligations, assisted by a grant scheme introduced by the Minister's Government.

The reality is that this money will pass through the hands of the applicants only on its way to the bank managers who approved these farmers for matching funds to complete the works. Loan facilities were approved to carry out the works on the basis of the grants that would be available.

Reference was made by previous speakers to bailing out the banking sector. Money makes the world go round. If one is talking about a figure of approximately €400 million as the liability for which the Department stands, this by itself, if denied to the banking institutions, will create a liquidity problem for them. I urge the Minister to act and I hope he can allay our fears. I hope he can tell us that he is in negotiation with the Minister for Finance or that he has concluded negotiations with him.

I am alarmed that the Taoiseach said in the House yesterday that no Supplementary Estimate was envisaged. The prospect of robbing Peter to pay Paul is raised if the Minister has to fund this scheme out of departmental resources. In addition to the disproportionate cuts that agriculture has already been asked to carry in the recent budget, that is a scenario that we cannot countenance.

I hope the Minister is in an position to allay our fears. It is incredible that he was not in a position to predict this situation on the basis of precedent. There were 42,000 applicants. An average payment, established from existing grants, was to be in the region of €33,000. A total of 17,000 had already been paid and approximately 17,000 remained to be paid. The mathematics are quite simple. The Minister had an allocation of €125 million which was entirely inadequate.

I can assure the Minister that if he does not pay this grant at its due time to members who are due their payments, it will make the protests that arose in respect of the disadvantaged area scheme, the installation aid scheme and the early retirement scheme look like the teddybears' picnic party. This issue will not go away.

Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Deputy Brendan Smith): The farm waste management scheme is the most successful on-farm investment scheme in the history of the State. It will see over €2 billion invested by both farmers and the Irish taxpayer in providing essential on-farm infrastructure and represents a long-term investment in improving the productive capacity of the most important indigenous sector in the economy. The scheme represents an enormous vote of confidence in the sector and is well justified on the basis of our export performance. Significantly, a recent analytical study showed that the agrifood industry contributed over 30% of net foreign earnings from the manufacturing sector.

Ireland must compete on the basis of quality, productivity and efficiency and must ensure that we meet the needs of consumers and society in general. We must ensure that the sector operates in a manner that is consistent with the preservation of the natural environment. Investment in the farm waste management scheme is consistent with all these priorities.

While market conditions are difficult at the moment, as Deputy Crawford mentioned, the global demand for meat and milk is forecast to double over the next 40 years and Irish agriculture and the agrifood sector—

Deputy Paul Connaughton: We must hang in long enough then.

Deputy Brendan Smith: I referred to the fact that my constituency colleague, Deputy Crawford, was right when he referred to the price and the demands on commodity prices. I state the facts——

Deputy Paul Connaughton: When will the Minister pay the cheques? He should simply pay the cheques.

Deputy Brendan Smith: Deputy Connaughton's intervention is not much use. Can I refer to a constructive contribution that my constituency colleague made?

Deputy Tom Hayes: The Minister is looking for his preferences.

An Ceann Comhairle: Carry on.

Deputy Paul Connaughton: It is a breach of contracts.

Deputy Brendan Smith: When the Deputy was a Minister of State, there were not too many on-farm investment schemes in his day in Agriculture House.

Deputy Paul Connaughton: They paid.

Deputy Brendan Smith: They were not allowed in the first place.

While market conditions are difficult at the moment, the global demand for meat and milk is forecast to double over the next 40 years and Irish agriculture, and the agrifood sector which is built on it, with the benefit of the investment under the farm waste management scheme, will be well positioned to take advantage of these trends.

As Deputies will be aware, a revised, and greatly improved, farm waste management scheme was introduced by the Department in March 2006 in order to assist farmers meet the additional requirements of the nitrates directive. The amendments to the scheme included, in particular, an increase in the standard grant rate from the previous 40% to 60%, with 70% available in the four Zone C counties, namely counties Cavan, Donegal, Leitrim and Monaghan. In addition, the new scheme provided for an increase in the maximum eligible investment ceiling from €75,000 to €120,000 and removed any minimum income requirements from farming from the scheme so that all small farmers could participate in it.

It is acknowledged that Ireland was in a very difficult position prior to the introduction of the revised scheme in 2006, having been found to be in breach of the terms of the nitrates directive in 2004 by virtue of a judgment of the European Court of Justice. Continued failure to implement this directive to the satisfaction of the EU Commission would have had serious implications for Ireland, including the threat of substantial daily fines and the undermining of EU funding for rural development schemes and the single payment scheme. The annual EU funding to Ireland under both headings amounts to approximately €1.6 billion. To have continued to have ignored those threats would have represented nothing less than gross irresponsibility which the Government was not prepared to countenance.

The immense success of the scheme is demonstrated by the 48,500 applications which were received by the closing date of end-December 2006, of which over 30,000 were received during the final month for receipt of applications. By responding thus to the Government's generous scheme, not only was the farming sector demonstrating a willingness to address the nitrates issue but it was also showing a huge amount of confidence in the future of the sector. Almost

43,000 approvals to commence work were issued to farmers under the scheme prior to the end-2008 deadline for completion of work. These figures are virtually unprecedented within the context of on-farm investment schemes.

The financial commitment of the Government to the scheme has been very substantial, particularly during these challenging economic times, and all of this grant aid comes directly from the Exchequer. This is demonstrated by the fact that €413.7 million was paid out to farmers under the scheme in 2008. This was in addition to amounts of €21 million in 2006 and €114 million in 2007. The high level of expenditure under the scheme last year was made possible by the agreement of this House to a Supplementary Estimate of €195 million, which enabled a further 6,000 farmers to receive timely payments under the scheme during 2008.

The 2008 expenditure of €413.7 million should be seen against the original provision of €129 million in the Estimates. In addition to savings of €53 million, identified in mid-year, and the Supplementary Estimate of €195 million, the Department devoted an additional €36 million to funding the scheme before the end of the year.

The Government places a very high value on the Irish agri-food sector and it was in view of the sector's importance that the Government agreed to fund such a generous scheme in support of an essential infrastructure investment that is every bit as important to the agri-food sector as other infrastructural investments were to other sectors of the economy. There is no doubt the scheme has already dramatically transformed the Irish farming infrastructure through this major injection of capital and it has left the sector well-positioned to meet the highest international environmental standards required of Irish farming, as well as the changing market requirements. It will also continue to strengthen the competitiveness of Irish agriculture into the future as well as protect Irish farmers from the threat to their EU payments.

The deadline of 31 December for completion of investment works under the scheme was an integral part of the EU state aid approval and had to be strictly adhered to. The state aid approval was granted by the Commission on the clear understanding that the scheme represented a once-off opportunity to enable farmers to meet the requirements of the nitrates directive. The Commission consistently reiterated that position, both in writing and to me personally, as well as to our officials on several occasions. Indeed, only recently an MEP representing Leinster was advised of this specific condition.

The imposition of this deadline was known at all stages of the scheme and has been shown in the final analysis not to have hindered the participation of most interested farmers. Despite the urgings of others, I was consistent in my advice to farmers that the deadline would not be revised and that they should spare no effort to ensure the necessary work was done and the paperwork submitted to my Department by the end of December last. All of the evidence suggests this advice was adhered to and approximately 35,000 claims were received in respect of completed works under the scheme prior to the closing date, over 14,200 of which were submitted during the month of December.

In an effort to facilitate those farmers who may, for whatever reason, not have wanted to proceed with the full extent of the project for which they had approval, I introduced a facility whereby the scheme participants could proceed with distinct discrete units of work, for which the Department would provide funding. I am satisfied this important initiative will have been of considerable assistance to thousands of farmers who might otherwise have lost the opportunity to provide important storage facilities.

By 31 December, almost 17,600 farmers had been paid and approximately 17,400 payment claims now remain to be processed. The Department is currently assessing these claims with a

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view to estimating the overall cost involved in grant terms. Though this review is not yet complete, I expect it will be completed shortly.

I am pleased to confirm to the House, as I have done earlier this week both through the media and again last night at the Irish Farmers Association national AGM, that all farmers who completed work in accordance with the terms and conditions of the scheme will be paid.

Deputy Seymour Crawford: When?

Deputy Brendan Smith: I am currently discussing the funding arrangements with the Minister for Finance, Deputy Brian Lenihan, and I expect that a determination on those arrangements will be made shortly. As the Taoiseach said last night, “the Government’s aim is to ensure that funding is available to meet claims for properly completed and validated work under the scheme.”

In the short intervening period, payments to farmers under the scheme have been deferred but they will be resumed as soon as possible. I reassure Deputies that the Department continues to carry out the necessary inspections and to process claims to payment stage. I am aware of the concerns among farmers that these payments will not be honoured but I would again reiterate my commitment and that of the Government to full payment of these claims, subject to their meeting the terms and conditions of the scheme.

Before concluding, it is important to stress that the Government has made and continues to make very significant financial commitments to underpin the future development of a sustainable and competitive agriculture and food sector capable of meeting the demands of modern consumers. This year, the Department spend is in excess of €3.4 billion in support of Irish agriculture, fisheries and forestry. Notwithstanding the overriding need for budgetary restraint in these difficult times, we are making every effort to preserve measures designed to underpin the productive capacity of the sector. I can assure the House that the Government will continue to utilise whatever means it can to enable agriculture and the agri-food sector to maximise its contribution to the wider economy.

I again thank the Deputies for giving me the opportunity to set out the position on this matter and to reiterate the Government’s commitment to honouring in full those farm waste management scheme claims that meet the Department’s specifications. In response to Deputy O’Mahony, I never spoke about the late flood of applications on the national airwaves. I spoke about the number of claims that came in, which are quite different to applications. On a point made by Deputy Creed and others, there is a gain for farmers in this scheme. Many people I spoke to and whom we all represent have said that for the first time they have good on-farm facilities. They are able to keep cattle indoors for longer to save and preserve their grassland. Similarly, individual farmers——

Deputy Tom Hayes: We know all that. We need the money from the banks.

Deputy Brendan Smith: Deputy Hayes does not like to hear the facts. Similarly, any individual who did not meet the cross-compliance criteria would be in danger of losing his or her single payment, which is now a very important part of farming income. That scheme has enabled farmers to ensure they are in a position to meet the criteria for the single payment scheme and, from that point of view, it is extremely beneficial to the farming community.

Deputy Tom Hayes: That is why we wanted it extended.

Deputy Brendan Smith: The work is done.

Turbary Rights.

Deputy Paul Connaughton: I thank the Ceann Comhairle for the opportunity to raise this matter. I want to give the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government and the Government a chance to think seriously about this terrible decision to prevent thousands of turf cutters throughout Ireland from cutting their own domestic supply of fuel on the 32 raised bogs designated under the EU habitats directive. In the economic circumstances in which we find ourselves, not alone do the thousands of bog owners who are to be driven out of their own bogs this spring believe this is a daft scheme operated under an illogical EU-Government order which makes no sense, but so do those in society generally. We need only look at the facts.

I must explain to the House I have a vested interest. I am one of the thousands of bog owners who will be prevented from cutting a domestic supply of turf this year, something which has happened in my family for three generations.

Last summer, as people harvested their supply of turf, the price of crude oil hit €147 a barrel, and while it is not at that level now, most economists suggest that over the next year or so this level will be surpassed. Bogs were made available to families to allow them to become self-sufficient with regard to fuel supplies. Everybody wants the ailing economy to be energy conscious and less dependent on foreign oil imports but the Government seems not to understand that turf provides fuel for cooking, heating houses and an array of purposes. Why would the Government, particularly in this week in our history when our collective backs are to the wall, want to drive thousands of ordinary, decent people out of their bogs, forcing them to replace their heating systems with appliances that are powered by electricity or gas, all necessitating expensive oil imports?

We must consider the loss of jobs on turf-cutting machines and the financial disaster that is facing turf-cutting contractors, many of whom have €500,000 tied up in expensive turf-cutting machinery that can never be used for any other purpose. When the beet industry was allowed to die a few years ago, at least the beet contractors got some financial help but nothing whatsoever is planned for the bog contractors. The compensation offered to bog owners is a measly €3,000 per acre. Even such a ridiculously low valuation is beyond the capacity to pay of this cash-strapped Government. In other words, it does not have the funds to pay in any case; the Government is not able to pay for a bog. Why not let people continue to supply their domestic needs?

Many areas of the country contain raised bogs which do not have the quality turf which is a feature of many of the 32 bogs previously mentioned. Why are efforts not made to take over those bogs? This would not cause problems for the landowners, because the turf quality is bad. It would allow people cut turf on their bogs, which have proved useful throughout the years. I warn the Minister and the Government that this matter will be very difficult to implement, because right is on the side of bog owners in this case. There is a moral right to allow them to cut turf on their bogs as they have been doing for generations.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Minister has five minutes in which to keep the home fires burning.

Deputy Paul Connaughton: The Ceann Comhairle should put that out.

Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Deputy Brendan Smith): Once, I listened to the Ceann Comhairle on the radio discussing one of his favourite poems. He recited it and

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perhaps he will put Deputy Connaughton's contribution to song some evening. I thank Deputy Connaughton for raising this issue. The Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government, Deputy Gormley, is unable to reply and I do so on his behalf.

The Minister is currently considering proposals for preservation of bogs of high conservation value. I understand that the Minister will bring this issue to Government shortly.

Turf cutting is scheduled to end during 2009 in 32 raised bogs, which would involve a relatively small proportion of turf cutters and not, I am advised, several thousand. Outside these 32 bogs, in other words, in the vast majority of areas, cutting may continue as normal. In particular, blanket bogs, which comprise most of the areas of peatland, are not affected. These arrangements will concern only raised bogs. However, there are between 1,500 and 1,600 raised bogs. Only 139 of these are designated and turf cutting is scheduled to cease during 2009 on 32 of these.

Turf cutting is not prohibited on most bogs, although on special areas of conservation and natural heritage areas cutting must be for domestic or non-commercial purposes and the use of certain machinery, such as sausage machines is not allowed.

Ireland's designated raised bogs are of European importance. Almost all of western Europe's raised bogs have disappeared or been severely damaged. Ireland has approximately 60% of the remaining uncut areas. These are of significant importance to Ireland's and Europe's natural heritage. We are required to protect habitats of European importance under the 1992 habitats directive. This bogland is priority habitat under the directive. It is also protected under our legislation, the European Communities (Natural Habitats) Regulations 1997, and the Wildlife (Amendment) Act 2000.

Within Ireland, as elsewhere, most areas of bog have been severely damaged. This has mainly been caused by turf cutting, but also, in more recent times, by afforestation and over-grazing. Less than 1% of Ireland's active raised bogs remain. These are bogs on which the indigenous flora are still growing and where peat is forming. When arrangements were announced for the cessation of turf cutting on the 32 bogs designated for conservation in 1999, a ten-year grace period was granted to domestic turf cutters. It was intended to allow domestic turf cutters to find an alternative source of fuel. This ten-year period is now ending. A similar ten-year derogation applies to bogs designated after 1999. When natural heritage areas were designated in 2004, under an agreement with the farming organisations, another ten-year derogation was put in place, allowing cutting in these areas until 2014.

Since 1999, the Government has actively encouraged the cessation of domestic cutting by buying the traditional turf-cutting rights through a voluntary scheme of compensation. This covers both special areas of conservation and natural heritage areas. However, a review of the state of our bogs has revealed severe and continuing damage caused by domestic turf cutters. It is the Government's responsibility to ensure Ireland meets its obligations in protecting at least a portion of what remains of this irreplaceable natural heritage. I will ensure Deputy Connaughton's contribution is brought to the attention of the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government, Deputy Gormley.

The Dáil adjourned at 9.35 p.m. until 10.30 a.m. on Thursday, 29 January 2009.

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 8, inclusive, answered orally.

Questions Nos. 9 to 91, inclusive, resubmitted.

Questions Nos. 92 to 104, inclusive, answered orally.

Departmental Bodies.

105. **Deputy Eamon Gilmore** asked the Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism the progress on the amalgamation of the National Library of Ireland, the National Archives and the Manuscripts Commission; if legislation will be required to enact the amalgamation; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2254/09]

118. **Deputy Michael D. Higgins** asked the Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism the progress on the planned amendment of the National Archives Act 1986; when he expects this to be published; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2275/09]

214. **Deputy Mary Upton** asked the Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism when the National Library of Ireland, the National Archives and the Manuscripts Commission will be amalgamated; the amount he expects will be saved as a result of this amalgamation; his views on whether this amalgamation is feasible and practical; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2548/09]

Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism (Deputy Martin Cullen): I propose to take Questions Nos. 105, 118 and 214 together.

I would like to advise the House that the National Archives, the National Library of Ireland, and the Irish Manuscripts Commission are distinct institutions, established under various legislative acts. Accordingly, the merger of these organisations will require primary legislation.

As I stated in my reply to Questions Nos. 76, 77 and 84 on 19th November 2008, the corporate, legislative and accommodation positions of each of the Institutions is being examined with a view to drawing up a plan of action to give effect to the Government decision. My Department is also investigating the functional and logistical requirements of each institution and the

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adjustments which will be required. The challenges here are detailed and multi-faceted and it would be premature at this point to give definite dates. A consultative process with the Directors of the Institutions referred to above is underway under various headings including governance, shared management structures, unified support services and resources.

Tourism Industry.

106. **Deputy John Deasy** asked the Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism if he is satisfied that the terms of the mid-Shannon tax corridor initiative are consistent with achieving the objectives of the scheme and are benefiting Shannon region tourism; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2356/09]

Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism (Deputy Martin Cullen): The Mid-Shannon Tourism Infrastructure Investment Scheme, which was introduced in section 29 of the Finance Act 2007 and launched in June 2008, provides tax incentives for investment in tourism attractions and facilities in the designated Mid-Shannon Corridor. The Mid-Shannon Tourism Investment Board, selected by the Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism, in consultation with the Minister for Finance, is to examine proposals and to approve those which meet the criteria set out in Guidelines to the Board. Only those projects that are approved beforehand and certified after completion, by the Board, will benefit from the incentives.

This will ensure that investment takes place in line with the carefully prepared strategies of the agencies and that projects meet standards of quality. The Guidelines also set out the classes of facilities that have been identified as most appropriate and needed in the Mid-Shannon Corridor. Among the qualifying activities included under the Scheme are:

- water sports activities, boat rental and inland cruising;
- visitor attractions and centres;
- wellness amenities and spa facilities;
- cultural facilities;
- caravan and camping parks and holiday camps; and
- certain restaurants and cafes.

The Guidelines have been designed to encourage the development of appropriate facilities, to the high standards expected by our tourism customers. I am satisfied that the terms set out in the Guidelines are appropriate if we are to maximise the tourism assets of the Mid-Shannon Corridor.

The Mid Shannon Tax Incentive Scheme is a welcome addition to the range of supports available to the tourism agencies in their effort to promote the development of the tourism business in the lower reaches of the Shannon basin. The scheme has been warmly embraced by Fáilte Ireland and Shannon Development and they have jointly promoted it extensively across the eligible catchment areas and through the relevant professional bodies. Between them, they have held 10 seminars and workshops for the private sector and professional groups. Over 300 people have attended these. Additional briefings have been held for key stakeholders such as local authorities, planning departments and local tourism groups.

While there have been no formal submissions to date, the executive teams in the two agencies are currently working with potential investors in exploring their projects and the funding options available to get them to a point of making formal submissions. I am advised that there

are a number of quality projects in the pipeline which it is hoped will be submitted before the May 31st deadline in place. This Scheme, while in many respects similar to others which have preceded it, is in crucial ways quite new and innovative. It is in the nature of innovation that elements are experimental and may be subject to review in the light of experience as well as external developments.

My Department, in conjunction with the Department of Finance, the Mid-Shannon Tourism Infrastructure Board, Fáilte Ireland and Shannon Development, is continuing to keep the terms of the Scheme under review with a view to identifying any necessary changes. Any review of the Scheme in terms of the deadlines set is a matter for my colleague the Minister for Finance in the first instance.

Departmental Reports.

107. **Deputy Seymour Crawford** asked the Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism if he has reached conclusions following his consideration of the London 2012 Olympics and Paralympics task force report; if he will take action on foot of the report's recommendations; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2348/09]

116. **Deputy Thomas P. Broughan** asked the Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism the position regarding the promised publication of the Indecon economic evaluation of the benefits to Ireland of the London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2256/09]

Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism (Deputy Martin Cullen): I propose to take Questions Nos. 107 and 116 together.

The London 2012 Olympics and Paralympics Task Force was established in August 2006 to ensure Ireland can identify and maximise the complete range of opportunities arising from our proximity to the Olympic and Paralympic Games in London 2012. The Task Force included experts from the sport, tourism, cultural and business sectors and was supported by staff within my Department. The Task Force report makes a number of recommendations arising from an audit carried out of high quality sports facilities in Ireland and the findings of a report by Indecon International Economic Consultants on the economic evaluation of the benefit to the island of Ireland of the London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic games. It highlights the opportunities for Ireland from the London 2012 Games in the sport, tourism, cultural and business sectors.

I am considering the implementation of the recommendations of the London 2012 Task Force Report taking account of the current economic situation and my ongoing meetings with the key high performance stakeholders to identify the challenges which must be met in the preparation of our team for the London Games. I intend to make the report available on the Department's website next week.

Departmental Capital Projects.

108. **Deputy Bernard Allen** asked the Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism if capital projects under his remit will commence in 2009; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2314/09]

212. **Deputy Olivia Mitchell** asked the Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism if capital projects under his remit will commence in 2009; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2755/09]

Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism (Deputy Martin Cullen): I propose to take Questions Nos. 108 and 212 together.

A number of landmark capital projects under the aegis of the Department are currently at various stages of development, from the pre-contract stage to the phase of nearing completion.

National Theatre

The Abbey Theatre is to be redeveloped by way of a public-private partnership on a site at George's Dock. This site was chosen following an extensive search exercise conducted by the Office of Public Works that involved the examination of a number of options. This PPP project is now being progressed on the basis solely of the Georges Dock site. The project is complex and there are a myriad of technical, procedural and legal factors to address in making progress on it, and these continue to be progressed. The project remains a priority for the Department and I will make an announcement on the design competition very soon.

National Concert Hall

The redevelopment of the National Concert Hall, also by means of a public-private partnership agreement, is currently in the competitive dialogue phase of the procurement process. This phase involves engagement with three shortlisted applicant consortia, at the end of which they will be invited to submit tenders. The successful tenderer will be selected by September 2009 and, subject to planning permission, I will award the contract around the end of 2009. Upon completion, the project will deliver, among other facilities, a main auditorium with a seating capacity for more than 2,000 patrons. The project is progressing to schedule, with construction expected to commence in 2010.

National Conference Centre

The development of the National Conference Centre is proceeding apace according to the public-private partnership agreement already in place. The Centre will deliver significant numbers of international conference visitors to Ireland and will generate substantial foreign revenue earnings. It is, therefore, all the more important that this project be completed. I am pleased to note that the Centre remains on schedule to open on 1 September 2010.

Lansdowne Road Stadium

The Lansdowne Road Stadium project will deliver a new, state-of-the-art 50,000-seat capacity stadium to meet the international rugby and soccer fixture requirements of the IRFU and the FAI. Again, I am pleased to report that following the commencement of building work in May 2007, the project remains well on schedule for completion by mid 2010.

National Sports Campus

With respect to the establishment of a National Sports Campus at Abbotstown, the difficult economic constraints has meant that no funding has been provided to date to advance the Phase I development in 2009. I am having discussions with the Minister for Finance to see what funding might be available to move forward with Phase I on a phased basis. I am also having discussions with the NSCDA in this regard. In the short term, construction work has commenced on providing a headquarters for the Irish Institute of Sport, involving the refurbishment of an existing building, to be ready for occupancy this year.

As can be seen, progress is continuing apace on a number of major capital projects, and I hope to report positively on developments to this House during the remainder of this year and beyond. In addition my Department will continue to make payments to grantees who have

been awarded grants under the Sports Capital, Local Authority Swimming Pool and ACCESS programmes.

Departmental Funding.

109. **Deputy Deirdre Clune** asked the Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism if he will confirm the operational subsidy provided by his Department to the National Aquatic Centre in 2008; the level of subsidy he envisages will be required in 2009; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2341/09]

Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism (Deputy Martin Cullen): I refer the Deputy to the response given to Deputy Upton in respect of Priority Question Number 95 (reference 2480/09) of today's date. The National Aquatic Centre (NAC) is operated by NSCDA (Operations) Ltd., a subsidiary company of the National Sports Campus Development Authority (NSCDA). All day-to-day operations of the NAC are a matter for the Authority and the operations company. Following the restoration of the NAC to the then Campus and Stadium Ireland Development Ltd., on 1 December 2006, an extensive capital programme was undertaken to restore the Centre to its original condition.

Much effort has gone into rebuilding its reputation and increasing its customer base and, in that context, an initial subsidy of €1.8 million was required in its first full year of operation. In 2008 a more positive picture of operational needs emerged and I have been encouraged by the significant increase in both visitor numbers and income which is being achieved to date. In more specific terms, while in 2007 there were 576,000 visitors, in 2008 there have been some 707,000 visitors. Notwithstanding the marked improvement in the level of activity and income at the NAC during 2008 there has still been a requirement of a subsidy of just over €1 million required in 2008. However this is reduced from the amount of €1.8 million in 2007.

In parallel with overseeing the ongoing operation, the Authority undertook an international benchmarking exercise comparing the performance of the NAC against other equivalent facilities throughout Europe. This work was recently completed and has been evaluated both by the Authority and by my officials. The clear message is that all publicly accessible 50metre indoor pools receive direct or indirect subsidies from Governments, local authorities, sports councils, universities and/or other like facilities. Clearly therefore the performance of the NAC is not dissimilar to other like facilities. Accordingly, and based on the National Aquatic Centre projections for trading in 2009, a subsidy in the order of €1million will be needed by the Authority for this purpose, out of its provision for 2009, in respect of this year's trading.

Question No. 110 answered with Question No. 102.

Arts Funding.

111. **Deputy Seán Barrett** asked the Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism the impact he envisages the reduction in funding for the arts sector will have on the industry in 2009; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2319/09]

Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism (Deputy Martin Cullen): I refer the Deputy to my reply of 19th November 2008 last to question 41832/08. As I outlined in that reply, under measures introduced in the 2009 budget, all Government Departments and State Agencies are to achieve a range of reductions and savings in 2009, both on pay and non-pay expenditure, and the Arts Council is no exception. These include a 3% reduction in the level of their 2008 pay bill and at least a 50% reduction in their consultancy and advertising budgets.

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The Arts Council is statutorily independent, under the Arts Act 2003, in its funding decisions and I have no role to play in actual funding allocations made by the Council. As Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism I am committed to securing the best possible funding deal for the Arts Council and the arts sector generally throughout the country. By any standards however, the Arts Council has seen dramatic increases in its funding allocation in recent years, increasing by over 59% from €47.67 million in 2002 to €81.62 million in 2009. These are significant amounts of taxpayers' money in any context and have effectively transformed the arts, by facilitating increased access to and participation in the full spectrum of art forms throughout the country.

The Government's sustained support has resulted in a firm foundation to the arts sector that will assist it in facing future challenges and hopefully minimizing the effects of the new funding situation. This Government is committed to supporting the arts and will continue to work with and fund the Arts Council within available financial resources as part of its programme to achieve this.

Beijing Olympic Games.

112. **Deputy Kathleen Lynch** asked the Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism if a review of the Irish performance in the Beijing Olympics has been conducted by or on behalf of his Department; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2263/09]

Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism (Deputy Martin Cullen): The Irish Sports Council (ISC), which is funded by my Department, has statutory responsibility for encouraging the promotion, development and co-ordination of competitive sport and the achievement of excellence in competitive sport. In this regard the ISC works in partnership with the Irish Institute of Sport, the Olympic Council of Ireland, the Paralympic Council of Ireland and the relevant national governing bodies of sport in the preparation of Irish athletes for the Olympic and Paralympic Games.

The ISC established a review group to examine the preparations and performances at the 2008 Beijing Games in order to prepare for the 2012 London Games. The overall aim of the review is to make recommendations to the ISC in respect of structures, programmes and investment policy that should be pursued based on the outcomes of the 2008 Olympic and Paralympic Games. I understand that the review will be published shortly.

I am completing a series of meetings with a number of the key stakeholders involved in the support of our elite athletes to discuss how we can best build on the success we had in Beijing and the supports required in terms of coaching, programmes, facilities and funding to ensure the optimum performance of Irish athletes at the London 2012. It is my intention that the issues arising from these meetings and the review being carried out by the ISC will inform the high performance strategy for the London 2012 Games.

Abbey Theatre.

113. **Deputy Dinny McGinley** asked the Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism the progress on the new Abbey Theatre design competition; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2387/09]

Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism (Deputy Martin Cullen): In 2006 the Government decided to proceed with the redevelopment of the Abbey Theatre by way of a public private partnership on a site at George's Dock, on a build, finance and maintain basis. This site was chosen following an extensive search exercise conducted by the Office of Public Works that

involved the examination of a number of options. This PPP project is now being progressed on the basis solely of the Georges Dock site. The project is complex and there are a myriad of technical, procedural and legal factors to address in making progress on it and these continue to be progressed, including the International Design Competition. Significant progress has been made in recent weeks and I hope to make an announcement soon on the matter.

Arts Plan.

114. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism the steps expected to be taken to develop, enhance or promote the arts at national and local level in the future; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2407/09]

218. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism the proposed extent of expenditure by his Department in 2009 for the promotion of the arts at local level with particular reference to encouraging local drama and musical groups; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2680/09]

220. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism his plans to generate increased interest in the arts at community level here; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2682/09]

Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism (Deputy Martin Cullen): I propose to take Questions Nos. 114, 218 and 220 together.

As I outlined in my reply of 19th November 2008 last to Question No. 41808/08, Government Policy on the Arts is set out in the Programme for Government and is elaborated further in my Department's Statement of Strategy. 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 make the arts an integral and valued part of our national life.

Responsibility for the promotion of the arts at all levels throughout the country is primarily devolved to the Arts Council. The Arts Council is the principal agency through which State funding is channelled to the arts. Under the Arts Act, 2003, the general functions of the Council include the following:

- to stimulate public interest in the arts;
- to promote knowledge, appreciation and practice of the arts;
- to assist in improving standards in the arts.

The Arts Council is a statutorily independent body, funded by my Department and independent in its day-to-day operations, including in relation to its funding decisions. My Department has taken a direct role in relation to the provision of grant-aid for arts and culture infrastructure and has allocated over €150m in funding for the capital development of facilities around the country in recent years. A total of €108m of this was drawn down by the end of 2008. The table outlines expenditure on capital arts projects since 2004.

The Arts Capital Programme (previously known as ACCESS — Arts and Culture Capital Enhancement Support Scheme) is designed to assist in the provision of high standard arts and culture infrastructural projects, thereby enhancing access to all aspects of the arts throughout the country. The programme has been widely acknowledged as a significant intervention in the provision of high quality arts and culture infrastructure around the country. Under the scheme facilities funded to date include integrated arts centres, theatres, galleries as well as art studios and other arts production and performance spaces. A total of almost €86m has been granted

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to 120 projects across the country under the scheme, many of which were community based arts groups.

Arts Council Funding 2004-2008

Year	Funding	% Change	Supplementary Estimate	Total including Supplementary	% Change
	€m				
2004	52.500	19.0	2.00	54.50	23.6
2005	61.000	16.2	5.23	66.23	21.5
2006	72.310	18.5	10.00	82.31	24.3
2007	80.000	10.6	3.00	83.00	0.8
2008	82.102	2.60		81.60	-1.7

Capital Arts Expenditure

Year	Expenditure
	€m
2004	6.1
2005	12.7
2006	20.0
2007	37.2
2008	32.7
Total	108.7

Tourism Industry.

115. **Deputy James Bannon** asked the Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism if he has had discussions with the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food with regard to the possibility of the EU imposing quotas on sea angling; his views on whether angling tourism here may be damaged by the proposals; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2317/09]

Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism (Deputy Martin Cullen): As the Deputy is aware; it is primarily a matter for my colleague, Brendan Smith, T.D. Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, to negotiate the new Fisheries Control System, which is scheduled to come into effect on 1st January 2010. There is no doubt that the proposal as it is currently framed — to count catches of fish taken through recreational fishing against the relevant quotas of Member States — has the potential to adversely affect sea angling tourism. Angling visitors to Ireland are a specialist group and while smaller in comparison to other product specific visitors, they are a loyal group who tend to return year on year. In 2007, angling visitors to Ireland amounted to 128,000, with an estimated spend of €90million; of these visitors 31,000 were sea anglers.

I have asked my officials to monitor the situation in relation to the detailed negotiations on this proposal and to liaise with officials in the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, as necessary. My concern is to mitigate any adverse impact on the sea angling tourism sector, which is an important contributor to the Irish economy, especially in rural and coastal areas.

Question No. 116 answered with Question No. 107.

Departmental Reports.

117. **Deputy John O'Mahony** asked the Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism if he will report on the outcome of his perusal of the Indecon report on the feasibility of a regional conference centre; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2401/09]

125. **Deputy Pat Breen** asked the Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism if he will publish the Indecon report on the feasibility of a regional conference centre; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2331/09]

Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism (Deputy Martin Cullen): I propose to take Questions Nos. 117 and 125 together.

I informed the House yesterday by way of written answer that the Department of Arts, Sport and Tourism had asked Fáilte Ireland to arrange an objective and independent study of the feasibility of a Regional Conference Centre in the Shannon/Limerick area. Indecon Consultants were engaged to carry out the feasibility study, the report of which was submitted to Fáilte Ireland, and this report has subsequently been presented to my Department.

The report concludes that the case for a regional conference centre in the Shannon/Limerick area is subject to considerable uncertainty and is marginal at best. The study also concludes that the required level of investment is not likely to represent the best use of public resources, either in a national context or in the context of the Shannon/Limerick region. Having examined the report, I agree with its findings. I have asked Fáilte Ireland to place a copy of the report on their website www.failteireland.ie.

Question No. 118 answered with Question No. 105.

Sport and Recreational Development.

119. **Deputy Ruairí Quinn** asked the Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism if he has had discussions with the Department of Finance regarding the possible extension of the tax relief for sporting bodies to be extended to current expenditure for sporting organisations; his views on such a proposal and the extension; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2261/09]

Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism (Deputy Martin Cullen): The tax relief on donations to certain sports bodies scheme, established under section 847a of the Taxes Consolidation Act came into effect from 1st May 2002. It allows for tax relief on donations made to approved sports bodies for the funding of sports capital projects. This scheme applies to donations of over €250 made towards expenses incurred by an approved sports body in relation to a capital project after the 1st of May 2002. The donation must be freely given with no benefit derived in return by the donor. Individual taxpayers on the self-assessment system are able to claim relief on their annual tax returns as a deduction from their total income. A corporate entity may claim relief on a donation by treating it as a deductible trading expense. Projects that are valid under the scheme include the following:

- the purchase, construction or refurbishment of a building or structure, or part of a building or structure to be used for sporting or recreation activities provided by the approved sports body,
- the purchase of land to be used by the approved sports body in the provision of sporting or recreation facilities,

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- the purchase of permanently based equipment (excluding personal equipment) for use by the approved sports body in the provision of sporting or recreation facilities,
- the improvement of the playing pitches, surfaces or facilities of the approved sports body, and
- the repayment of, or the payment of interest on, money borrowed by the approved sports body on or after 1 May 2002 for any of the above purposes.

I believe that the scheme is working well with 217 projects worth over €156 million approved to date. Any changes to this scheme or any new provisions of the nature referred to by the Deputy would be a matter for the Minister for Finance to consider in the context of overall taxation policy.

Arts Funding.

120. **Deputy Joe Costello** asked the Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism if the drafting of a new per cent for art scheme has been initiated; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2272/09]

Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism (Deputy Martin Cullen): I refer the Deputy to my reply to Question 44676 of 9th December 2008. As outlined in that reply, the Per Cent for Art scheme, when launched, was accompanied by a set of Guidelines to assist with its implementation. The Guidelines included a commitment to review the scheme and this process is now underway.

The review of the working and implementation of the Per Cent for Art Guidelines has been undertaken through an Inter-Departmental Group, chaired by my Department, since September 2007. This group, which is representative of a wide range of Government Departments and agencies with construction budgets, as well as the Arts Council and the Local Authority Arts Officer Association, has been active in working to revise and achieve an agreed and constructive set of guidelines.

As referred to in my reply of 9th December 2008, the Public Art Advisory Panel, convened by the Arts Council is currently liaising with the Interdepartmental Group so that the revised guidelines can be agreed, finalised and published. The public art website; Publicart.ie, is at an advanced stage of construction and is expected to be launched in the first half of this year.

Sports Capital Programme.

121. **Deputy Brian O'Shea** asked the Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism the position regarding the money granted under the sports capital programme which has not been drawn down; the amount in question; the reasons this money has not been drawn down; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2250/09]

Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism (Deputy Martin Cullen): 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. Since 1998 the Government has allocated over €725m in sports capital funding to over 7,400 sports projects across the country. This investment has transformed the sporting landscape of Ireland and has allowed the development of sports facilities across the length and breadth of the country.

These facilities have dramatically increased the opportunities for all people to engage in a wide variety of sports. The total level of outstanding commitments on hand for various rounds of the Sports Capital Programme at the end of 2008 was just over €175m.

The Deputy will be aware that payments under the programme are made on compliance by grantees with the conditions for payment outlined in the terms of the Programme. It is the responsibility of the grantee to ensure that these conditions are met in a timely manner to ensure the payment of the grant.

Sport and Recreational Development.

122. **Deputy Liz McManus** asked the Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism the progress in promoting co-operation in sport on a North-South basis; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2271/09]

Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism (Deputy Martin Cullen): The Irish Sports Council and the Sports Council for Northern Ireland have an excellent working relationship and engage in a number of joint initiatives, such as the Code of Ethics and Good Practice for Children's Sport, the All Island Sports Development Conference and programmes such as Youth Sport West.

The high level All Island Planning Group, which includes the Chairperson and Chief Executive of each Council, meets on a regular basis to ensure consistency in policy and practice in sports development. There is cooperation on such issues as research, development of high performance sport and anti-doping. The group ensures that there is no duplication of effort in planning and support for governing bodies of sport and individual athletes. The most recent meeting was held in Dublin on 16th December 2008.

In addition, the National Coaching and Training Centre has evolved into Coaching Ireland with an all-island remit and a clear focus to lead the development of coaching in Ireland. The Coaching Strategy for Ireland launched in 2008 was developed in partnership with the Irish Sports Council and Sport Northern Ireland. The strategy was developed following an extensive consultation process with coaches, athletes, national governing bodies of sport and other relevant agencies. A number of meetings have also taken place in the last year between officials of my Department and the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure to discuss sporting issues of mutual interest.

Departmental Programmes.

123. **Deputy Mary Upton** asked the Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism the way his Department is promoting greater co-operation between the areas of arts, sport and tourism in order to mutually enhance future development of the areas; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2267/09]

Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism (Deputy Martin Cullen): Pursuant to its Statement of Strategy 2008-2010, one of the Department's high-level goals is to promote close co-operation between the arts/culture, sport and tourism sectors in order to enhance their shared contribution to the social and economic well being of the country. I am actively realising this goal in the following manner.

Tourism is a key driver of the Irish economy, and world cultural tourism is growing at approximately 15% per annum. Accordingly, I am taking an initiative in 2009 to develop the potential of cultural tourism, building in the first instance on co-operation and synergy between the bodies and institutions under the Department's remit. In particular, I intend to bring

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together the Heads of the key arts, sport and tourism sectoral development bodies and the National Cultural Institutions to draw up a Cultural Tourism Action Programme, to be initiated as soon as possible. This will strengthen the arts and culture family and assist the tourism industry to address current challenges and boost business in future years.

I have been encouraged in this step by the already successful benefits accruing from, for instance, the Arts Council's country-wide festivals support programme and its initiatives in the traditional arts sector, all of which contribute significantly to the tourism package available to visitors but which will, I hope, be harnessed to achieve improved synergies. In addition, 'Culture Ireland' works closely with 'Tourism Ireland' to maximise the opportunities for tourism which the international promotion of Irish culture presents. Apart from ongoing promotion of Culture Ireland-funded events through Tourism Ireland's international network of offices, recent successful joint initiatives include support for a special Irish focus at the leading literary festival in North America and a publication promoting Irish arts events in the key New York market.

Moreover, since 2006, the Department has financially supported 'Culture Night', on which arts and cultural organisations, including the National Cultural Institutions, extend their opening hours to allow for increased access, in order to stimulate interest in the arts and cultural life of the city. Originally conducted only in Dublin, the concept was extended to Cork, Limerick, Galway and Waterford in 2008, and I plan to extend it further to a total of nine cities/towns outside Dublin in 2009. I have awarded a grant of €100,000 to Boston College for the period 2008-2010 to conduct a project to gather together Ireland's sporting heritage for publication on a website with links to present-day sporting organisations, publications, etc.

In the area of sport and tourism, Fáilte Ireland's International Sports Tourism Initiative (ISTI) is designed to attract major sporting events that can showcase Ireland as a major tourism destination. The events targeted have the ability to generate significant international media coverage and bring visitors and associated economic benefits to all the regions of the country. Events supported under ISTI include the World Rally Championship round in the North West; the Volvo Ocean Race, which is due in Galway in May; and the Tour of Ireland international cycle race in August. In addition, the Solheim Cup, which is a biennial transatlantic team matchplay competition considered to be the ladies golf equivalent of the Ryder Cup, is to be hosted by Ireland at Killeen Castle, Co. Meath, in 2011 while the Irish Open Golf tournament which is one of the major tournaments on the European Tour's 2009 schedule, will be staged at Co. Louth Golf Club in May '09.

Tourism Promotion.

124. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism if, having regard to the difficulties experienced in the tourism sector in the past 12 months, it is intended to take specific measures which might have the effect of rejuvenating the industry in 2009; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2406/09]

134. **Deputy James Bannon** asked the Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism if he will take action on foot of the issues cited in the Central Statistics Office's Tourism Trends 2007 report as disadvantages to holidays here; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2316/09]

Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism (Deputy Martin Cullen): I propose to take Questions Nos. 124 and 134 together.

At the end of last year, the Central Statistics Office (CSO) published its thematic report “Tourism Trends 2007”, which brings together tourism statistics from a variety of sources to provide a useful reference source to those interested in the tourism sector. This report shows clearly the progress of tourism in recent years, highlighting the exceptional performance in 2007. The number of overseas trips to Ireland grew by 27% to 8,012,000 between 2000 and 2007. Half of all trips were for holiday purposes and total earnings from all visitors in 2007 were €4,902 million. The Irish people and scenery were cited as the most frequently mentioned advantages of Ireland as a holiday destination between 2002 and 2007.

The Deputy will be aware that our tourism strategy framework, “New Horizons for Irish Tourism: an Agenda for Action 2003-2012” addresses these issues, among others. One of my priorities as Minister is to ensure that the tourism agenda is accommodated in all the relevant policies and programmes that impact on tourism. This is being put into practice on an ongoing basis by my Department and the tourism agencies through engagement with the relevant Departments and agencies on their policies and programmes.

The latest tourism figures published by the Central Statistics Office (CSO) show that despite a challenging global environment, Ireland’s visitor numbers overall have held up well, making a vital contribution to employment, export earnings and tax receipts in our economy. The 2009 business plans for the key tourism agencies, Tourism Ireland and Fáilte Ireland, are designed to support the marketing of Irish tourism, to improve our product offerings and to help improve business capability. These are being supported by the positive response of the tourism sector at enterprise level to the challenges we face.

While I know that our businesses and tourism agencies are responding constructively to current challenges, it is just as important that the strategic framework for tourism development responds to the changing environment. Accordingly, I have recently established the Tourism Renewal Group, which has been tasked with reviewing and, where appropriate, renewing the current tourism strategy, set out in the “New Horizons” report, in order to ensure that this strategy is focused for the short term and that the tourist industry is well placed to benefit from the upturn when it comes.

I have asked the Tourism Renewal Group to report back to me by the middle of 2009, following its considerations, with recommendations in the form of a Framework for Action for the period to 2013. I am confident that, in partnership with the sector, we can plan for current and future challenges and take appropriate action to meet them, thereby ensuring that Irish tourism continues on a path of sustainable growth over the medium term.

Question No. 125 answered with Question No. 117.

Ministerial Appointments.

126. **Deputy Jan O’Sullivan** asked the Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism if a new chief executive has been appointed to the Irish Institute of Sport; if there are plans to appoint a chief executive to this organisation; if a decision has been taken on the independent status of the organisation; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2262/09]

Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism (Deputy Martin Cullen): In 2006, the Government approved the establishment of the Irish Institute of Sport. The Institute has been working with the national governing bodies of sport and the elite athletes in ensuring that they have available to them the most up-to-date supports as they prepare to represent Ireland at international events and the Olympic Games. As Deputies will be aware, the Executive Chairperson, Mr

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Sean Kelly resigned recently. I would like to take this opportunity to place on the record my thanks for the work that he did to bring the Institute to its current position.

It was the intention to introduce legislation to enable the Irish Sports Council to establish subsidiaries and that the Institute would be given such legal status. However, in responding to the OECD Report on Public Sector Reform and in particular to its recommendations on the number of agencies involved in public administration, I have decided not to establish the Institute as a subsidiary of the ISC. This has not deflected the Institute from carrying on with its important work. I met with the Institute staff recently and was very impressed with the work that they are doing on behalf of our elite athletes.

I will be having discussions with the ISC on the best structure for the Institute as we plan for the Olympic Games in London in 2012 when the council's review of the Beijing Olympic Games is completed and I have completed my meetings with the relevant sporting bodies about how best to structure on high performance supports delivery mechanisms.

Sport and Recreational Development.

127. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism if he will confirm that phase two of the National Sports Campus in Abbotstown has been postponed as per comments by him (details supplied); the status of phase one plans; if these will be progressing in 2009; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2258/09]

Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism (Deputy Martin Cullen): The facilities approved by the Government for development of Phase I of the National Sports Campus at Abbotstown, include:

- A National Field Sports Training Centre catering for rugby, soccer, Gaelic games and hockey;
- A multi-sport National Indoor Training Centre to provide world class training facilities for over 20 sports;
- Sports science and medical facilities;
- Accommodation for sports men and women; and
- All-weather synthetic pitches for community recreational access.

A Project Management Team and a Design Team was appointed early in 2008 to prepare a detailed design for the facilities envisaged for Phase I. This work is almost finalised and the NSCDA will be ready to submit an application for planning permission.

However, the current difficult economic constraints has meant that no funding has been provided to date to advance the Phase I development during 2009. I am having discussions with the Minister for Finance to see what funding might be available to move forward with Phase I on a phased basis. I am also having discussions with the NSCDA in this regard.

With regard to further phases of the Campus I would like to see the development of facilities such as a Velodrome being developed. Current budgetary constraints do not allow for this at the present time. However, in its planning for the future the NSCDA is making provision for such facilities.

Departmental Bodies.

128. **Deputy Jack Wall** asked the Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism if he requested the chairmen of the bodies under the aegis of his Department to take a 10% pay cut similar to that which Government Ministers took in 2008; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2265/09]

Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism (Deputy Martin Cullen): In the Budget speech, the Minister for Finance informed the House that members of the Government and Ministers of State would surrender 10% of their current total pay and that officers at Secretary General level in Government Departments had volunteered to make a corresponding surrender in respect of their pay. The Minister for Finance also stated that other public servants in leadership and senior positions might wish to consider whether it is appropriate for them to make a similar move in current circumstances.

While the question of any fee/salary surrender by the chairmen and senior executives of bodies under the aegis of my Department is a matter for the individuals themselves to consider I welcome the policy of the Chairman and members of the Irish Sports Council to forfeit their fees and the decision of the Chairman and members of the Board of the National Library to offer a 10% cut in their fees.

Departmental Reports.

129. **Deputy Thomas P. Broughan** asked the Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism the precise status of the national sports facility strategy; the reason that this report has taken so long to publish; if any of the finished parts of the strategy will be published; when he expects the full report will be completed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2276/09]

Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism (Deputy Martin Cullen): My Department is currently finalising a five-year strategic plan to inform the future development of necessary sporting facilities throughout the country. An inter-agency steering group, chaired by my Department, was established to oversee the development of the strategy, involving both national and international experts in the area of sports facilities, were engaged to assist in the preparation of the 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. The strategy is also examining the wider economic, health and social case for continued investment in sports facilities. It aims to develop an agreed and integrated approach to planning, funding, provision and management of sports facilities and to prioritise areas for future investment to ensure continued impact in the relevant areas.

A wide range of stakeholders were consulted in order to generate a clear picture of the important issues to be considered in the provision of sports facilities including other Government Departments, local authorities, national governing bodies of sport, local sports partnerships, sports clubs and interested individuals.

A thorough international review was also carried out on existing reports, studies and strategies relating to facility provision. Research was carried out into areas such as the links between sports facility provision and participation, sports facility specifications and the motives for investing in sports facilities. On the domestic front, detailed research was carried out on the identification and awareness of various Government strategies and documents which impact

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on sports facility provision. The strategy is at an advanced stage and it is my intention to publish it once it has been completed and considered by the Government

Irish Horseracing Industry.

130. **Deputy Bernard Allen** asked the Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism the outcome of discussions held in relation to the future financing of the horse racing industry; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2315/09]

Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism (Deputy Martin Cullen): The Horse and Greyhound Racing Fund was established under the Horse and Greyhound Racing Act, 2001 for the purpose of giving support to both the horse and greyhound racing industries. €69.719 million has been allocated to the Fund for 2009. In accordance with the Horse and Greyhound Racing Act 2001, 80% and 20% of the moneys paid into the Fund each year are distributed between Horse Racing Ireland (HRI) and Bord na gCon respectively.

Since 2001, income from the Fund has been used by both bodies towards increasing prize money levels, meeting administration costs alongside a programme of capital investment, which has underpinned a growth in both sectors. Since the establishment of the Fund a major period of development of both industries has resulted. The funding has allowed Ireland to develop into a world centre of excellence for horseracing and greyhound racing.

To date the Fund has not only helped towards providing some top class racing venues and facilities, but it has also underpinned significant employment in the industries. Horse breeding is a significant net contributor to the Irish 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 Irish greyhound industry is also regarded as one of the most vibrant and successful in the world.

In 2004, the Government put in place regulations to increase the limit of the Horse and Greyhound Racing Fund from €254m to €550m to continue the Fund for a further four years to 2008. A review of the Horse and Greyhound Racing Fund is currently underway and is expected to be completed shortly. Any increase of the Fund limit will require the approval of the Government and the Oireachtas as the level of the Fund is increased by Regulations made by the Minister, with the consent of the Minister for Finance.

National Archives.

131. **Deputy Seán Sherlock** asked the Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism his views on the requirements for storage space in respect of the National Archives; the progress on the storage site previously referred to by him; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2252/09]

Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism (Deputy Martin Cullen): The question of storage space for the National Archives is being examined afresh in the context of the proposed amalgamation of the National Library, the National Archives and the Irish Manuscripts Commission the expected relocation of the Land Commission staff and records from the National Archives building, and the availability of the necessary financial resources.

Arts Plan.

132. **Deputy Willie Penrose** asked the Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism his views on the

proposed contemporary art event for Dublin in 2011; when he will be in a position to make a full announcement on this; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2260/09]

Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism (Deputy Martin Cullen): A proposal for a first Dublin Biennale type event — Dublin Contemporary 2011 — is currently being developed in conjunction with the Irish Museum of Modern Art and other relevant stakeholders, under my Department's aegis. It is envisaged that this event would comprise a 12 week presentation (mid- June 2011 until September 2011) of contemporary art at landmark sites in Dublin City by national and international artists.

This is a very worthwhile project, which would be the first of its scale in Ireland and would provide a highlight for cultural tourism to the country in 2011. As with all projects currently in hand, progress on the development of Dublin Contemporary 2011 will be commensurate with available resources.

Decentralisation Programme.

133. **Deputy Joanna Tuffy** asked the Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism when the decentralisation to Killarney will be completed; the number of employees who chose to transfer from Dublin to Killarney; his views on the fact that there may be an issue with the institutional memory in the Department, particularly at a time when funding is contracting; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2268/09]

135. **Deputy Joan Burton** asked the Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism if accommodation has been purchased to facilitate the decentralisation of bodies under the aegis of his Department; when he expects to begin again the decentralisation process; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2269/09]

Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism (Deputy Martin Cullen): I propose to take Questions Nos. 133 and 135 together.

The Department of Arts, Sport and Tourism was designated for relocation to Killarney, Co. Kerry, under the Government's Decentralisation Programme, which was announced in the 2004 Budget. The Department, with a staff of 130, excluding the National Archives, was designated an "early mover" by the Decentralisation Implementation Group (DIG).

As only 10 of the existing staff of the Department opted to transfer to Killarney, it was clear that the impact of the implementation of decentralisation could be significant if not managed properly, particularly in relation to the potential loss of institutional memory. Accordingly the Department set itself a key corporate goal in its 2005-2007 Statement of Strategy to manage the organisational challenge while continuing to deliver a quality customer service during the implementation of the Decentralisation Programme. In order to meet the needs of new staff transferring into the Department a comprehensive training plan was put in place, which was regularly reviewed and revised. Procedures Manuals were also prepared in the financial area and in the case of the Department's major capital programmes.

To specifically address the potential loss of institutional memory, the transfer of staff into the Department was planned carefully and carried out on a phased basis over a number of years with appropriate training given to new staff as required. The Department has continued to operate successfully and at full capacity throughout the process. To date, 79 members of staff (including two service officers who were recruited locally) have relocated to new purpose built offices in Killarney. Of that number, 37 staff members relocated from Dublin.

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The Department is currently in the process of arranging for the transfer of the remaining officials from the Department in Dublin who have opted to transfer to Killarney while simultaneously assessing how best to provide an efficient and effective service to its stakeholders, including meeting the needs of the Minister, the Minister of State and the Houses of the Oireachtas in the context of implementing Government decisions on decentralisation. No accommodation has been purchased to facilitate the decentralisation of the three State Agencies under the aegis of the Department — the Arts Council, the Irish Sports Council and Fáilte Ireland. The decentralisation of these Agencies has been deferred pending a review in 2011.

Question No. 134 answered with Question No. 124.

Question No. 135 answered with Question No. 133.

Question No. 136 answered with Question No. 99.

Departmental Expenditure.

137. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Taoiseach the annual cost of printing reports by his Department and agencies under the control of his Department; the corresponding figure for annual reports; the cost of posting these reports; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2546/09]

The Taoiseach: The cost of printing reports by my Department in 2008 was €128,747. There were no costs incurred for printing of annual reports during 2008. The approximate cost of posting reports by my Department was €14,130 in 2008. The table outlines the cost of printing and posting reports by offices and bodies under the aegis of my Department in 2008.

Office/Body under the aegis of this Department	Overall cost of printing reports in 2008	Cost of printing Annual Reports in 2008	Approximate cost of posting reports in 2008
	€	€	€
NESDO	51,917	3,951	8,056
Ireland Newfoundland Partnership	2,022	2,022	323
National Forum on Europe	135,770	NIL	29,516
Law Reform Commission	85,840	9,704	5,886
Central Statistics Office	9,850	NIL	840

Ministerial Staff.

138. **Deputy Enda Kenny** asked the Taoiseach the cost, in tabular format, including salary and pension payments, of each of the programme managers, special advisers, assistants or other staff appointed by him in 2007 post-election and 2008; the names, titles and duties of each of the staff appointed during these periods; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2618/09]

The Taoiseach: The information requested by the Deputy relating to staff appointed by me since my appointment as Taoiseach on 7 May 2008, are detailed in the schedule:

Name	Title	Annual Salary
		€
**Joe Lennon	Programme Manager/Special Adviser	**221,929
Gerry Steadman	Special Adviser	131,748
Brian Murphy	Special Adviser	131,748
Declan Ryan	Special Adviser	94,785
Peter Clinch	Special Adviser	204,952
Oliver O Connor	Special Adviser (to the Minister for Health & Children)	177,547
Padraig Slyne	Special Adviser (to the Government Chief Whip)	96,555
Sineád Dooley	Personal Assistant	53,354
Peter Lenehan	Personal Assistant	49,685
Annette McManus	Personal Assistant	61,082
Denise Kavanagh	Personal Assistant	46,558
John Sheridan	Personal Assistant	55,030
Yvonne Graham	Personal Assistant	55,030
Sarah McLoughlin	Personal Assistant	47,973
Aoife Ní Lochlainn	Personal Assistant	66,179
***Margaret Fogarty	Secretarial Assistant to Government Chief Whip and Minister of State [Finglas Office]	20,239
***Linda Weir	Secretarial Assistant to Government Chief Whip and Minister of State [Finglas Office]	21,398
Elaine Hogan	Personal Secretary [Tullamore Office]	40,479
Colette Waters	Personal Secretary [Tullamore Office]	39,351
Eoghan O Neachtain	Government Press Secretary	150,712
Mark Costigan	Deputy Government Press Secretary	111,818
John Downing	Deputy Government Press Secretary	118,759

*These members of staff, are not members of a civil service pension scheme, they receive a contribution towards their pension fund of 11% of their salary, which they arrange separately. All other staff are members of the Civil Service pension schemes, for whom separate superannuation arrangements are in place for which the Department of Finance has responsibility.

**Mr. Joe Lennon, Programme Manager/Special Adviser has made a gift of €22,193 being part of his emoluments from his employment in 2009 for use for any purpose for or towards the cost of which public moneys are provided, and the Minister for Finance has accepted the gift. The salary mentioned above is the total salary prior to the making of the gift.

***On 50% worksharing basis.

Work Permits.

139. **Deputy Ciarán Lynch** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment if her attention has been drawn to the fact that due to the fact that the spouse of a work permit holder is himself or herself required to apply for a work permit the additional bureaucracy acts as an impediment to employment; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [2492/09]

Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Billy Kelleher): The Employment Permits Act 2006 sets down in legislation the rules governing the employment of non-EEA nationals in the State. Enshrined in this legislation are our obligations under Community Preference whereby Member States of the EU are obliged to fill skill and labour shortages from within the European Economic Area (EEA) before hiring a national from outside the EEA. The current policy in this area is to only facilitate skills gaps and to

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that end this Department works closely with FÁS/EURES in ensuring that Community Preference is fulfilled in the first instance.

Where a decision is made to issue a new permit, the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform facilitates family reunification, where they are satisfied that it is appropriate, by permitting spouses and dependants to enter the State. Up to 2004 spouses/dependants were not permitted access to employment and the current scheme was introduced in 2007 as a concession and in light of continuing labour shortages in the domestic market.

The Scheme was designed to give greater ease of access to employment for spouses who have been admitted to the State under Family Reunification by:

- Not requiring the employer in question to advertise the job with FÁS in advance of making a work permit application,
- Accepting applications for jobs in categories that would otherwise be ineligible for work permits, and
- Exempting the application from the work permit fee.

Regulation of this employment under the Employment Permits Act 2006 is essential for several reasons including tracking of the types of vacancies being filled and to ensure the protection of these workers.

The Employment Permits Act 2006 provides for regular review of Ireland's economic migration policy in order to respond to the changing needs of the economy and the existing employment permit arrangements are being kept under active review to ensure that they continue to reflect current labour market needs.

FÁS Training Programmes.

140. **Deputy Ruairí Quinn** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment her views on whether the courses being offered on the FÁS e-college website fail to meet the latest and most recent standards in information technology and that they would not be widely accepted as sufficient qualifications within the IT industry; if she is planning to overhaul this on-line training system with more modern curricula; if her attention has been drawn to the need for the latest training to be put in place if the economy is to recover; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [2501/09]

Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Mary Coughlan): The FÁS e-college website lists 28 courses covering a range of topics related to information technology (IT) and office skills, from Introduction to ECDL to Managing a Server Environment. Learners are assisted to access appropriate and industry recognised certification in test centres close to their location.

FÁS recently consolidated its course offering on its e-Learning platform to facilitate management and quality of the courses and to fit them to the changing needs of its clients. To meet this changing need the current course offerings will be delivered using different methodologies including full time in-centre courses, evening training classes, self directed on-line learning and blended learning, which combines on-line learning with workshops and tutor supported interaction.

The courseware is updated to meet current and future needs of clients who access the service. The courses themselves are updated in line with changes to certification and client demands. FÁS strives to find a balance between the most up to date courses in terms of vendor offerings

and the demand from users of existing IT platforms. All of the other courses offered on the e-college website are up to date with content appropriate to the associated certification available.

FÁS considers that e-learning is a viable and important training delivery methodology and the organisation is currently in the process of extending its use by making an initial 42 on-line courses available in a blended learning format. This will allow FÁS to deliver 25,000 additional training opportunities to clients who need fast, flexible interventions meeting the current needs of the labour market. FÁS plans to expand the current portfolio in response to demand from its training centre network and from client feedback and needs.

In response to the changing needs of the labour market, FÁS is offering an expanded range of on-line training courses with enhanced learner supports. This initiative builds on the existing e-Learning platform and will provide appropriate training for persons with high levels of employability who have been recently made redundant to upskill and refocus for re-entry into the labour market. It will target those individuals who are motivated to self-manage their learning.

Departmental Expenditure.

141. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the annual cost of printing reports by her Department and agencies under the control of her Department; the corresponding figure for annual reports; the cost of posting these reports; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [2539/09]

Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Mary Coughlan): I presume the Deputy is requesting information in relation to the year 2008. The printing costs associated with the reports of my Department and the Offices of my Department for 2008 was €13,711. There was no specific postage cost associated with those reports. The printing costs associated with the annual reports of my Department and the Offices of my Department for 2008 was €39,057.89 and the cost of posting those reports was €1,611. I am not in a position to provide the information sought by the Deputy in relation to the State Agencies under the control of my Department as such information falls within the day-to-day administration of the State Agencies concerned.

Ministerial Staff.

142. **Deputy Enda Kenny** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the cost, in tabular format, including salary and pension payments, of each of the programme managers, special advisers, assistants or other staff appointed by her in 2007 post-election and 2008; the names, titles and duties of each of the staff appointed during these periods; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [2611/09]

Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Mary Coughlan): The table below outlines the title, duties and salary pay scales for each staff member appointed by me since I took up office as Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment on 7 May 2008.

All staff listed below are members of the Non-contributory Pension Scheme for Non-established State Employees.

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Title	Duties	Salary (Per annum)
		€
Special Adviser	Providing advice to me as Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment; monitoring, facilitating and securing the achievement of Government objectives that relate to my Department; and performing such other functions as I may direct from time to time.	86,168 – 106,582
Press Adviser	Providing press and communications advice in relation to my role in Government as Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment and performing such other functions as I may direct from time to time.	66,179 – 82,520
Special Adviser	Providing advice to me as Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment; monitoring, facilitating and securing the achievement of Government objectives that relate to my Department; and performing such other functions as I may direct from time to time.	86,168 – 106,582
Personal Assistant	Performing general secretarial duties including the handling of enquiries made to my Constituency Office.	46,558 – 59,097
Personal Secretary	Performing general secretarial duties including the handling of enquiries made to my Constituency Office.	23,101 – 44,572
Temporary Clerical Officer	Performing general secretarial duties including the handling of enquiries made to my Constituency Office.	24,397 – 39,558

Job Creation.

143. **Deputy Billy Timmins** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the number of State aided jobs which have been created in County Wicklow since 1998; the breakdown of same by job description and location; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [2664/09]

Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Mary Coughlan): Between 1998 and 2008, a total of 8,396 jobs were created by IDA Ireland and Enterprise Ireland assisted companies in County Wicklow. There were 5,497 manufacturing jobs. International Services accounted for 2,493 and the remaining 406 were in various other areas including agriculture and forestry for example. Employment data in respect of companies supported by these agencies are collated by Forfás on a County by County basis. Between 1998 and 2007, over 400 jobs were created by Wicklow County Enterprise Board. Figures for 2008 are not yet available in relation to the CEB. I am confident that the efforts of the two agencies and the CEB will continue to attract industrial development and jobs to the County.

144. **Deputy David Stanton** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment if her Department has carried out research into possible job creation in support of industries that will reuse and recycle waste materials; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [2694/09]

Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Mary Coughlan): At present, Enterprise Ireland supports waste recycling and waste management companies particularly through its Growth Fund, Investment Fund or Research and Development Fund.

Current initiatives include the establishment by EI of a dedicated CleanTech Department to support an expanding portfolio of companies covering the Waste, Water, Energy and Services sub-sectors. This team is being resourced to address the needs and challenges arising. In addition, the agency's GreenTech Support package helps client companies take advantage of the opportunities presented by integrating environmental sustainability into their businesses.

In addition, a recent study undertaken by Forfás and Inter-Trade Ireland identified opportunities across a range of areas in the environment goods and services, including the waste sector. There are openings for those enterprises that can provide equipment, consultancy services and, in particular, develop innovative technologies in the areas of waste collection and disposal. Such technologies and services will make for more efficient and cost effective operations.

Prospects are good for companies that can meet the strong market demand for recovered materials such as plastics and metals. This is especially so where the activity can be carried out on a larger scale, producing a higher quality final material for recycling. In the area of transforming waste into energy, opportunities exist for companies providing innovative systems that utilize new and existing technologies to produce energy as well as a range of application fuels (e.g. gas, biomass fuel) and secondary products (e.g. compost) from waste materials. Renewable energy companies are becoming increasingly involved in the waste industry indicating the future growth potential for this sector. I am confident we can look forward to significant job creation in the areas identified.

Ministerial Salaries.

145. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Finance the payroll and the financial package, including basic salary and pension entitlements of outgoing Taoisigh, Ministers and Ministers for State. [2505/09]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Brian Lenihan): The table sets out the basic salary entitlements (i.e. Office Holders allowance plus Oireachtas Members salary) for the Taoiseach, Tánaiste, Minister and Minister of State on 1 September 2008:

Office Holder Post	1.09.08
	€
Taoiseach	185,392
TD	100,191
Total	285,583
Tánaiste	145,134
TD	100,191
Total	245,325
Minister	125,005
TD	100,191
Total	225,196
Minister of State	54,549
TD	100,191
Total	154,740

Pension Entitlements:

Two years of service are required to qualify for an Office Holder's pension. A person who held the office of Taoiseach qualifies for Taoiseach's pension following a minimum period of

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two years service as Taoiseach or Minister. The pension is 20% of the Office Holder's allowance for the first two years of service plus 5% of the allowance for each further year of service up to a maximum of 60%. Pension is not payable before age 50, or age 65 in the case of "new entrants" as defined in the Public Service Superannuation (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2004, except in the case of the Taoiseach. The pension is reduced to one-half if the person continues as a member of either House of the Oireachtas or as an MEP.

On leaving office severance may be payable for up to two years; the rates payable are: 75% of Office Holder's salary for the first six months; 50% of Office Holder's salary for the next twelve months; and 25% of Office Holder's salary for the final six months. A person may, if entitled to, switch to pension at any point but severance and pension are not payable at the same time.

Separate pension entitlements are payable in respect of TD service. Two years of service is also required to qualify for a TD's pension entitlements. These are a pension of 1/40th plus lump sum of 3/40ths of TD salary for each year of service up to a maximum of 20 years. The pension entitlements are not payable before age 50 (or from age 45 on an actuarially reduced basis), or age 65 in the case of "new entrants".

Severance may also be payable to a TD. This consists of a lump sum of 1/6th of annual salary if the person has a minimum of six months service. In addition if a person has a minimum of three years continuous service as a TD then a monthly payment may be made in respect of each year of service over two years up to a maximum of twelve monthly payments. The amount of monthly payment is 75% of 1/12th of the annual salary for the first six payments and 50% of 1/12th of the annual salary for the next six payments. A person may, if entitled to, switch to pension at any point but severance and pension are not payable at the same time.

Tax Code.

146. **Deputy Billy Timmins** asked the Minister for Finance if an income levy is applicable to the pension of a person (details supplied) in County Tipperary. [2675/09]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Brian Lenihan): I am informed by the Revenue Commissioners that the person in question has an annual pension in excess of the age exemption threshold of €20,000 and is accordingly liable to pay the income levy. A person entitled to a full medical card is, however, specifically exempt from the income levy. If the person in question holds a full medical card then evidence of this should be furnished to the pension provider who will not make any income levy deductions.

Garda Stations.

147. **Deputy Michael Creed** asked the Minister for Finance the status of the proposed development of a new Garda station (details supplied) in County Cork. [2498/09]

Minister of State at the Department of Finance (Deputy Martin Mansergh): Ballincollig Garda Station is on the priority list of the Garda Building Programme for 2009. Under the Capital Works Management Framework, all public sector construction projects are required to be carried out under the new form of contract. It is necessary, therefore, to re-tender construction projects, such as Ballincollig Garda Station, which has been tendered under the previous GDLA form of contract and where no contractual commitment had been entered into, utilising the new form of construction contract.

Accordingly, the tender documents for Ballincollig Garda Station are being re-calibrated to the new form at present. The award of a contract will be subject to the availability of funding and the priority afforded to the project by An Garda Síochána and the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform.

National Wage Agreements.

148. **Deputy Leo Varadkar** asked the Minister for Finance the legal basis which exists for reducing basic rates of public sector pay in the absence of an agreement; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2528/09]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Brian Lenihan): There are a number of statutes governing the terms and conditions of staff in the different areas of the public service. As the Deputy is aware, sensitive discussions are taking place at present with the social partners. Among the issues being considered is the need to reduce public expenditure. The Deputy can be assured that any action taken by the Government will have regard to the position under legislation. I would not consider it helpful to comment further on the subject matter of the Deputy's question at the present time.

149. **Deputy Leo Varadkar** asked the Minister for Finance if he is legally bound by the recently agreed national wage agreement; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2529/09]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Brian Lenihan): The provisions of the agreement are not provided for in legislation. As the Deputy is aware, sensitive discussions are taking place at present with the social partners. Among the issues being considered is the pay provision of the national agreement. I would not consider it helpful to this process to comment further on the subject matter of the Deputy's question at the present time.

Financial Institutions Support Scheme.

150. **Deputy Leo Varadkar** asked the Minister for Finance his plans for the future of a bank (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2530/09]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Brian Lenihan): The Deputy will be aware that the institution in question is covered under the Government's guarantee Scheme. Arising from the intensified scrutiny and oversight applying to beneficiaries under the Scheme, the Financial Regulator commissioned PricewaterhouseCoopers to report on the financial position of the six covered institutions. This report established that the institution in question was well-capitalised and capital levels would remain above regulatory minimums under various loan impairment stress-scenarios. The institution concerned is not in public ownership and its plans for the future are in the first instance, a matter for its Board and members.

Departmental Expenditure.

151. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Finance the annual cost of printing reports by his Department and agencies under the control of his Department; the corresponding figure for annual reports; the cost of posting these reports; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2541/09]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Brian Lenihan): In general my Department prints its reports in-house and in most cases these reports are also published on the Department's website. In

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some cases however, it may be decided to outsource the printing due to the volume of printing required to produce the report. In 2008 the European Regional Development Fund Financial Control Unit annual report was printed externally at a cost of €8,450 and the postage costs associated with the distribution of this report amounted to €945.70.

From time to time copies of reports printed-in-house are distributed through the postal system. No separate record is kept of the postal charges in these instances. In regards to the bodies under the remit of my Department, the table gives the details requested by the Deputy in relation to reports printed in 2008.

Body	Annual cost of Printing Reports	Cost of printing annual reports	Postage costs
	€	€	€
Special EU Programmes Body	*35,976	*9,115	Not Available
Commission for Public Service Appointments	8,591	8,591	Not Available
Valuation Office	Reports produced-in-house	Nil	Not Available
Public Appointments Service	12,283	7,460	Not Available
State Laboratory	Nil	Nil	Not Available
Office of the Ombudsman	37,000	22,000	7,500
The Office of the Revenue Commissioners	46,448	46,448	800
National Treasury Management Agency	76,526	65,554	**See footnote

*The Special EU Programmes Body has advised that this is the total cost (Northern Ireland and Ireland). The Department of Finance only pay, at a maximum, 50% of this figure. The majority of these costs come from the technical assistance programmes rather than core administration costs. These reports are normally not posted out. However, if a request for a report is received and it is necessary to post it, there is an average cost of £1.44 (UK)/€4.32 (RoI) per report.

**Costs supplied by National Treasury Management Agency include costs associated with the production of all aspects of the reports including design, printing, translation and postage costs.

I have been informed by the Office of Public Works that they are currently collating the information required by the Deputy and will forward it to the Deputy as soon as it is available.

Ministerial Staff.

152. **Deputy Enda Kenny** asked the Minister for Finance the cost, in tabular format, including salary and pension payments, of each of the programme managers, special advisers, assistants or other staff appointed by him in 2007 post election and 2008; the names, titles and duties of each of the staff appointed during these periods; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2613/09]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Brian Lenihan): I appointed Ms. Cathy Herbert in May 2008 as Special Adviser. She provides advice to me and monitors, facilitates and secures the achievement of Government objectives that relate to my Department, and performs such other functions as may be directed by me. I appointed Ms. Maura Cosgrove and Ms. Marian Quinlan in May 2008 as Personal Assistant and Personal Secretary respectively. They provide me with administrative/secretarial support. I am also assisted in this regard by two permanent civil servants who are on loan from other Government Departments.

The salary scales in each case are set out in the table.

Title	Number	Annual Salary Range
Special Adviser	1	€93,730 – €114,366
Personal Assistant	1	€46,558 – €55,030
Personal Secretary	1	€23,181 – €44,726
Executive Officer (on Higher Executive Officer duties)	1	€46,558 – €59,097 (plus allowance retained from former duties)
Clerical Officer	1	€23,174 – €40,417

The special Adviser is in receipt of a contribution of 11% of salary in lieu of membership of civil service superannuation schemes. The remaining staff are covered by civil service pension arrangements.

Tax Collection.

153. **Deputy Seán Connick** asked the Minister for Finance the number of imported used cars that were registered for VRT in this State from July to December 2007, January to June 2008 and July to December 2008. [2661/09]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Brian Lenihan): I am informed by the Revenue Commissioners that the number of imported used cars registered for VRT in the State for the specified periods is set out in the table.

Used Cars registered in the State for VRT – July 2007 to December 2008

Period	Gross Registrations	Exempt ⁽¹⁾	Net Registrations
July – December 2007	27,607	3,216	24,391
January – June 2008	33,887	2,942	30,945
July – December 2008	27,764	2,890	24,874

⁽¹⁾Cars registered that are not liable for VRT; primarily cars registered by owners transferring residence into the state.

Financial Institutions Support Scheme.

154. **Deputy Billy Timmins** asked the Minister for Finance if he will recapitalise banks (details supplied); the extent to which he will do so; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2665/09]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Brian Lenihan): On 21 December 2008, the Government announced a recapitalisation programme for Allied Irish Bank and Bank of Ireland. This decision reflects the Government's commitment to sustain the continued stability of these banks, to increase confidence and to ensure the capacity of the banks to lend into the economy to meet the everyday financial needs of individuals and businesses. Detailed discussions are ongoing.

Banking Sector Regulation.

155. **Deputy Billy Timmins** asked the Minister for Finance the changes the Financial Regulator put in place in his office following the collapse of a bank (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2666/09]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Brian Lenihan): The issues that arose with Northern Rock in September 2007 were part of the wider global liquidity crisis. Given market developments at that time, I have been informed that the Financial Regulator required Irish licensed credit institutions to commence weekly liquidity reporting in October 2007. This was supplemented by increased direct contact with credit institutions, in some cases daily, and included high-level meetings between the Financial Regulator, the Central Bank and Irish credit institutions.

Following the collapse of Northern Rock, the Financial Regulator maintained close and ongoing contact with the UK and Irish authorities regarding Irish depositors of Northern Rock. While Northern Rock operated in Ireland on a branch basis, it is subject to prudential supervision by the UK Financial Services Authority. However the Financial Regulator worked to ensure that all relevant information was made available to customers to contact and transact with Northern Rock through its websites and consumer helpline. The Financial Regulator experienced a significant increase in the number of queries to the Financial Regulator's consumer information helpline and in visits to the personal finance website in September 2007 as a result of communication difficulties experienced by Northern Rock at that time. The Financial Regulator also put a contingency plan in place to deal with any future unexpected increases to the consumer helpline and website.

Departmental Staff.

156. **Deputy Billy Timmins** asked the Minister for Finance the number of economists employed in his Department at present and their roles; the number of economists employed in his Department each year since 1997 and their roles; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2667/09]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Brian Lenihan): As I indicated in a reply to Deputy Joan Burton on 17th December 2008 (No. 199), there are currently 614 people (wholetime equivalents) employed in my Department. More than 80 individual officers have qualifications in economics at various levels. 57 officers hold degrees in Economics and related disciplines, 44 hold a Masters qualification in Economics and related disciplines, and 2 officers hold a PhD. Some officers will, of course, be included in more than 1 of these categories.

In the time allowed, it would not be possible to ascertain what the equivalent numbers would have been in each of the years since 1997. However, my Department has a longstanding policy of recruiting economists. Individuals with skills and qualifications in economics are employed at almost all levels of the Department. Indeed, I would point out that, of the last 7 appointments at Assistant Secretary level in the Department, 5 had Masters qualifications in economics or related disciplines, while 2 had primary degrees in economics or related disciplines.

Flood Relief.

157. **Deputy Seán Sherlock** asked the Minister for Finance if the new contract for the Fermoy flood relief plan will include proposals for work on the weir at Fermoy, County Cork; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2759/09]

Minister of State at the Department of Finance (Deputy Martin Mansergh): Documents relating to the construction of the Munster Blackwater (Fermoy North) Drainage Scheme have been issued to the pre-qualified contractors by the Office of Public Works. At the request of the Department of Communications, Energy and Natural Resources, the tender documents have included works to Fermoy Weir. Before a successful contractor is appointed, OPW will, in consultation with the Department, make a decision on whether these works will be included in the contract or not. This will depend on agreement being reached between the Department

of Communications, Energy and Natural Resources and Fermoy Town Council on the proposals for the Weir.

Financial Institutions Support Scheme.

158. **Deputy Enda Kenny** asked the Minister for Finance the meetings he held with financial institutions or other relevant personnel prior to the decision to issue a guarantee scheme to banks; the dates of such meetings; the institutions or personnel whom he met; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2766/09]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Brian Lenihan): The decision to introduce the Guarantee provided by the Credit Institutions (Financial Support) Act 2008 was taken after a prolonged and unfolding period of turmoil in financial markets characterised by deteriorating availability and cost of liquidity, which accelerated rapidly in the late summer and early autumn 2008. Throughout this period, and particularly in the weeks and months preceding the decision to introduce the Guarantee, the Financial Regulator had engaged in intensive liaison and monitoring with Irish credit institutions.

I consulted throughout this period with the Financial Regulator and the Governor of the Central Bank and had available to me the advice of my officials, the National Treasury Management Agency and independent legal and financial expertise. These discussions and consultations were ongoing and intensified in the period following the virtual freezing of credit markets in September. As has been widely reported in the media, I also met with the Chief Executives of the two largest domestic banks on the night of Monday September, 29th. As the Deputy would expect during a period of difficult conditions I and my officials engaged in discussions with a wide range of institutions in the period before and after the guarantee.

I dealt with this matter at some length in my Second Stage speeches to Dáil and Seanad on the Credit Institutions (Financial Support) Bill, setting out the background to and the Government's decision to act to underpin the financial standing of Irish credit institutions.

159. **Deputy Enda Kenny** asked the Minister for Finance the meetings he held with financial institutions or other relevant personnel prior to the decision to introduce a recapitalisation programme for banks and financial institutions; the dates of such meetings; the institutions or personnel whom he met; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2768/09]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Brian Lenihan): The implementation of the Bank Guarantee Scheme, announced in September 2008, has given rise to detailed engagement with the banks. In the period since September I have, along with my Department, the Central Bank, the Financial Regulator and the NTMA, worked with the covered financial institutions to examine all options to maintain stability and the proper functioning of the banking system. This process has been comprehensive and structured, addressing such issues as the business plans of the banks, potential private investment, financial market expectations, and the role of the banks in supporting the real economy.

The Government's specific recapitalisation proposals were proposed following consultation with the Central Bank, the NTMA, the Financial Regulator and our legal and financial advisors and took account of consultations with the CEOs and Chairpersons of the covered institutions.

160. **Deputy Enda Kenny** asked the Minister for Finance the meetings he held with financial institutions or other relevant personnel prior to the decision to nationalise Anglo Irish Bank; the dates of such meetings; the institutions or personnel with whom he met; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2770/09]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Brian Lenihan): The implementation of the Bank Guarantee Scheme, announced in September 2008, has given rise to detailed engagement with the banks. In the period since September I have, along with my Department, the Central Bank, the Financial Regulator and the NTMA, worked with the covered financial institutions to examine all options to maintain stability and the proper functioning of the banking system. This process has been comprehensive and structured, addressing such issues as the business plans of the banks, potential private investment, financial market expectations, and the role of the banks in supporting the real economy.

The Government's decision to take Anglo into public ownership was consistent with advice given by the Central Bank, the NTMA, the Financial Regulator and our legal and financial advisors and took account of consultations with the Board of Anglo Irish Bank.

National Pensions Reserve Fund.

161. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Finance the value of the National Pensions Reserve Fund at the end of each year since its inception; the value of the Exchequer contribution in each of these years; the projected contribution in respect of 2009; the overall cost of maintaining and investing in the fund in each of these years; the amount paid out in fees, charges and other costs to fund managers, fund administrators and others in each of these years; if the cost *vis-à-vis* the return on the fund has been subject to a recent value for money audit; if there are plans to conduct one in view of the losses incurred in 2008; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2771/09]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Brian Lenihan): The National Pensions Reserve Fund (NPRF) was established in 2001 to meet as much as possible of the costs of social welfare and public service pensions from 2025 when these costs are projected to increase dramatically due to the ageing of the population.

Under the National Pensions Reserve Fund Act 2000, the National Pensions Reserve Fund Commission controls and manages the National Pensions Reserve Fund. The Commission has discretionary authority to determine the Fund's investment strategy in accordance with the Fund's statutory investment policy of securing the optimal total financial return provided the level of risk to the moneys held or invested is acceptable to the Commission. The National Treasury Management Agency acts as Manager of the Fund and the Commission performs its functions through the Manager.

The value of the Fund at the end of each year from 2001 to 2007, as published in the NPRF Commission's Annual Report and Accounts, was as follows:

Year	€ million
2001	7,715
2002	7,426
2003	9,561
2004	11,689
2005	15,419
2006	18,900
2007	21,153

A preliminary 2008 end-year valuation for the Fund of €16,355 million was published in the National Treasury Management Agency's Statement of Preliminary Results for 2008. This valuation was, in the case of direct quoted investments, based on valuations at close of business

on 30 December and, in the case of indirect investment vehicles, based on the most recently available valuations. The Fund's investment return from 1 January to 30 December 2008 was -29.5 per cent, reducing its annualised performance since inception in 2001 to 0.6 per cent (compared to 6.0 per cent at end-2007).

The Statement notes that the Fund's performance reflects the exceptionally difficult global market conditions in 2008 as the worsening credit crisis took its toll on economic growth. Following the dramatic deterioration in conditions since early September — in particular following the collapse of Lehman Brothers — the credit crunch escalated into the most serious financial and economic crisis since 1929, with major international stock market indices down in the region of 40 per cent for the year and the domestic ISEQ index recording a decline of some 66 per cent. All long-term investment funds have been severely affected by these extreme market conditions. In the first eleven months of 2008, the value of the NPRF declined by 28%, compared to the average Irish managed pension fund which declined by 32.6%. Overall, from inception (April 2001) until 30 November 2008, the annualised return on the NPRF was 0.9%, while, in the same period, the average Irish managed pension fund gave a return of -1.5%.

The Statement adds that the investment strategy of the NPRF Commission is primarily focused on building up a diversified portfolio of equities and other real assets on the basis that — as has historically proved the case — real assets will outperform financial assets such as bonds over the Fund's long investment timeframe. While this strategy means that the Fund will suffer volatility over certain short-term periods — and in severe bear markets it will experience negative returns — ultimately the Fund's performance will be determined by the long-term growth of the global economy over a 25 to 30 year period, rather than by sharp market movements in response to extreme events.

The National Pensions Reserve Fund Act 2000 provides for the payment each year to the Fund from the Exchequer of a sum equal to 1% of GNP. €6,515 million was paid into the Fund from the Temporary Holding Fund for Superannuation Liabilities in 2001. This included 1% of GNP contributions in respect of 1999 and 2000, the proceeds of the sale of Telecom Éireann (€4,528 million) and the interest earned on those sums. The amounts paid over in respect of 2001 and subsequent years under the statutory requirement to pay over an amount equal to 1% of GNP were as follows:

Year	€ million
2001	972
2002	1,035
2003	1,103
2004	1,177
2005	1,320
2006	1,446
2007	1,616
2008	1,690

For 2009, 1% of GNP for NPRF purposes, as published with the Budget Statement, would be €1,584 million.

The fees and expenses incurred by the Commission in managing the Fund, and which are charged to the Fund, are set out in its Annual Report. These are principally comprised of investment manager fees but also include custodian fees, fees and expenses of commissioners, IT systems, legal and tax advisory fees and consultancy fees. The fees for the years 2001 to 2007 were as follows:

[Deputy Brian Lenihan.]

Year	€ million
2001	1.0
2002	8.9
2003	14.1
2004	18.3
2005	23.8
2006	28.9
2007	23.8

The level of fees and expenses each year is mainly driven by the size of Fund assets under management. As a large institutional investor, the NPRF Commission is able to negotiate very competitive fees with its fund managers. The fees and expenses set out above do not include the costs incurred by the NTMA in its role as Manager of the Fund, which are borne by the Exchequer. The costs for the years 2001 to 2007 were as follows:

Year	€ million
2001	1.9
2002	2.5
2003	3.2
2004	3.4
2005	4.4
2006	5.7
2007	6.7

The Commission participates each year in a survey run by a Canadian firm, Cost Effectiveness Management, which measures the total operating costs of pension funds relative to their peers. The most recent survey, which was in respect of 2007 costs, found that the costs of the NPRF are in line with the average costs of peer international pension funds.

Hospital Services.

162. **Deputy Edward O’Keeffe** asked the Minister for Health and Children the position regarding a hospital (details supplied) in County Cork; and if the proposals for this hospital can be justified in view of previous expenditure. [2819/09]

189. **Deputy Seán Sherlock** asked the Minister for Health and Children the action she will take regarding a hospital (details supplied) in north Cork which is due to close in February 2009 and at which thousands of euro were spent recently on installing a new kitchen facility; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [2691/09]

Minister of State at the Department of Health and Children (Deputy John Moloney): I propose to take Questions Nos. 162 and 189 together.

As this is a service matter the question has been referred to the HSE for direct reply.

Medical Cards.

163. **Deputy Deirdre Clune** asked the Minister for Health and Children if a person who is

over 70 years and widowed in late 2008 will qualify for a medical card for three years if their income is less than €1,400; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [2494/09]

Minister for Health and Children (Deputy Mary Harney): Under the Health Act 2008, automatic entitlement to a medical card for persons aged 70 or over ceased on 31st December 2008 and, with effect from 1st January 2009, the income thresholds for entitlement to a medical card for those aged 70 and over is €700 (gross) per week (€36,500 per year) for a single person and €1,400 (gross) per week (€73,000 per year) for a couple. The Act also allows for a surviving spouse of a person covered by the over 70 medical card to retain the medical card for a period of 3 years provided that:

- the death occurred on or after 1st January 2009;
- the surviving spouse/partner was aged 70 or over at the time of death;
- he/she remains within the weekly income limits of €1,400.

At the expiry of the 3 year period, he/she will be assessed under the single income limit of €700.

Persons aged 70 or over who were widowed prior to the 1st January 2009 are assessed under the single person income threshold of €700 (gross) per week.

Departmental Expenditure.

164. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Health and Children the increase in funding allocated to the national health service in each of the years since 2000; the breakdown of the allocation of funding for each of these years; the primary person or department responsible for the allocation of funding in the health service; and the services and targets set down and achieved in each year. [2506/09]

Minister for Health and Children (Deputy Mary Harney): Increases in funding for health services, and excluding Vote 41 Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, since 2000 are set out in the table.

Year	Increase
	€000s
2000	852,315
2001	1,344,401
2002	1,184,826
2003	952,120
2004	925,632
2005	1,646,050
2006	889,138
2007	1,323,775
2008	1,152,563

The figures are derived from the Revised Estimates Volume. However they exclude funding provided in respect of certain costs such as Hepatitis C Compensation Payments, Health Repayment Scheme, the Lourdes Redress Scheme and Dormant Account Funding, which are not related to the provision of services. The figure for 2005 includes additional funding arising from the inclusion in the Health Service Executive (HSE) Vote of monies which prior to its

[Deputy Mary Harney.]

establishment were received and accounted for independently by the Health Boards outside the published Estimates.

Funding for service developments was provided for all the programmes in Health which include Care of Older People, Children and Families, Care for People with Disabilities, Mental Health, Primary Care, Acute Hospitals and Cancer Control Programme. The additional funding was mainly required to meet a range of issues including pay increases and related matters, cost pressures in Demand-Led Schemes, pressures arising from demographic and technological changes as well as general inflation and developments in service.

Funding for my Department and the agencies it directly funds is provided by the Government in Vote 39, subject to the approval of the Dáil. The allocation of funding between agencies funded under this Vote is approved by me. The funding for the HSE is agreed each year by Government as part of the Estimates process which includes negotiations between the Minister for Finance and myself with the support of our respective Departments. The Estimate for the HSE is subsequently put before the Dáil for approval. Operational responsibility for the management and delivery of health and personal social services is a matter for the HSE and funding for the services once approved by Government is provided within its Vote 40.

In Budget 2009, allowing for the adjustments indicated above, an additional €622 million was provided for the health services. The services and targets to be provided by the HSE in 2009 are set out in the National Service Plan which I approved in December, 2008. The National Service Plan provides details of all HSE funding and levels of service activities. The overall services and targets in respect of all of the funding provided across the Health Group of Votes is set out in the Annual Output Statement published by my Department each year.

Health Services.

165. **Deputy Billy Timmins** asked the Minister for Health and Children the position in relation to a person (details supplied) in County Wicklow; if they will be seen as a matter of urgency; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [2513/09]

Minister for Health and Children (Deputy Mary Harney): As this is a service matter it has been referred to the HSE for direct reply.

Ambulance Service.

166. **Deputy Thomas P. Broughan** asked the Minister for Health and Children if she will provide two additional ambulances for the Dublin Fire Brigade fleet; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [2521/09]

Minister for Health and Children (Deputy Mary Harney): Neither my Department nor the HSE has any function in the matter of purchasing capital assets for local authorities.

Nursing Home Admissions.

167. **Deputy Richard Bruton** asked the Minister for Health and Children the number of admissions to private and to public nursing homes in the most recent year for which data are available; the number of beds in each category; the cost of operating public nursing homes and the value of revenue received from patients in the most recent year for which data are available; and the cost of subventions to patients in private nursing homes in the most recent year for which data are available. [2523/09]

Minister of State at the Department of Health and Children (Deputy Máire Hctor): As this is a service matter it has been referred to the Health Service Executive for direct reply.

Health Services.

168. **Deputy Pat Breen** asked the Minister for Health and Children when a refund will issue to a person (details supplied) in County Clare; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [2527/09]

Minister for Health and Children (Deputy Mary Harney): As this is a service matter it has been referred to the HSE for direct reply.

Departmental Expenditure.

169. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Health and Children the annual cost of printing reports by her Department and agencies under the control of her Department; the corresponding figure for annual reports; the cost of posting these reports; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [2543/09]

Minister for Health and Children (Deputy Mary Harney): The number of reports produced by my Department varies from year to year. In 2008 the cost for printing all reports amounted to €66,035. Of that amount €30,321 was for the printing of Annual Reports by my Department, by the Office of the Minister for Children and the Adoption Board. It is not possible to give a figure for the cost of posting reports. These costs are included as part of my Department's general postal costs and are not broken down by category of items posted.

The position regarding the HSE and other agencies under my Department's aegis is a matter for the agencies themselves. My Department is asking these agencies to reply directly to the Deputy in this regard. My Department is committed to progressively moving towards e-publishing and away from the traditional paper products in order to reduce costs and waste.

Mental Health Services.

170. **Deputy Tom Hayes** asked the Minister for Health and Children the way the policy of admitting children with mental health issues into adult wards is perceived internationally; if it is best practice; the number of children each year for the past five years who have been admitted to adult wards; if the provisions for mental health in young people, including the number of psychologists and psychiatrists here per 1000 of population in comparison to other OECD countries, are sufficient; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [2549/09]

Minister of State at the Department of Health and Children (Deputy John Moloney): The undesirability of admitting children to units providing care and treatment to adults is recognised but in the absence of an alternative, such admissions are sometimes necessary. The Mental Health Commission has issued a code of practice relating to the admission of children under the Mental Health Act 2001 which outlines interim arrangements and facilities that should be put in place to ensure the protection and safety of such children.

The development of child and adolescent mental health services is a priority for the HSE. During 2008, four beds were commissioned in St Anne's, Galway and work was completed on a six bedded unit at St Vincent's, Fairview, Dublin and the refurbishment of an eight bedded interim unit at St Stephen's, Cork. These beds will be brought into operation in 2009. Construction has commenced on two 20-bedded units in Cork and Galway. The provision of this additional bed capacity within the child and adolescent service will ensure that the inappropriate admission of 16 and 17 year olds to adult psychiatric units is curtailed.

[Deputy John Moloney.]

With regard to the specific details requested in relation to the number of children admitted to adult units and the number of psychologists and psychiatrists per 1000 of population, my Department has requested the HSE to reply directly to the Deputy.

171. **Deputy Tom Hayes** asked the Minister for Health and Children when a director for mental health for Ireland will be appointed; the reason there has been a delay in appointing this director in view of the fact that it is recommended by herself and an independent monitoring group; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [2550/09]

172. **Deputy Tom Hayes** asked the Minister for Health and Children if she will instruct the Health Service Executive to publish an implementation plan for A Vision for Change that has been approved by her with detailed year on year targets, timeframes and human and financial resource commitments; if such an implementation plan already exists; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [2555/09]

Minister of State at the Department of Health and Children (Deputy John Moloney): I propose to take Questions Nos. 171 and 172 together.

Responsibility for the implementation of ‘A Vision for Change’ is being addressed in the new structure currently being developed in the Health Service Executive. A draft implementation plan has been prepared and will be finalised by the HSE following completion of the restructuring process.

173. **Deputy Tom Hayes** asked the Minister for Health and Children the amount spent on mental health services since the launch of the A Vision for Change programme; the amount that has been generated by the sale of lands under the A Vision for Change provisions; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [2556/09]

175. **Deputy Tom Hayes** asked the Minister for Health and Children if it is her policy to revise and particularly to ring-fence mental health funding in view of increasing demands on the services due to population growth; and if she will commit to same in view of her stated preference for dealing with patients as outpatients rather than as inpatients. [2558/09]

Minister of State at the Department of Health and Children (Deputy John Moloney): I propose to take Questions Nos. 173 and 175 together.

Substantial resources are invested in mental health services; overall spending on mental health services in 2007 amounted to €1 billion, and this level of funding continued into 2008 and 2009. The estimated additional cost of the implementation of ‘A Vision for Change’ the Report of the Expert Group on Mental Health Policy is €150m over 7 — 10 years. Development funding totalling €51.2m was allocated to the HSE in 2006 and 2007, some of which was diverted because of core budgetary pressures; however I am advised by the HSE that 94% of the €51.2m will be in place before the end of 2009. Funding will be provided in 2009 for the recruitment of 35 therapy posts for the child and adolescent mental health service. In addition, once-off funding of €1.75m will be provided for suicide prevention initiatives and for mental health projects supporting service users and carers.

It should be noted that the implementation of ‘A Vision for Change’ is not solely dependent on the provision of additional funding; implementation is dependent to a much greater extent on the remodelling of existing resources. ‘A Vision for Change’ envisions an active, flexible and community-based mental health service, with a greatly reduced need for hospital admissions.

The Report also recommended that a plan to bring about the closure of all psychiatric hospitals should be drawn up and implemented, and that the resources released by these closures should be re-invested in the new mental health service infrastructure requirement. The Departments of Finance and Health and Children have agreed in principle to the release of the proceeds of the disposal of properties prior to 2006 for reinvestment in mental health capital development. The arrangements for property disposal require Department of Finance approval in each case, the lodging of the proceeds as Exchequer Extra Receipts and the re-Voting of the funds for approved projects. Disposals to date amount to over €42m and a submission detailing the priority projects to be funded from these disposals and planned future disposals is expected to be made by the HSE, for consideration by my Department and the Department of Finance, within the coming months. It is envisaged that this submission will provide an opportunity to achieve overall agreement on the extent and timing of property disposals to facilitate the modernisation of the mental health infrastructure.

174. **Deputy Tom Hayes** asked the Minister for Health and Children the number of fully staffed community mental health teams in place here. [2557/09]

Minister of State at the Department of Health and Children (Deputy John Moloney): As this is a service matter the question has been referred to the HSE for direct reply.

Question No. 175 answered with Question No. 173.

Ministerial Staff.

176. **Deputy Enda Kenny** asked the Minister for Health and Children the cost, in tabular format, including salary and pension payments, of each of the programme managers, special advisers, assistants or other staff appointed by her in 2007 post election and 2008; the names, titles and duties of each of the staff appointed during these periods; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [2615/09]

Minister for Health and Children (Deputy Mary Harney): I have made the following personal appointments since 7th May, 2007:

Name	From	To	Title	Salary payments 7/5/2007 – 31/12/2007 (Plus ER)	Salary Payments 2008 (Plus ER)
				€	€
John O'Brien	7/5/2007	31/12/07	Special Adviser/ Programme Manager	92,118	—
*Oliver O'Connor	7/5/2007	6/05/08	Special Adviser/Programme Manager	97,940	71,415
Patricia Ryan	7/5/2007	Present	Special Adviser	93,343	168,671
Derek Cunningham	7/5/2007	Present	Special Adviser/Press Officer	83,768	141,386
Catherine Dardis	7/5/2007	Present	Personal Assistant	40,936	64,559
Alan McGaughey	7/5/2007	Present	Personal Assistant	41,383	65,263

With the exception of my Special Adviser/Press Officer, who is a member of the appropriate Civil Service Superannuation Scheme, the remaining staff, as identified above, are in receipt of 11% of their current salary in lieu of membership of a Civil Service Superannuation Scheme.

*I appointed Mr. Oliver O'Connor as my Programme Manager in the Department with effect from the 1st January, 2008. On the 7th May, 2008, Mr. O'Connor was appointed by the Taoiseach as Special Adviser with responsibility for Health and Children.

Child Care Services.

177. **Deputy Dan Neville** asked the Minister for Health and Children the position regarding a crèche (details supplied) in County Limerick. [2621/09]

Minister of State at the Department of Health and Children (Deputy Barry Andrews): The Community Childcare Subvention Scheme (CCSS) was introduced by my Office in January 2008, under the National Childcare Investment Programme 2006 -2010 (NCIP). The purpose of the scheme is to subsidise the cost of childcare for disadvantaged and low paid parents in the not for profit childcare sector.

I understand that the service in question was approved capital grants totalling €1.4 million. On the commencement of their service in 2008 they were approved €74,750 for a year's funding under the CCSS as a start up contribution towards staffing costs for childcare workers working directly with children. The Group has been informed that their level of subvention under the CCSS for 2009 is €40,898 based on their service return submitted last year which outlined their level of service, and the level of disadvantage among the families using the service. This return identified only 25% of parents qualifying as disadvantaged or in low paid employment, compared with the national average in the Scheme which generally averages around 40% of parents.

The funding awarded will allow the service reduce fees by €100 per week for disadvantaged parents, by €70 per week for parents on FIS, and by €45 per week for working families holding either a GP Visit Card or a Medical Card. Middle and upper income parents will pay the cost price, which is significantly reduced by virtue of the €1.4 million capital grant the Group has been awarded, thereby removing rental costs for the service. The projection of 2009 costs provided by the Group suggest that this cost price, at €140 per week, is some 20% lower than the national average price for childcare with the result that all families availing of this service will benefit from quality childcare at reduced rates.

Health Services.

178. **Deputy Charlie O'Connor** asked the Minister for Health and Children if she will make a comprehensive statement detailing plans for the future delivery of all cancer services in the Tallaght region currently delivered from Tallaght Hospital, Dublin; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [2622/09]

Minister for Health and Children (Deputy Mary Harney): As the Deputy is aware, the Health Service Executive (HSE) has designated St James's Hospital and St Vincent's Hospital as the two cancer centres in the Managed Cancer Control Network for the HSE Dublin Mid-Leinster region, which includes Tallaght.

The designation of cancer centres aims to ensure that patients receive the highest quality care while at the same time allowing local access to services where appropriate. Where diagnosis and treatment planning is directed and managed by multi-disciplinary teams based at the cancer centres, then much of the treatment (other than surgery) can be delivered locally, including chemotherapy and support services. The Oncology Day Ward at the Adelaide and Meath Hospital, incorporating the National Children's Hospital (AMNCH) will continue to operate under a medical oncologist following the transfer of cancer surgery to one of the designated cancer centres. Related cancer clinical trials can therefore also continue at AMNCH.

Breast cancer services are the first to be centralised into the eight centres and will be transferred from AMNCH in April 2009 to one of the two designated cancer centres for the region, to which patients from the Tallaght region will be referred by their GP. The views of GPs in

the Tallaght region are being sought to establish to which of the designated cancer centres for the region they will now refer patients with symptomatic breast disease.

Following the transfer of breast services to the designated centres, the HSE's National Cancer Control Programme (NCCP) will progress the centralisation of services for other site-specific cancers, including lung, prostate and pancreatic cancers. The National Hospitals Office of the HSE will engage with AMNCH and the designated centres to agree on the services that will transfer to AMNCH from the designated centres, replacing cancer services at the hospital.

179. **Deputy Charlie O'Connor** asked the Minister for Health and Children her plans for the development of children's services in the Tallaght region, particularly in view of her Department's plans for the new children's hospital on the Mater site; if she will give assurances to those parents in the region who are concerned about the matter; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [2623/09]

Minister for Health and Children (Deputy Mary Harney): The development of the National Paediatric Hospital is a priority project for the Government. The Health Service Executive Capital Plan 2008-2013 includes provision for the development of the new hospital which will include an associated Ambulatory and Urgent Care Centre at Tallaght. The project is being overseen by the National Paediatric Hospital Development Board.

The Ambulatory and Urgent Care Centre at Tallaght will offer a range of services including urgent care consultations, outpatient services and day surgery. The vast majority of children who presently attend the National Children Hospital's Emergency Department at Tallaght do not require admission and will continue to access their care locally at the new Centre. It has been estimated that when the Centre is developed, it will cater for approximately 48,000 emergency attendances, 9,000 day cases and 58,000 out-patient attendances. The actual level of activity will depend on the number of such centres developed over time.

Child Care Services.

180. **Deputy Billy Timmins** asked the Minister for Health and Children the position in relation to a group (details supplied) in County Wicklow which is anxious to draw down due funding; if this will be forwarded as a matter of urgency in order to continue the service; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [2628/09]

Minister of State at the Department of Health and Children (Deputy Barry Andrews): Under the Community Childcare Subvention Scheme (CCSS) which is implemented under the National Childcare Investment Programme 2006 -2010, and its predecessor the EOCP Staff Grant, payments are made by Pobal to community based childcare groups, generally on a quarterly basis. The final payments in 2008 were made during October — December, and the first payments for 2009 are being made this month (at the equivalent of the quarterly rate payable at the end of last year).

The Group in question has been paid €9,540 as an interim payment for January to March 2009. This payment will be adjusted when their return is processed. To qualify for a 2009 payment, services made an electronic return, and also forwarded signed parental forms from parents and a form signed by the service manager confirming adherence to measures which ensure compliance with Data Protection legislation. The service in question chose not to make an electronic return but a paper return only. This has delayed the process in their case. However it is hoped that the Group will know their 2009 funding in full by the end of next month.

Herbicide Controls.

181. **Deputy Joanna Tuffy** asked the Minister for Health and Children the position regarding a report sought by her Department into the spraying of 2,4,D, at roadside verges in County Meath on behalf of Meath County Council; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [2635/09]

182. **Deputy Joanna Tuffy** asked the Minister for Health and Children her policies on the spraying of herbicides and pesticides near houses or buildings such as schools; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [2636/09]

Minister for Health and Children (Deputy Mary Harney): I propose to take Questions Nos. 181 and 182 together.

I understand that the Department of Environment, Heritage and Local Government wrote to all Local Authorities in May of last year advising that untargeted spraying of road verges with herbicide is, prima facie, an offence under Section 40 of the Wildlife Acts and that the policy of the Minister for Environment, Heritage and Local Government is to prosecute in such cases. The incident referred to by the Deputy is, I understand, the subject of legal proceedings taken by the National Parks and Wildlife Service. I have not sought a specific report on the matter.

Mental Health Services.

183. **Deputy Joanna Tuffy** asked the Minister for Health and Children if assessment, treatment and funding to meet the requirements of those suffering autistic spectrum disorders are uniform across all Health Service Executive regions; if a specific question will be added to the census to determine the numbers of people who have autistic spectrum disorder; the reason for the delay in accessing assessment for children in the south Tipperary area; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [2637/09]

Minister of State at the Department of Health and Children (Deputy John Moloney): The Central Statistics Office has indicated to the Department that a specific question on autistic spectrum disorder will not be included in the 2011 Census of Population. It is planned to include a general question on the number of persons with a disability but not to include questions on specific disabilities. This approach is being taken following a consultation process in 2008, in relation to the contents of the 2011 Census of Population, which included representatives of the National Disability Authority, the Equality Authority, the Disability Federation of Ireland and the National Federation of Voluntary Bodies.

As the Deputy's question relates to service matters I have arranged for the question to be referred to the Health Service Executive for direct reply.

Hospital Accommodation.

184. **Deputy John Deasy** asked the Minister for Health and Children if she will request the Health Service Executive not to close Saint Brigid's Ward in Saint Patrick's Hospital, Waterford until the equivalent number of beds are provided through increases in other areas of the hospital; if she will seek a guarantee that there will be no reduction in the overall number of beds in the hospital; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [2639/09]

Minister of State at the Department of Health and Children (Deputy Máire Hocht): As this is a service matter it has been referred to the Health Service Executive for direct reply.

Hospital Services.

185. **Deputy John Deasy** asked the Minister for Health and Children if she will provide details of plans for developing Saint Patrick's Hospital in Waterford; the planned commencement and completion dates of such developments; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [2640/09]

Minister of State at the Department of Health and Children (Deputy Máire Hctor): As this is a service matter it has been referred to the Health Service Executive for direct reply.

Health Services.

186. **Deputy Paul Connaughton** asked the Minister for Health and Children the reason a person (details supplied) in County Galway is not entitled to a special care package; if her attention has been drawn to the fact that the applicant has been in the National Rehabilitation Hospital, Dún Laoghaire, County Dublin since October 2008 and is being discharged; if her attention has further been drawn to the fact that they are not suitable for a private nursing home and that the family is prepared to look after the person provided they receive the benefit of a home care package; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [2642/09]

Minister of State at the Department of Health and Children (Deputy Máire Hctor): As this is a service matter it has been referred to the Health Service Executive for direct reply.

187. **Deputy Paul Connaughton** asked the Minister for Health and Children the reason a person (details supplied) in County Galway has not been paid under the nursing home Bill; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [2645/09]

Minister for Health and Children (Deputy Mary Harney): As this is a service matter it has been referred to the HSE for direct reply.

Accident and Emergency Services.

188. **Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin** asked the Minister for Health and Children if it is her view that the crisis in hospital accident and emergency departments constitutes a national emergency in view of the fact that the numbers of patients on trolleys and chairs in accident and emergency units in January 2009 exceeded the numbers on the day she declared this a national emergency in March 2006; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [2690/09]

Minister for Health and Children (Deputy Mary Harney): The HSE made considerable progress since 2006 in improving the delivery of services in Emergency Departments. The vast majority of hospitals were fully or substantially compliant last year with the 12 hour maximum waiting time target for those requiring admission. However, considerable pressures have been experienced since the beginning of January in Emergency Departments across the country and this has been reflected in an increase in the waiting times for patients. The difficulties are attributed to a number of factors, including the influenza and norovirus outbreaks. The HSE is working closely with all hospitals in managing the pressures to ensure that waiting times for all patients attending Emergency Departments are kept to a minimum.

I am determined that the improvements made over the last two years in managing activity in our Emergency Departments are sustained and in this context I have asked the HSE to set a revised maximum waiting time target this year of no more than 6 hours from registration to admission or discharge for all patients attending Emergency Departments, and not just for

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those patients who require admission. The HSE is also introducing a measurement system during 2009 which will record the total waiting time for all patients attending Emergency Departments.

Question No. 189 answered with Question No. 162.

Road Network.

190. **Deputy Billy Timmins** asked the Minister for Transport the applications for funding for roads he currently has from all local authorities in Counties Wicklow and Carlow; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2671/09]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Noel Dempsey): The improvement and maintenance of regional and local roads in their areas is a matter for local authorities to be funded from their own resources supplemented by State grants. State road grants for regional and local roads are allocated to local authorities under a number of grant categories. These include the Specific Improvement Grants scheme. The initial selection of projects to be funded under that scheme, and the priority to be attached to each project, is entirely a matter for the local authorities.

The projects submitted to my Department by Wicklow County Council and Carlow County Council in respect of 2009 under the Specific Improvement Grants scheme are outlined in Tables 1 and 2 respectively.

Table 1: Wicklow County Council Specific Improvement Grant Applications 2009

Road Number	Scheme Name	Grant Requested 2009
		€
R750	Ballyrooaun Bridge	110,000
	Ballysmuttan Bridge	500,000
	Blainroe Bridge	41,000
	Colbinstown Bridge	85,000
	Rampere Bridge, Baltinglass	170,000
	Baltinglass Railway Bridge	93,000
	Glenmalure Bridge	84,000
	Killough Bridge	30,000
	Meetings Bridge	66,000
	Three Wells Bridge	70,000
L5099	Rockey Road	400,000
L4364/L43642	Lackan, Blessington	120,000
N11	Newcastle – Link Road	500,000
R117	Enniskerry – N11 Link	300,000
R747	Aughrim to Templelusk	500,000
R761	Blacklion to Killincarrig	300,000
R753/752	Rathdrum – Ballinaclash Junction	200,000
	Friars Hill	232,320

Table 2: Carlow County Council Specific Improvement Grant Applications 2009

Road Number	Scheme Name	Grant Requested 2009
		€
	Tullow Relief Road	2,000,000
	Carlow Inner Relief	500,000

In addition Wicklow County Council and Carlow County Council each sought funding for Low Cost Safety Improvement works at a number of locations. Details for Wicklow County Council and Carlow County Council are outlined in Tables 3 and 4 respectively.

Table 3: Wicklow County Council Low Cost Safety Improvement Applications 2009

Priority	Scheme	Estimated Cost
		€
1	R759 Kilbride	93,000
2	R747 Woodfield	29,000
3	R747 Tinoranhill South	29,000
4	L4321 Castleruddery	27,000
5	L4310 Grangecon	22,000
6	R752/L6168 Meeting of the Waters	24,000
7	L7276 Redwells Crossroads	29,000
8	L8371 Red Lane	27,000
9	R746 Cronyhorn	15,000
10	R746 Rosnastaw	20,000

Table 4: Carlow County Council Low Cost Safety Improvement Applications 2009

Priority	Scheme	Estimated Cost
		€
1	Doyles cross at Cashel	20,000
2	Safety barrier at Ballinacra	20,000
3	Cross roads at Knockballystine	20,000
4	Cross roads at Browneshill	20,000
5	Junction for Killeshal	15,000
6	Ballywilliamroe Cross Roads	10,000
7	Roundabout at the junction of Staplestown Road and Inner Relief Road	25,000
8	Farranphlure	10,000
9	Roundabout at the junction of Staplestown Road and St. Patrick's Avenue	20,000
10	Moate Cross	5,000

Any questions regarding the prioritisation of particular projects should be addressed to the individual local authority. Road grants for 2009 in respect of regional and local roads will be announced shortly.

Airport Development Projects.

191. **Deputy Ciarán Lynch** asked the Minister for Transport the development envisioned for Cork Airport; if the Scott Wilson Kirkpatrick master plan has been abandoned; when the main runway will need resurfacing; if it is intended to extend the existing runway; if, in this context, an adequate evaluation of the prevailing meteorological conditions has been carried out; if there is an intention to sell existing lands; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2491/09]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Noel Dempsey): Issues concerning the operation and management of Cork Airport are the responsibility of the Cork Airport Authority in the context of delegated arrangements made with the Dublin Airport Authority and I have no function in the matters raised by the Deputy.

Rail Network.

192. **Deputy Thomas P. Broughan** asked the Minister for Transport if he will report on delays in the design and construction of all new railway bridges; if the State has paid out more than €7 million in compensation claims to contractors as a result of delays in the construction of certain railway bridges; if he will report further on pending claims due to delays; if he is reviewing the railway bridge design and building process; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2519/09]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Noel Dempsey): As Minister for Transport, I have responsibility for overall policy and funding in relation to the national roads programme element of Transport 21. The implementation of individual national road projects, including the provision of road over rail bridges on the national roads network, is a matter for the National Roads Authority (NRA) under the Roads Act, 1993 in conjunction with Iarnród Éireann and the local authorities concerned. I have made it clear that I expect both agencies to improve their co-operation in order to minimise delays.

Public Transport.

193. **Deputy Thomas P. Broughan** asked the Minister for Transport when the Dublin Transport Authority will be fully operational; when he will appoint the chief executive officer to the new DTA; if he will transform the DTA into a national transport regulator; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2522/09]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Noel Dempsey): My Department is proceeding with preparations for the establishment of the Dublin Transport Authority (DTA) as soon as possible during 2009. A key part of those preparations is the recruitment of a Chief Executive Officer and the necessary recruitment process is now underway. The Agreed Programme for Government includes a commitment to reform bus licensing to facilitate the optimum provision of services by providing a level playing field for all market participants. The Government Programme also contains a commitment to examine the need for a National Transport Regulator in the context of the overall review of the economic regulatory environment.

The Government recently approved the General Scheme of the Public Transport Regulation Bill, which contains proposals for:

- a new bus licensing regime which will replace the Road Transport Act 1932 and the provisions of the Transport Act 1958 that relate to the provision of bus services by the State bus companies;

- extending nationally the provisions of the DTA Act 2008 in relation to the provision of public service obligations;
- assigning responsibility to the DTA for bus licensing and public transport services contracts nationwide;
- the amalgamation of the Commission for Taxi Regulation into the DTA, and
- the renaming of the DTA as the National Transport Authority given its proposed national focus in relation to commercial bus licensing, future bus and rail subvention and the regulation of small public service vehicles.

In the light of the recent Government approval of the General Scheme, the Public Transport Regulation Bill will be now drafted and published as soon as possible.

Departmental Expenditure.

194. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Transport the annual cost of printing reports by his Department and agencies under the control of his Department; the corresponding figure for annual reports; the cost of posting these reports; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2547/09]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Noel Dempsey): The information requested by the Deputy is being compiled and will be forwarded as soon as possible.

Public Transport.

195. **Deputy Olivia Mitchell** asked the Minister for Transport if he will report on the Dublin Bus services which are expected to be reduced or abolished following the announcement of cutbacks in that agency; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2603/09]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Noel Dempsey): It is a matter for Dublin Bus, within the resources available to it from fare revenue and Exchequer subvention, to optimise its services in the most efficient and effective manner, while maintaining as high a level of service as possible to the travelling public. Day to day decisions in this regard are matters for the company. I published yesterday the report by Deloitte on a Cost and Efficiency Review of Bus Éireann and Dublin Bus and I have asked the Chairman of both companies to bring forward at an early date a programme to implement the recommendations in the report.

Ministerial Staff.

196. **Deputy Enda Kenny** asked the Minister for Transport the cost, in tabular format, including salary and pension payments, of each of the programme managers, special advisers, assistants or other staff appointed by him in 2007 post-election and 2008; the names, titles and duties of each of the staff appointed during these periods; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2619/09]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Noel Dempsey): The attached table provides the information required by the Deputy. The total salary costs in the attached table includes salary and employers PRSI payments paid to staff appointed to my office in 2007, post election, to end 2008.

[Deputy Noel Dempsey.]

Name	Title	Total Salary costs	Duties
		€	
James Fegan	Special Advisor	121,648	Provides advice to the Minister, monitoring, facilitating and securing the achievement of Govt. objectives that relate to the Department of Transport.
Olive Stephens	Press Advisor	143,875	Responsible for day to day management of the Department's Press Office.
Una Grehan	Personal Secretary	69,350	Secretarial duties.
Margaret Conway	Personal Assistant	88,252	To ensure the smooth running of all constituency matters.

Garda Stations.

197. **Deputy Bernard Allen** asked the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform the situation regarding Blarney Garda station, County Cork; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2483/09]

Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform (Deputy Dermot Ahern): I am advised by the Garda authorities that the station party at the Garda Station at Blarney have been working out of Gurranabraher Garda Station since October last. I am also advised that the Office of Public Works has arranged a pre-planning consultation with Cork Co. Council this week to address planning concerns raised in relation to a proposed location for a temporary Garda facility at Blarney. It is intended to lodge a planning application for a temporary facility as soon as possible. Negotiations with the landlord of the existing station building are on-going in respect of its restoration.

198. **Deputy Michael Creed** asked the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform the status of the proposed development of a new Garda station (details supplied) in County Cork; the contingencies in place if the proposed development does not take place; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2499/09]

Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform (Deputy Dermot Ahern): I am advised that Ballincollig Garda Station is on the Garda Building Programme. The Office of Public Works has advised that under the Capital Works Management Framework all public sector construction projects are now required to be carried out under a new form of contract. It is therefore necessary to commence a re-tendering process for the construction project utilising the new form of contract. Accordingly, the tender documents for Ballincollig Garda Station are currently being revised to the new form. The award of a contract will be subject to the availability of funding for Garda Building Projects. In the meantime the existing Garda Station will continue to service the policing needs of the local community.

Crime Prevention.

199. **Deputy David Stanton** asked the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform if his Department has carried out studies into the operation of electronic monitoring of offenders; if he will provide detailed analysis of costs, advances in technology, and the offender cohort most suitable and other research that his Department has carried out on this matter; when he envisages such a system being introduced; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2531/09]

Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform (Deputy Dermot Ahern): I published a comprehensive Discussion Document on the management of convicted sex offenders yesterday which, inter alia, puts forward the possibility of using GPS electronic monitoring technology to monitor higher risk convicted sex offenders for the critical 6 month period when they have completed their sentences and have been released back into the community. Simultaneously I announced the establishment of a Project Board, led by the Probation Service, to look at this specific possibility as well as the implementation of electronic monitoring more generally in this jurisdiction. The Project Board will now begin its examination — including the cost and viability of introducing a pilot phase having regard to the most suitable prisoner cohort — and I expect to receive their recommendations within a nine month timeframe.

I should advise the Deputy that developments in the area of Electronic Monitoring have been kept under review by my Department and the Probation Service. Specifically the Service has kept abreast of developments in the area through its engagement with the CEP, the European Organisation for Probation. This work will feed in to the work of the Project Board. In tandem with the work of the Project Board my Department will examine the legislative implications that may be necessary to supplement the existing enabling provisions in the Criminal Justice Acts of 2006 and 2007 should we proceed to introduce a pilot phase of Electronic Monitoring in this jurisdiction for a specific group of convicted offenders.

Departmental Expenditure.

200. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform the annual cost of printing reports by his Department and agencies under the control of his Department; the corresponding figure for annual reports; the cost of posting these reports; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2544/09]

Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform (Deputy Dermot Ahern): The costs associated with the printing or publishing of reports issued by my Department is not recorded in a manner that facilitates ready identification from other administrative costs. However, I can inform the Deputy that in order to meet public information obligations in relation to official publications, it is my Department's policy to issue CDs or to use other IT based publication tools such as PDF formats. This policy also covers the publishing of documents, such as annual reports, on my Department's website. I have also requested all bodies operating under the aegis of my Department to adopt a similar practice in order to keep costs to a minimum. Where hard copies of documents are required, they are prepared for publication by the use of in-house copying equipment. As a consequence of implementing this policy, printing and postal costs are kept to an absolute minimum.

Ministerial Staff.

201. **Deputy Enda Kenny** asked the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform the cost, in tabular format, including salary and pension payments, of each of the programme managers, special advisers, assistants or other staff appointed by him in 2007 post-election and 2008; the names, titles and duties of each of the staff appointed during these periods; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2616/09]

Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform (Deputy Dermot Ahern): The requested information in respect of the staff appointed by me since June 2007 is set out in the following table:

[Deputy Dermot Ahern.]

Name	Title / Duties	Salary Range
Mr Ciarán Ó Cuinn	Special Adviser (Programme Manager)	€86,168 – €106,582 (Principal Officer scale)
Mr Richard Moore	Press Adviser	€86,168 – €106,582 (Principal Officer scale)
Ms Christine Maguire	Personal Assistant	€46,558 – €59,097 (Higher Executive Officer scale)
Ms Myra Wall	Personal Secretary	€30,566 – €50,410 (Executive Officer scale)

Payments not exceeding 11% of salary are paid in respect of Personal Retirement Savings Accounts (PRSAs) for my Special and Press Advisers. Both my Personal Assistant and Personal Secretary are members of the Non-Contributory Pension Scheme for non-established State employees. The Public Service Management Act, 1997 sets out the duties of Special Advisers.

Citizenship Applications.

202. **Deputy Billy Timmins** asked the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform the position in relation to a person (details supplied) in County Wicklow; if this will be dealt with as a matter of urgency and granted; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2629/09]

Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform (Deputy Dermot Ahern): Officials in the Citizenship Division of my Department inform me that there is no record of an application for a certificate of naturalisation from the person referred to in the Deputy's Question.

Joint Policing Committees.

203. **Deputy Seán Connick** asked the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform if his Department will provide funding to joint policing committees. [2662/09]

Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform (Deputy Dermot Ahern): Joint Policing Committees are provided for in the Garda Síochána Act 2005. Their purpose is to provide a forum where An Garda Síochána and the local authority — the two organisations which make the most significant contribution to preventing and tackling crime in a specific area — can come together, with the participation of members of the Oireachtas and community and voluntary interests, on matters affecting the area.

On 24 September I launched, with my colleague the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government, the roll out of the Committees from the initial pilot phase in 29 local authority areas to all 114 local authority areas. An Garda Síochána and the relevant local authorities have now commenced establishing the Committees in accordance with new Guidelines in local authority areas where there are not yet Committees. The necessary steps will take a certain amount of time, since there will be a process to select the Committee members from the local authority, the Oireachtas and the community and voluntary sector.

It is envisaged that by and large each agency involved will meet their expenses from within their own budgets. However, the question of providing some financial support from the two Government Departments involved will be kept under view in the context of the overall and evolving budgetary situation.

Probation and Welfare Service.

204. **Deputy Charles Flanagan** asked the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform the percentage of the probation service budget that is spent in relation to work in prisons; the

average cost of the service's work in prisons and places of detention in 2007 and 2008; the ratio of prisoners per probation officer; the ratio of special category prisoner per probation officer; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2702/09]

Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform (Deputy Dermot Ahern): I wish to set out for the Deputy the primary function of the Probation Service — a key agency within the Criminal Justice System. The primary role of the Service is first and foremost to help reduce the level of crime in the community and thereby increase public safety by:

- the effective assessment and management of offenders in the community;
- challenging offending behaviour and encouraging changed behaviour; and
- facilitating the integration of ex-offenders back to the community.

In meeting this mandate the Probation Service provides probation supervision, community service, offending behaviour programmes and specialist support services, to both adult and young offenders, with the aim of reducing re-offending. The core work of the Service involves:

- preparing pre-sentence assessments for the Courts;
- supervising offenders in the community who are referred by the Court;
- supervising offenders released conditionally from custody; and
- providing a counselling service to offenders and their families.

Whilst the Probation Service does work with prisoners in the prison setting, much of that work concentrates on helping the offender to prepare for reintegration back to the community by building links with statutory and voluntary organisation who can best support the individual needs of the offender. As the Deputy will appreciate successful re-integration to the community and positive family support are critical to helping the ex-offender re-build links and the Probation Service plays a vital role in this regard.

I am glad to say that my Department has worked with the Service over recent years to develop a more focussed role for the Service. This is manifested in its new senior management structure, increased level of staffing, significant funding and in the current Strategy Statement for the Service for the period 2008 to 2010. Quite correctly, in my view, the document places a clear emphasis on how the Service can contribute to increasing public safety by targeting its resources to core functions orientated towards involvement with ex-offenders in the community and helping them in the transition from custody to the community.

The management of offenders within the prison setting is primarily a matter for the Irish Prison Service. Significant resources are channelled into working with prisoners in a supportive way to link them in with services, provide workshop training and help deal with the diverse and often complex range of issues facing individual offenders. I am satisfied that the Irish Prison Service and the Probation Service work in a collaborative way to best meet offender needs in prison and in supporting re-integration back to the community.

I can tell the Deputy that, in keeping with the emphasis on providing community support to ex-offenders, there are 38 professional Probation staff out of a total of 323 providing a dedicated service to prisoners within the Prison system. The compilation of the other specific information sought by the Deputy would require a disproportionate amount of staff time and effort to prepare and could not be justified in current circumstances where there are other significant demands on resources.

205. **Deputy Charles Flanagan** asked the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform the amount of the 2008 and 2009 gross budget of the probation service; the percentage of this budget which provides capital and operating funding to a range of projects that support the work of the service in 2008 and the forecast for 2009; the number of projects this service supported in 2007 and 2008 and which will be supported in 2009; and the average cost per individual project participant. [2703/09]

Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform (Deputy Dermot Ahern): The information requested by the Deputy is provided in the following table for the years 2007 and 2008.

Level of funding provided to the Community Based Organisations (CBOs) and the overall Probation Service budget

Year	No. of CBO	Current CBO	Capital CBO	Probation Service Gross Expenditure	% of Annual Expenditure Budget
		€	€	€m	
2007	66	14.731	6.865	59,323	36%
2008	57*	14.393	5.000	54,019	36%

*In 2008, responsibility for projects involving juvenile offending initiatives was transferred to the Irish Youth Justice Service, leaving 57 adult projects being supported by the Probation Service.

As the 2009 estimates have not yet been finalised the information sought is not yet available. I can advise that a Value for Money and Policy Review of projects funded by the Probation Service which was published by my Department last September indicated that the average cost per individual project participant was €5,519.00 taking into account only the funding from the Probation Service. As the Deputy will appreciate, funding is made available from other sources to some of these projects and accordingly, I am not in a position to give any other information on individual participant costs.

Going forward, I want to see community projects continue to work with the Probation Service to deliver a focussed and measurable set of outcomes to the client group of the Service. I can assure the Deputy that my Department, through the Probation Service, will continue to support such projects having regard to budgetary provisions.

206. **Deputy Charles Flanagan** asked the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform if he plans to re-open Harristown House in Roscommon; the reason for the closure; his views on the fact that the consultants only recommended a temporary closure of the house for six months to undertake strategic restructuring; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2704/09]

Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform (Deputy Dermot Ahern): I wish to advise the Deputy that the project ceased operation at the end of November, 2008. In my reply to a Parliamentary Question from the Deputy's colleague on the 14th October last I set out the background to the proposed closure of this project. My Department is fully committed to finding the best viable alternative model to assist the varied client needs of the Probation Service. I expect to shortly receive a proposal from the management of the Probation Service setting out a detailed new vision for Harristown House which will inform this process.

As the Deputy will appreciate we now have an opportunity to strengthen and refocus the delivery of a programme(s) to be run from the House. We must ensure that we have strong, strategic and committed partnership(s) in place to deliver the most appropriate service to the client group of the Probation Service. I expect to be in a position to make an announcement on the future of Harristown House in the coming months.

Garda Strength.

207. **Deputy Charles Flanagan** asked the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform the strength of An Garda Síochána at the end of 2008; the number of recruits in training at year end; when the first of these will graduate; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2705/09]

Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform (Deputy Dermot Ahern): I have been informed by the Garda Commissioner that the personnel strength of An Garda Síochána on 31 December 2008, the latest date for which figures are readily available, was 14,412. Included in this figure there are 1,050 probationary Gardai. There are a further 944 student Gardai in training phases 1-3. The first graduation of 2009 is due to take place on Thursday next 29 January 2009.

Drug Seizures.

208. **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** asked the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform the drugs seizures in Limerick including dates, quantities and locations between 18 and 29 December 2008. [2714/09]

Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform (Deputy Dermot Ahern): I have been informed by the Garda Authorities that the information sought is not readily available and is currently being researched. I will be in contact with the Deputy when the information is to hand.

Departmental Expenditure.

209. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the annual cost of printing reports by his Department and agencies under the control of his Department; the corresponding figure for annual reports; the cost of posting these reports; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2542/09]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Micheál Martin): As the Deputy will appreciate, the annual cost of printing reports has significantly reduced in recent years as, in many instances, reports are no longer published in hard copy but, instead, are placed on the Department's website. This is the case with our Department's Annual Report. In cases where we are required to publish hard copies of reports, the number of copies printed is significantly less than was the case in earlier years, because of website access to the report. In 2008, my Department incurred printing costs of €7,703 in respect of its Statement of Strategy 2008-2010.

Irish Aid, which is funded by one of my Department's Votes, produces a significant number of reports. The total cost incurred in 2008 was €86,511 in 2008. These reports are primarily concerned with the evaluation and audit of expenditure and help ensure a high level of transparency in the funding and management of Irish Aid projects. Irish Aid reports are distributed through the Irish Aid web site and public offices, such as the Irish Aid Volunteering and Information Centre and Embassies abroad. The individual reports are listed as follows:

- Irish Aid Annual Report (2,000 copies) — €14,064;
- Irish Aid Hunger Task Force (3,700 copies) — €34,750;
- Report of the Audit Committee 2006 — €6,885;
- South Africa Country Programme Evaluation 2004-2006 — €9,825;

[Deputy Micheál Martin.]

- Support to Tsunami Affected Countries — €11,313;
- Evaluation of the Mozambique Country Programmes 2001-2006 — €9,674.

In addition, the Advisory Board for Irish Aid (ABIA) spent €46,774 on printing reports in 2008. The four publications in question were: “Measuring Impact: the global and Irish Aid programme perspective”; “Good Governance, Aid modalities and Poverty Reduction”; “Research Findings Volume 1: Governance, Trade & Aid Effectiveness”; and, “ABIA 2007 Annual Report”.

The North South Ministerial Council (NSMC) Secretariat in Armagh jointly produces an annual report with their Northern counterparts. My Department’s share of the printing costs in 2008 for the NSMC annual report was €5,678. As a result of posting reports on the internet, postage costs in respect of these reports have been very limited. Standard post is used where a hard copy of a report is requested by a member of the public. It is not possible to isolate the postage cost for this type of distribution.

Ministerial Staff.

210. **Deputy Enda Kenny** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the cost, in tabular format, including salary and pension payments, of each of the programme managers, special advisers, assistants or other staff appointed by him in 2007 post-election and 2008; the names, titles and duties of each of the staff appointed during these periods; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2614/09]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Micheál Martin): The following table sets out the names, positions and cost of the non-established staff appointed by me in 2007 post election and 2008.

Minister Micheál Martin, T.D.

Name	Responsibility	Remuneration
Ms. Deirdre Gillane	Special Advisor	Principal Officer standard scale: €86,168 – €100,191
Mr. Christy Mannion	Special Advisor	Principal Officer standard scale: €86,168 – €100,191 plus a 10% attraction allowance
Ms. Elizabeth O’Donoghue	Personal Assistant	Secretarial Assistant Salary Scale: €23,102 – €44,572 per annum plus a 10% attraction allowance
Ms. Susan Kinsella	Personal Secretary	Executive Officer PPC Salary Scale: €32,179 – €51,054 per annum

The terms of the Non-contributory Pension Scheme for Non-established State Employees and of the Contributory Spouses’ and Children’s Pension Scheme for Non-established State Employees applied to the following appointments:

- Deirdre Gillane, Special Advisor;
- Elizabeth O’ Donoghue, Personal Assistant;
- Susan Kinsella, Personal Secretary.

The terms of the Non-contributory Pension Scheme for Established State Employees and of the Contributory Spouses’ and Children’s Pension Scheme for Established State Employees applied to the following appointment: Christy Mannion, Special Advisor

Staff members appointed by Ministers are required to perform any duties which are assigned to them from time to time as appropriate to their position. The particular duties of Special Advisors to Ministers are set out in Section 11 of the Public Service Management Act 1997.

National Concert Hall.

211. **Deputy Mary Upton** asked the Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism the status of the National Concert Hall redevelopment plan; if it is intended to go ahead with this on a public private partnership basis; the amount of money that will be required from the Exchequer; the amount that has been guaranteed; when he expects construction to begin; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2482/09]

Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism (Deputy Martin Cullen): I wish to confirm that the redevelopment the National Concert Hall is going ahead. It will be a Design/Build/Finance/Maintain PPP project, as decided by the Government. The tenders received will determine the cost of the project. Payments by the State will be in the form of monthly unitary payments over a twenty-five year period. These unitary payments will not commence until the first phase of the project is completed, which is expected to take place in 2012.

The primary objective of the project is to provide three performance auditoria in a single complex, offering a newly built Main Hall with a seating capacity of about 2,050 seats; the refurbishment of the existing hall of just over a 1,000 seats as a mid size performance space; and a smaller more flexible hall of 400 seats and the related public and management spaces associated with a concert hall complex developed to the highest international acoustic and architectural standards. This three-hall configuration will enable the National Concert Hall to provide for public demand including the staging of key performances by top-class world artists at reasonable ticket prices, and will meet the requirement for universal access. It is envisaged that the Earlsfort Terrace buildings will be re-united with the Iveagh Gardens, facilitating increased public access, and new public rooms, cafes and restaurants would over-look the Gardens and the city.

The official notification of the tender was published in the Official Journal of the European Union on 29th May 2008. Three shortlisted applicant consortia are participating in the competitive dialogue process at present. It is intended to invite these participants to submit tenders by end June 2009. The successful tenderer should be selected by Autumn 2009 and will then apply for planning permission for his project proposal. I look forward to placing a contract for this project as soon as the successful tenderer receives the necessary Planning Permission, with a view to the commencement of construction early in 2010.

Question No. 212 answered with Question No. 108.

Departmental Expenditure.

213. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism the annual cost of printing reports by his Department and agencies under the control of his Department; the corresponding figure for annual reports; the cost of posting these reports; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2534/09]

Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism (Deputy Martin Cullen): In respect of the year 2008, the cost of printing reports by the Department and the National Archives, together with any associated posting cost, are as set out in tabular form.

[Deputy Martin Cullen.]

Title of Report	Cost of Printing	Cost of Posting
	€	€
Report of the Tourism Strategy Implementation Group	357.00	Not Available*
Value-for-Money & Policy Review Report of the Local Authority Swimming Pool Programme	608.30	Not Available*

*The normal postal service of An Post was used to distribute a small number of copies of the report, the cost of which was minimal and for which separate postal cost records are not maintained.

In respect of the Department's Annual Report 2007, published in 2008, no printing costs were incurred last year, as the in-house facilities of the Civil Service were used to produce a sufficient number of hard copies for distribution. The minimum number of copies was circulated by means of the normal postal service of An Post, the cost of which was minimal and for which separate postal cost records are not maintained.

In the current budgetary environment, the Department is actively seeking to minimise all its administrative costs without affecting the outputs of the Department. In the case of the production of reports, this is facilitated by using in-house printing and/or photocopying facilities and by making best use of the Department's website, where soft-copy versions of reports are posted for unlimited download free of charge by its customers. The production and distribution of reports prepared by the agencies under the aegis of the Department are matters for the agencies themselves and not for the Department.

Question No. 214 answered with Question No. 105.

Ministerial Appointments.

215. **Deputy Olivia Mitchell** asked the Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism if he will confirm that new appointees to Bord Scannán na hÉireann will have broad national geographic representation including the west of Ireland which has a strong audio-visual sector; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2602/09]

Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism (Deputy Martin Cullen): I am currently considering nominations for appointment to the Board of Bord Scannán na hÉireann/Irish Film Board, and I hope to make an announcement shortly. In appointing members to the board cognisance needs to be had, in the main, of the following — a special interest in, or knowledge of, film-making in the State and the development of an industry in the State for the making of films. With regard to geographical representation, it must be borne in mind that the Irish audiovisual industry has grown considerably in recent years and has established roots throughout the country. The recent Irish audiovisual content production sector review carried out on behalf of the Irish Film Board confirms this with over 567 companies operating within the sector and over 6,000 employed.

Ministerial Staff.

216. **Deputy Enda Kenny** asked the Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism the cost, in tabular format, including salary and pension payments, of each of the programme managers, special advisers, assistants or other staff appointed by him in 2007 post-election and 2008; the names, titles and duties of each of the staff appointed during these periods; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2606/09]

Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism (Deputy Martin Cullen): The information requested in respect of the staff appointed by me following my appointment as Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism in May 2008 is set out in the following table:

Name	Position	Salary Level (Civil Service grades)
Michelle Hoctor	Special Adviser (Press)	Principal Officer level
Sean Dower	Personal Assistant	Higher Executive Officer level
Pat Daly	Constituency Assistant	Higher Executive Officer level
Inez O'Neill	Personal Secretary	Secretarial Assistant level + 10% attraction allowance

Payments not exceeding 11% of salary are paid in respect of a Personal Retirement Savings Account to Ms Michelle Hoctor. All the other appointees are members of the Non-Contributory Pension Scheme for non-established State employees. The role of the Special Adviser is set out in Section 11 of the Public Service Management Act, 1997. The other staff carry out general secretarial and administrative duties including the handling of enquiries made to the constituency office.

Tourism Industry.

217. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism if he is satisfied that projections in respect of visitors to Ireland in 2009 are expected to be met or exceeded; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2679/09]

Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism (Deputy Martin Cullen): While final year figures are not yet available for 2008, the most recent CSO figures show that there were over 7.3 million overseas visitors to Ireland in the first eleven months of 2008. This is a reduction of just over 2% compared to the corresponding period of 2007. In the context of the exceptionally challenging conditions affecting nearly all of our main markets, including volatile financial markets, economic contraction and negative consumer sentiment, as well as sharply fluctuating fuel costs and exchange rates, Ireland's overall visitor numbers held up quite well in 2008.

Global economic growth is expected to remain weak in 2009. In particular, it is expected that trading conditions in two of our major markets, Great Britain and the United States, will remain particularly challenging. Accordingly, in its Draft Business Plan for 2009, Tourism Ireland, which has responsibility for the overseas marketing of Ireland as a tourist destination, has forecast between 7.1 million and 7.4 million overseas visitors to the Republic of Ireland in 2009. This represents a further slight reduction on the 2008 projected outturn.

The relevant tourism agencies are working together to support the marketing of Irish tourism, to improve our product offerings and to help improve business capability. These are being supported by the positive response of the tourism sector at enterprise level to the challenges we face. I believe the necessary structures and support are in place at this time to facilitate delivery of the projected visitor numbers for 2009.

While I know that our businesses and tourism agencies are responding constructively to current challenges, it is just as important that the strategic framework for tourism development responds to the changing environment. Accordingly, I have recently established the Tourism Renewal Group, which has been tasked with reviewing and, where appropriate, renewing the current tourism strategy, in order to ensure that this strategy is focused for the short term and that the tourist industry is well placed to benefit from the upturn. This group is expected to report before Summer 2009.

Question No. 218 answered with Question No. 114.

Departmental Expenditure.

219. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism the extent of budgetary increases or cuts in his Department in 2009; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2681/09]

Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism (Deputy Martin Cullen): The 2009 allocation to my Department as published on Budget Day is €549.132m. This compares with €700.162m allocated in 2008, which represents a decrease of 22%.

Question No. 220 answered with Question No. 114.

Sports Capital Programme.

221. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism the extent to which it is intended in 2009 to provide extra funding for the provision or development of passive recreational facilities here; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2683/09]

Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism (Deputy Martin Cullen): 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. Since 1998 the Government has allocated over €725m in sports capital funding to over 7,400 sports projects across the country. This investment has transformed the sporting landscape of Ireland and has allowed the development of sports facilities across the length and breadth of the country. These facilities have dramatically increased the opportunities for all people to engage in a wide variety of sports. In the 2009 Estimates, €56m has been provided in my Department's vote to cover payments to be made from the C-1 sub-head, out of which grants are paid for the provision of sports and recreation facilities.

Tourism Industry.

222. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism the action expected to be taken to ensure the survival of the tourism sector in the current economic climate; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2696/09]

223. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism if he is satisfied that the tourism sector is adequately placed to meet the challenge of competition at home or abroad; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2697/09]

224. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism if he has issued instructions to the tourism industry with a view to improvement in 2009 with particular reference to the competitiveness of the sector; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2698/09]

Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism (Deputy Martin Cullen): I propose to take Questions Nos. 222 to 224, inclusive, together.

While final year figures are not yet available for 2008, tourism figures published by the Central Statistics Office (CSO) for the first eleven months of 2008 show that despite a challenging global environment, Ireland's visitor numbers overall have held up well, making a vital contribution to employment, export earnings and tax receipts in our economy. The 2009 business plans for the key tourism agencies, Tourism Ireland and Fáilte Ireland, are designed to

support the marketing of Irish tourism, to improve our product offerings and to help improve business capability. These are being supported by the positive response of the tourism sector at enterprise level to the challenges we face.

While I know that our businesses and tourism agencies are responding constructively to current challenges, it is just as important that the strategic framework for tourism development responds to the changing environment. Accordingly, I have recently established the Tourism Renewal Group, which has been tasked with reviewing and, where appropriate, renewing the current tourism strategy, set out in the “New Horizons” report, in order to ensure that this strategy is focused for the short term and that the tourist industry is well placed to benefit from the upturn when it comes.

I have asked the Tourism Renewal Group to report back to me by the middle of 2009, following its considerations, with recommendations in the form of a Framework for Action. Furthermore, one of my priorities as Minister is to ensure that the tourism agenda is accommodated in all the relevant policies and programmes that impact on tourism. This is being put into practice on an ongoing basis by my Department and the tourism agencies through engagement with the relevant Departments and agencies on their policies and programmes.

I am confident that, in partnership with the sector, we can plan for current and future challenges and take appropriate action to meet them, thereby ensuring that Irish tourism continues on a path of sustainable growth over the medium term.

Departmental Expenditure.

225. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs the annual cost of printing reports by his Department and agencies under the control of his Department; the corresponding figure for annual reports; the cost of posting these reports; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2536/09]

Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs (Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív): The cost incurred by my Department in printing reports in 2008 was €19,860, of which €4,700 related to the Annual Report. No postage charges were incurred. With regard to public bodies funded from my Department’s Vote Group, I have been informed that the following costs of the nature referred to by the Deputy were incurred in 2008:

Body	Total printing cost	Amount of total cost relating to Annual Report	Postage cost
	€	€	€
Oifig Choimisinéir na dTeangacha Oifigiúla*	6,675	6,675	1,391
Western Development Commission	21,285	960	630
Údarás na Gaeltachta	5,466	5,466	380

*Independent statutory office.

Ministerial Staff.

226. **Deputy Enda Kenny** asked the Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs the cost, in tabular format, including salary and pension payments, of each of the programme managers, special advisers, assistants or other staff appointed by him in 2007 post-election and 2008; the names, titles and duties of each of the staff appointed during these periods; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2608/09]

Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs (Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív): The details requested by the Deputy in respect of staff appointed by me post-election 2007 are outlined in the following tabular format. It should be noted that the salary payments reflected below are inclusive of Employers' PRSI at 10.75%.

Name	Title/Duties	Salary and pension payments post-election 2007	Salary and pension payments 2008
		€	€
Pádraic Ó hUiginn	Special Advisor	*61,088	**117,013
Layla de Cogan Chin	Media Advisor	36,378	85,618
Máirín Ní Choisdealbha	Personal Assistant from 15/06/07 to 14/09/07	16,517	Nil
Muireann Ní Thuairisg	Personal Assistant from 15/09/07	13,409	50,717
Máire Ní Fhlatharta	Personal Secretary	27,980	53,090

*Included in this figure is an 11% superannuation payment.

**Included in this figure is an 11% superannuation payment up to 07/05/2008 only.

National Drugs Strategy.

227. **Deputy Billy Timmins** asked the Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs the position in relation to a project (details supplied) in County Wicklow; if he will increase the funding as a matter of urgency in order that they can continue to provide this service; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2627/09]

Minister of State at the Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs (Deputy John Curran): Funding for Local and Regional Drugs Task Force areas in 2009 will be approximately €34.6m. Of this amount, over €23m is being allocated to the Local Drugs Task Forces while over €11m is being earmarked for the Regional Task Forces. Projects have already been approved funding for the first six months of 2009 and the National Drugs Strategy Team (NDST) will be reviewing this expenditure before allocating the remaining six months funding.

All Drugs Task Forces have been asked to identify savings across their area of responsibility. While I appreciate that there may be some difficult choices to be made, it will be a matter for the Drugs Task Forces — including the East Coast RDTF which allocates funding to the projects referred to by the Deputy — to identify measures to enable them to work within their allocated budgets. With regard to these projects, I understand that the Task Force has agreed funding allocations for 2009 with the company that manages the projects. My Department will continue to liaise with the NDST to ensure the continued operation of vital services in disadvantaged areas most affected by drug misuse.

Social Welfare Benefits.

228. **Deputy Jack Wall** asked the Minister for Social and Family Affairs the reason a person (details supplied) in County Kildare has not received rent supplement payment; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [2511/09]

Minister for Social and Family Affairs (Deputy Mary Hanafin): Rent supplement is administered on behalf of the Department by the Health Service Executive as part of the supplementary welfare allowance scheme. The Executive has advised that payment of basic supplementary welfare allowance and rent supplement is being reviewed and that both payments have been

suspended while the review is ongoing. The Executive will be in direct contact with the person concerned when the review is complete.

Departmental Expenditure.

229. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Social and Family Affairs the annual cost of printing reports by her Department and agencies under the control of her Department; the corresponding figure for annual reports; the cost of posting these reports; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [2545/09]

Minister for Social and Family Affairs (Deputy Mary Hanafin): The information requested is currently being compiled within the Department and will be made available to the Department as soon as possible.

Pension Provisions.

230. **Deputy Brian O'Shea** asked the Minister for Social and Family Affairs the proposals she has to introduce a pensions protection scheme for private sector pensions; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [2586/09]

231. **Deputy Brian O'Shea** asked the Minister for Social and Family Affairs the proposals she has to secure the pensions of all employees of a company (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [2588/09]

Minister for Social and Family Affairs (Deputy Mary Hanafin): I propose to take Questions Nos. 230 and 231 together.

The pension rights of scheme members are protected through trust law and by provision in the Pensions Act 1990 as amended. As supplementary pension schemes are usually established under irrevocable trust, the assets of the scheme are legally separate from the assets of the employer and are not available to any other creditors where the employer becomes insolvent. Under trust law, trustees of occupational pension schemes have the principal responsibility for ensuring that the entitlements of the members are adequately protected and that they receive the pensions due to them.

In addition to the safeguards provided by trust law, the Pensions Act 1990 also provides for the regulation of pensions schemes in Ireland. Under the Pensions Act, defined benefit pension schemes must meet a minimum funding standard which requires that schemes maintain sufficient assets to enable them discharge accrued liabilities in the event of the scheme winding up. Where schemes do not satisfy the Funding Standard, the sponsors/trustees must submit a funding proposal to the Pensions Board to restore full funding within three years. The Pensions Board can allow a scheme up to ten years to meet the standard in certain circumstances.

Should a scheme be wound up by its trustees, the Pensions Act 1990 (as amended) specifies how scheme assets are prioritised. In short, schemes first prioritise benefits that have accrued to members by way of additional voluntary contribution or transfer of rights from another scheme. Benefits being paid to retired members come next in the priority list, followed by benefits to current and deferred members of the scheme.

The Government is currently considering a number of options in relation to the ongoing security of occupational pensions. Any decisions made in this context will be considered as part of the development of a long term framework for pensions. The overall objective is to deliver a pensions system which will provide an adequate income in retirement for everyone, while at

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the same time being affordable in the immediate and long-term future — a key consideration in the current economic environment.

Ministerial Staff.

232. **Deputy Enda Kenny** asked the Minister for Social and Family Affairs the cost, in tabular format, including salary and pension payments, of each of the programme managers, special advisers, assistants or other staff appointed by her in 2007 post-election and 2008; the names, titles and duties of each of the staff appointed during these periods; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [2617/09]

Minister for Social and Family Affairs (Deputy Mary Hanafin): The information sought by the Deputy is set out in the following tabular statement.

Name	Title	Salary	Pension
		€	
Averil Power	Special Adviser	100,191	Model Scheme for non established civil servants
Geraldine Butler	Press Officer	76,087	Model Scheme for established civil servants
Peter O'Brien	Personal Assistant	55,030	Private pension contribution of 11% of salary
Martine Lynch	Personal Secretary	40,907 + 10% attraction allowance	Model Scheme for non established civil servants

Social Welfare Benefits.

233. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Social and Family Affairs the average reduction in the rate of payment of rent allowance over the past 12 months; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [2620/09]

Minister for Social and Family Affairs (Deputy Mary Hanafin): Rent supplement is administered on behalf of the Department by the Health Service Executive as part of the supplementary welfare allowance scheme. The purpose of the rent supplement scheme is to provide short-term income support to eligible people living in private rented accommodation, whose means are insufficient to meet their accommodation costs and who do not have accommodation available to them from any other source. There were almost 60,000 recipients of rent supplement at the end of 2007 at a cost of €392 million. At the end of 2008 numbers on rent supplement had increased to just over 74,000 at a cost of €441million.

The average weekly rent supplement payment at the end of 2007 was €128.43 and €125.87 at the end of 2008. This reflects a general reduction in rent levels in 2008. Data from the CSO's 'privately owned rent index' indicates that rent levels have declined by more than 10% in 2008. This deceleration in rent levels is also reflected in the Daft.ie quarter three rental report which showed reductions in rent of between 3% and 5% depending on location.

Public Service Card.

234. **Deputy Charlie O'Connor** asked the Minister for Social and Family Affairs if she has plans to issue photographic identity cards for claimants for social welfare benefits; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [2624/09]

Minister for Social and Family Affairs (Deputy Mary Hanafin): The Department has developed, in conjunction with a number of other government departments, the specifications for a Public Service card under the SAFE (Standard Authentication Framework Environment) programme. The specification provides for identification features, including a photograph. The Department has invited tenders for the production of the card along with associated management services. It hopes to conclude negotiations with the preferred bidder shortly.

It is intended that the card will introduce an improved registration process along with new card technology which will bring improved customer service and security features, considerably reducing the potential for forgery and fraudulent use. As a general principle, minimum personal data will be held on the card. It will provide secure identification and authentication to allow it to be used by the individual as a 'key' to access services as and when they are required. It will be introduced, in a phased manner, for a number of the Department's services.

Money Advice and Budgeting Service.

235. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Social and Family Affairs if she will provide MABSIS data for 2008 for each MABS centre in respect of the number of new clients, the number of new clients earning a wage, the number of new clients with a mortgage and the total and average debt owed by new clients when they first presented to MABS. [2772/09]

236. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Social and Family Affairs the data from the MABSIS system for 2008 in relation to the number of new clients, the number and percentage of new clients on social welfare and by type of payment, the number and percentage of new clients earning a wage, client profile by tenure type, the total debt owed by new clients when they first presented to MABS with a breakdown by creditor type, and the average debt owed by new clients when they first presented to MABS. [2773/09]

Minister for Social and Family Affairs (Deputy Mary Hanafin): I propose to take Questions Nos. 235 and 236 together.

The Money Advice and Budgeting Service (MABS) provided services to 16,600 new clients in the period to end December 2008. In addition, 2,441 people sought information about budgeting and money management. The MABS National Helpline received approximately 11,000 calls in 2008.

The detailed statistical breakdown of clients per centre requested by the Deputy is not readily available from the MABSIS. However the national MABS statistics show that the majority of new clients were on social welfare payments (59%), the highest numbers being almost 2,900 (17%) who were in receipt of the one parent family payment, 3,000 (18%) who were in receipt of jobseekers payments and 2,300 (14%) in receipt of illness/disability payments. Some 28% of clients were in receipt of wages and 3% were self-employed.

Clients mostly lived in rented accommodation, with 27% living in private rented accommodation and 24% in rented local authority accommodation. People with mortgages made up 28% of clients and 7% lived with parents. The total owed by new clients in 2008 to creditors, based on the debt they had when they first came to the MABS, amounted to €205 million, which works out at an average amount of €12,400 debt per client. Of the total amount of debt 64% was owed to banks/financial institutions, 16% was owed to credit unions, 3% was owed in respect of utilities bills and 1% was owed to moneylenders. Information on new clients per MABS company up to the end of December 2008 is detailed in the following table.

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Money Advice and Budgeting Service — New Clients

Company	New clients at 31st December 2008
Arklow	253
Athlone	188
Ballymun	543
Blanchardstown	422
Bray	574
Carlow	677
Cavan	205
Charleville	111
Clare	298
Clondalkin	322
COMAC	410
Cork	970
North Cork	384
West Cork	288
North Donegal	264
South Donegal	93
West Donegal	25
Drogheda	146
Dublin 12 Area	242
Dublin North City	257
Dublin North East	383
Dublin South East	181
Dundalk	188
Dundrum/Rathfarnham	293
Dun Laoghaire	411
Fingal	224
Finglas	482
North Galway	347
South Galway	602
Kerry	684
Kildare	457
Kilkenny	363
Laois	414
Leitrim	117
Liffey South West	310
Limerick	592
Longford	151
North Mayo	113
South Mayo	222
Meath	179
Monaghan	128
Mullingar	191
Offaly	223
Roscommon	158
Sligo	210

Company	New clients at 31st December 2008
Tallaght	438
North Tipperary	206
South Tipperary	546
Waterford	624
West Waterford	186
Wexford	305

Departmental Expenditure.

237. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Defence the annual cost of printing reports by his Department and agencies under the control of his Department; the corresponding figure for annual reports; the cost of posting these reports; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2537/09]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Willie O’Dea): In relation to publications for 2008 the information sought by the Deputy is detailed in the following table.

Publication	Cost	Postage
	€	€
Defence Forces Ombudsman Annual Report	18,035.00	3,300.00
Department of Defence Annual Report	8,159.02	Nil
Civil Defence Board Annual Report	6,181.00	Nil
Office of Emergency Planning Annual Report	300.00	Nil
Defence Forces Reports	5,493.33	Nil
Total	38,168.35	3,300.00

Ministerial Staff.

238. **Deputy Enda Kenny** asked the Minister for Defence the cost, in tabular format, including salary and pension payments, of each of the programme managers, special advisers, assistants or other staff appointed by him in 2007 post-election and 2008; the names, titles and duties of each of the staff appointed during these periods; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2609/09]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Willie O’Dea): The information regarding staff members appointed by me in 2007 post election and in 2008 is set out in the following table.

Staff Members Appointments	
Name	Derek Mooney
Title	Special Adviser / Political Adviser
Duties	To provide relevant advice to the Minister as necessary
Dates of Appointment	14 June, 2007; 7 May, 2008
Salary Scale 1 June 2007	€82,016 – €101,446
Salary Scale 1 March 2008	€84,066 – €103,982
Salary Scale 1 Sept. 2008	€86,168 – €106,582
Pension	€1,632.77

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Staff Members Appointments

Name	Suzanne Coogan
Title	Press Adviser
Duties	To provide press liaison services to the Minister
Dates of Appointment	14 June, 2007; 7 May, 2008
Salary Scale 1 June 2007	€82,016 – €101,446
Salary Scale 1 March 2008	€84,066 – €103,982
Salary Scale 1 Sept. 2008	€86,168 – €106,582
Pension	€1,629.26
Name	Fergal O’Brien
Title	Personal Assistant
Duties	To provide administrative assistance to the Minister
Dates of Appointment	14 June, 2007; 7 May, 2008
Salary Scale 1 June 2007	€44,314 – €52,379
Salary Scale 1 March 2008	€45,422 – €53,688
Salary Scale 1 Sept. 2008	€46,558 – €55,030
Pension	€703.60
Name	Olive McNamara
Title	Personal Secretary
Duties	To provide secretarial services to the Minister
Dates of Appointment	14 June, 2007; retired on 26 October, 2007.
Salary Scale 1 June 2007	€22,064 – €42,571
Pension	€113.77
Name	Yvonne MacMahon
Title	Personal Secretary
Duties	To provide secretarial services to the Minister
Dates of Appointment	9 November, 2007; 7 May, 2008
Salary Scale 1 June 2007	€22,064 – €42,571
Salary Scale 1 March 2008	€22,616 – €43,636
Salary Scale 1 Sept. 2008	€23,182 – €44,726
Pension	€176.26

The pension contributions, as outlined above, were paid by individual staff members to the Unestablished Civil Service Pension Scheme.

Recycling Policy.

239. **Deputy David Stanton** asked the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government the initiatives and supports that he has put in place or will put in place to support and develop industries here that will reuse and recycle waste materials; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2694/09]

258. **Deputy David Stanton** asked the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government the incentive that he has put in place or will put in place to encourage and support industries associated with recycling of waste; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2693/09]

Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government (Deputy John Gormley): I propose to take Questions Nos. 239 and 258 together.

At present, Enterprise Ireland supports waste recycling and waste management companies particularly through its Growth Fund, Investment Fund or Research and Development Fund. Current initiatives include the establishment by EI of a dedicated CleanTech Department to support an expanding portfolio of companies covering the Waste, Water, Energy and Services sub-sectors. This team is being resourced to address the needs and challenges arising. In addition, the agency's GreenTech Support package helps client companies take advantage of the opportunities presented by integrating environmental sustainability into their businesses.

In addition, a recent study undertaken by Forfás and Inter-Trade Ireland identified opportunities across a range of areas in the environment goods and services, including the waste sector. There are openings for those enterprises that can provide equipment, consultancy services and, in particular, develop innovative technologies in the areas of waste collection and disposal. Such technologies and services will make for more efficient and cost effective operations. Prospects are good for companies that can meet the strong market demand for recovered materials such as plastics and metals. This is especially so where the activity can be carried out on a larger scale, producing a higher quality final material for recycling.

In the area of transforming waste into energy, opportunities exist for companies providing innovative systems that utilize new and existing technologies to produce energy as well as a range of application fuels (e.g. gas, biomass fuel) and secondary products (e.g. compost) from waste materials. Renewable energy companies are becoming increasingly involved in the waste industry indicating the future growth potential for this sector. I am confident we can look forward to significant job creation in the areas identified.

Local Authority Housing.

240. **Deputy Ciarán Lynch** asked the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government if his attention has been drawn to the failure by some local authorities to comply with their obligations under the Planning and Development Act 2000 to take in charge residential developments and that this failure has meant the absence of public lighting in some social housing estates; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2489/09]

Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government (Deputy John Gormley): The taking in charge of a residential estate is a matter for the relevant planning authority. Under section 180 of the Planning and Development Act 2000, a planning authority must take in charge a residential development at the request of the developer, or a majority of the residents, where certain conditions are met.

In February 2008 my Department issued updated policy guidance to planning authorities on the taking in charge of estates. Each planning authority was asked to develop or update, as appropriate, its policy on taking in charge by the end of June 2008, on the basis of the updated policy guidance, to ensure that its revised policy is made available to the public and published on its website and is the subject of regular reports to the elected members.

A new local government service indicator in relation to the taking in charge of estates has been introduced, which will provide benchmark data from 2009 onwards for monitoring the taking in charge process. The information to be reported will include — the number of estates that were taken in charge in the year in question; the total number of dwellings in these estates; and the number of estates in respect of which enforcement action was taken. Informed by this data, which will be available in mid 2009, I intend to keep the issue of taking in charge under review.

[Deputy John Gormley.]

The question of taking in charge should not arise in relation to a social housing estate, as the housing authority is responsible for the estate from the outset. I am not aware of any problems in relation to public lighting in social housing estates; any such issues should be taken up directly with the housing authority concerned.

Fire Stations.

241. **Deputy Thomas P. Broughan** asked the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government the resources available and the priorities under the fire services capital programme 2009; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2520/09]

Minister of State at the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government (Deputy Michael P. Kitt): The resources to be made available in 2009 for capital funding of the fire and emergency services (€23 million) are included in the published 2009 estimates for public services and summary public capital programme. Proposals are currently under consideration for inclusion in the 2009 programme having regard to each fire authority's priorities, the existing facilities available, the level of activity, the proximity of other fire stations and competing demands in relation to the resources available.

Departmental Expenditure.

242. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government the annual cost of printing reports by his Department and agencies under the control of his Department; the corresponding figure for annual reports; the cost of posting these reports; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2540/09]

Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government (Deputy John Gormley): The information requested in respect of my Department is being compiled and will be forwarded to the Deputy as soon as possible. Printing costs for Agencies under the aegis of my Department are a matter for the Agencies themselves.

Electoral Management System.

243. **Deputy Leo Varadkar** asked the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government if a date has been set for the local and European elections. [2553/09]

Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government (Deputy John Gormley): The timing of European Parliament elections is determined by the EU Council of Ministers by reference to the period corresponding to the first direct elections in 1979. Accordingly, they are held within a specified four-day period in June every five years subsequent to 1979. The Council announced in June 2008 that the 2009 European Parliament elections will take place between 4 and 7 June 2009.

Each member state must fix a polling date within this period and, although a formal decision has not been made in the matter, I expect that, as on previous occasions, polling at the European Parliament and local elections will take place on the same day in June 2009. I will make a statement in relation to polling day as soon as possible.

244. **Deputy Leo Varadkar** asked the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government his plans to introduce campaign spending limits for the local and European elections; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2554/09]

Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government (Deputy John Gormley): I intend to bring forward proposals in the near future for legislative change to allow for the introduction of spending limits at local elections and to have the limits in place for the local elections to be held in June 2009. Section 33 of the Electoral Act 1997 and the related order (the Electoral Act 1997 (Section 3) Order 2004) provides for the limitation of election expenses at European elections.

Ministerial Staff.

245. **Deputy Enda Kenny** asked the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government the cost, in tabular format, including salary and pension payments, of each of the programme managers, special advisers, assistants or other staff appointed by him in 2007 post-election and 2008; the names, titles and duties of each of the staff appointed during these periods; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2612/09]

Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government (Deputy John Gormley): The information requested is set out in the following table:

Minister	Name	Grade	No. of staff	Salary 2007	Salary 2008	Duties
John Gormley	Ryan Meade	Special Adviser	1	€ 39,153	€ 86,014	As set out in Section 11 of the Public Service Management Act 1997
	David Healy	Special Adviser	1	36,825	85,692	As set out in Section 11 of the Public Service Management Act 1997
	Liam Reid	Special Adviser: Press and Information Officer	1	44,906	98,329	Responsible for all aspects of the Department's media related activities.
	Donall Geoghegan*	Special Adviser*	1	57,833	173,254	Programme Manager for the Green Party
	Diarmuid Hanafin	Personal Assistant-Higher Executive Officer	1			Provision of administrative and secretarial support.
	Ann O'Conarain	Personal Secretary-Executive Officer	0.5			Provision of administrative and secretarial support.
	Linda Farrell	Personal Secretary-Executive Officer	0.5			Provision of administrative and secretarial support.

*Mr. Geoghegan's salary is paid from my Department's vote but he is based in the Department of the Taoiseach.

As outlined in their contracts the above staff had the option of joining the Non-contributory Pension Scheme for Non-established State Employees or having their membership of an approved private pension fund paid for by the Department subject to certain conditions. Five are members of the Non-contributory Scheme and two have private pensions. The cost of contributions to the above scheme is 1½% of net pay. The salary scales for all administrative grades are available on the Department of Finance website (www.finance.gov.ie).

International Agreements.

246. **Deputy Joanna Tuffy** asked the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government the position regarding the signing, ratification and implementation of the Aarhus Convention, as well as the transposing of the public participation directive into law; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2631/09]

Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government (Deputy John Gormley): Ireland signed the Aarhus Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-Making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters on 25 June 1998. Progress towards ratification of the Convention is closely aligned with work at EU level and, in that context, the European Union has adopted two Directives as part of the ratification process for the Convention. These deal with public access to environmental information (2003/4/EC) and public participation in certain environmental decision-making procedures (2003/35/EC).

The European Communities (Access to Information on the Environment) Regulations 2007 came into effect on 1 May 2007. These Regulations transpose EU Directive 2003/4/EC on Public access to environmental information. The process to transpose the Public Participation Directive is well advanced, with legislation completed to amend the majority of the relevant consent systems. The work to amend the remaining outstanding consent systems will be finalised by the Departments concerned as soon as possible. When this work has been completed I, along with the Minister for Foreign Affairs, will ensure that the instrument of ratification of the Aarhus Convention is submitted to Government and laid before the Dáil as soon as possible.

Herbicide Controls.

247. **Deputy Joanna Tuffy** asked the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government if his Department has or plans to have guidelines for issuing to local authorities regarding the spraying of herbicides or pesticides, including 2,4,D; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2633/09]

248. **Deputy Joanna Tuffy** asked the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government if there are plans by his Department to require local authorities to give advance notice to nearby residents prior to any spraying of herbicides or pesticides, including 2,4,D; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2634/09]

Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government (Deputy John Gormley): I propose to take Questions Nos. 247 and 248 together.

Under Section 40 of the Wildlife Acts, the cutting, grubbing, burning or destruction by other means of vegetation growing on uncultivated land or in hedges or ditches is prohibited during the nesting and breeding season for birds and wildlife, from 1 March to 31 August. This is subject to certain specific exceptions. In most instances, it is required by law that work to hedgerows is undertaken outside this period. However, it is accepted that in some cases, trim-

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ming may be necessary, during the prohibited period, on grounds of public health and safety, notably when new road hazards are detected that require hedge trimming or vegetation clearance. Local authorities and relevant public bodies are reminded annually of their responsibilities in this regard.

I was seriously concerned in relation to the spraying of road verges in May 2008 by Meath County Council. My Department's National Parks and Wildlife Service has initiated a prosecution under the Wildlife Acts against both Meath County Council and the Company which carried out the spraying for the Council, and I understand that a date for the hearing of the case will be set in March, 2009. Following this incident, my Department issued a circular at the end of May, 2008 reminding all local authorities that extensive, untargeted spraying of road verges with herbicide is, *prima facie*, an offence under Section 40 of the Wildlife Acts, and it is my policy to prosecute in such cases. The question of advance notice to nearby residents should not therefore arise.

Departmental Expenditure.

249. **Deputy Phil Hogan** asked the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government the cost to the Exchequer of the administration and operation of each regional authority; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2648/09]

Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government (Deputy John Gormley): Under the Local Government Act, 1991 (Regional Authorities) (Establishment) Order 1993 by which they were established, the administration and operational costs of Regional Authorities are met principally by way of contributions from their constituent local authorities.

Local Authority Housing.

250. **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** asked the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government when his Department will make funding available for the redevelopment of a block of flats (details supplied) in Dublin 2. [2651/09]

Minister of State at the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government (Deputy Michael Finneran): The redevelopment of the Charlemont Street flat complex is one of a number of projects included in Dublin City Council's Housing Regeneration Programme and is currently the subject of procurement under a competitive dialogue process. It is up to Dublin City Council to finalise this process and, subject to the outcome, submit a proposal to the Department for project approval and funding from within the annual housing allocation made available to the local authority.

Water and Sewerage Schemes.

251. **Deputy Seán Sherlock** asked the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government when funding will be made available to allow construction of a new waste water treatment plant at Rathcormac, County Cork; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2654/09]

Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government (Deputy John Gormley): The Rathcormac Water and Sewerage Scheme is included for funding under the Serviced Land Initiative measure of my Department's Water Services Investment Programme 2007-2009. Work on the water supply element of the scheme has been completed and the waste water

collection system is under construction. My Department is examining an application for increased funding submitted by Cork County Council in advance of awarding the contract for the wastewater treatment plant. A decision on the application will be conveyed to the Council as soon as possible.

Local Authority Housing.

252. **Deputy Billy Timmins** asked the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government the situation with respect to an application for funds in respect of the construction of a house by Wicklow County Council (details supplied); when this application was received; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2668/09]

Minister of State at the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government (Deputy Michael Finneran): An application to construct a house at Parkmore, Baltinglass was received in my Department from Wicklow County Council on 11 December, 2006. My Department's housing inspectorate examined the proposal and was of the opinion that it would offer better value for money and better use of the available land if the Council were to build a number of houses on the land rather than a single house.

The Council was asked in February, 2007 to reconsider the proposal along these lines and to resubmit to the Department in due course. No further proposal in relation to the construction of the house was received. Following the issue of Circular N7/07 in April, 2007, the construction of a single housing unit or of small projects with a capital value of less than €500,000 may be carried out by housing authorities without prior approval of the Department subject to compliance with conditions as set out in the circular and providing funds are available within the housing allocation provided to the authority under the Social Housing Investment Programme.

Water and Sewerage Schemes.

253. **Deputy Billy Timmins** asked the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government the situation with respect to funding for a scheme (details supplied) in County Wicklow; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2669/09]

Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government (Deputy John Gormley): The Dunlavin Sewerage Scheme is included for funding in my Department's Water Services Investment Programme 2007-2009 at an estimated cost of €5.1m. My Department has approved Wicklow County Council's Preliminary Report and is awaiting submission of a construction stage budget for the scheme by the Council.

254. **Deputy Billy Timmins** asked the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government the situation with respect to funding for a scheme (details supplied) in County Wicklow; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2670/09]

Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government (Deputy John Gormley): The Arklow Sewerage Scheme is approved for funding in my Department's Water Services Investment Programme 2007-2009 at an estimated cost of €15.9 million. I understand that the unsuccessful applicant to the High Court for a judicial review of An Bord Pleanála's decision to grant approval for the proposed wastewater treatment plant has been given leave to appeal to the Supreme Court and has exercised that option. Further progress on this element of the scheme will depend on the outcome of these proceedings.

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In May 2006, my Department conveyed approval to Wicklow County Council to undertake advance works on the Northern Interceptor Sewer, costing €1.25million, in conjunction with road works adjacent to the Bridgewater development in the town. The Council is also considering whether any other elements of the scheme should be advanced pending the outcome of the Supreme Court proceedings. Any ensuing proposals will be examined as quickly as possible by my Department.

Local Authority Funding.

255. **Deputy Billy Timmins** asked the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government the applications for funding for housing, sewerage and water schemes he currently has from all local authorities in Counties Wicklow and Carlow; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2671/09]

Minister of State at the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government (Deputy Michael Finneran): Housing related projects in Counties Carlow and Wicklow for which applications for funding have been received are listed in the following tables. The most complete and up to date statement of Carlow and Wicklow County Councils' water services infrastructural requirements is set out in the Assessment of Needs produced by the Councils in response to my Department's request to all local authorities in 2006 to carry out fresh assessments of the need for capital works in their areas and to prioritise their proposals on the basis of the assessments. These assessments were taken into account in drawing up the Water Services Investment Programme 2007-2009, which is available in the Oireachtas Library.

Carlow County

Programme	Project Details
Local Authority Housing	Eastwood, Bagenalstown
Remedial Works	Phelim Wood, Tullow (Part V) Broderick's Field Hacketstown Rd. Carlow Maryborough St. Graiguecullen John Sweeney Park Carlow
Capital Assistance Scheme	Cheshire Ireland Housing Assoc. Templeowen, Abbey St, Tullow

Wicklow County

Programme	Project Details
Local Authority Housing	Emoclew, Arklow 66 Upper Dargle Road, Bray Carrigoona, U. Dargle Road, Bray Kilbride Lane, Bray Kilbride Lodge, Bray Marino Clinic site, Bray Soldier's Road, Bray St. Enda's, Upper Dargle Road, Bray Brewery Straight, Rathdrum Carnew (Phase 4)

Programme	Project Details
	Lott Lane, Kilcoole Shillelagh Three Trouts Stream, Greystones
Remedial Works	Ashlawn Court, Bray Oldcourt, Bray Parnell Park, Rathdrum Sycamore Dr. & Mountain View, Newtownmountkennedy Vartry Heights, Roundwood Woodview Park, Avoca
Capital Assistance Scheme	Sophia Housing Association, Kilmantan Place, Bray John of Gods, Ballywaltrim Cottages, Bray Sunbeam Housing Association, Vevay House, Bray Peacehaven Housing Assoc., 52 Applewood Heights, Greystones Cheshire Ireland Housing Assoc. Templeowen, Abbey St, Tullow
Capital Loan & Subsidy Scheme	Sunbeam Housing Assoc. Fairgreen Terrace, Bray
Traveller Accommodation	Coolmore, Scratnagh, Co. Wicklow Killough Lower, Kilmacanogue, Co. Wicklow
Homeless Accommodation	Bray
Affordable Housing	Blessington (Phase 2)

Election Management System.

256. **Deputy Billy Timmins** asked the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government the criteria which exist for the establishment of a polling station; and if a certain number of electors are required to keep it viable. [2672/09]

Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government (Deputy John Gormley): Section 28 of the Electoral Act 1992 requires each county or city council, in consultation with the relevant returning officer for Dáil elections, to make a polling scheme dividing the county or city into polling districts and appointing a polling place for each district. At a poll, the returning officer is required to provide a sufficient number of polling stations at the polling place. Standing advice from my Department to councils, in exercising their responsibilities in this regard, is that polling districts must meet the reasonable requirements of electors and that, subject to this, all polling districts should be of a reasonable size.

Waste Disposal.

257. **Deputy David Stanton** asked the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government his policy on incineration as a waste management option; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2692/09]

Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government (Deputy John Gormley): The Programme for Government contains a range of commitments in respect of waste management policy centred on the Government's continued support for the internationally recognised waste hierarchy which places major emphasis on the prevention, reuse and recycling of waste while minimising reliance on landfill and incineration. This commitment to the waste hierarchy

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has added significance in the context of the requirements of the EU Landfill Directive to divert waste from landfill. Meeting this obligation will entail doubling the existing level of diversion from landfill by 2010 and further increases in diversion in subsequent years. The Programme also signalled a move away from mass burn incineration towards alternative technologies.

This is a process which will be assisted by the major review of waste policy, also provided for in the Programme, which has now commenced and which will address how better to implement waste prevention and minimisation in the particular context of the emergence of new technologies for waste management, particularly those for the mechanical and biological treatment of waste which can reduce the need for both incineration and landfill.

Undue emphasis on incineration as the cornerstone of waste management policy is detrimental to the development of alternative solutions. The review may well indicate a continuing role for incineration in our future waste management strategy but I do not envisage it being on anything like the scale that was previously envisaged. On completion of this major review I will bring forward any necessary legislative and policy initiatives needed to give effect to its conclusions.

Question No. 258 answered with Question No. 239.

Broadcasting Services.

259. **Deputy Ciarán Lynch** asked the Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources when he will introduce legislation in regard to the licensing of community radio; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2493/09]

Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The Broadcasting Bill 2008, which proposes to reconstitute the statutory basis for the licensing of community radio in Ireland, is currently before the Houses of the Oireachtas. The Bill assigns responsibility for licensing community radio to the proposed Broadcasting Authority of Ireland.

Departmental Expenditure.

260. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources the annual cost of printing reports by his Department and agencies under the control of his Department; the corresponding figure for annual reports; the cost of posting these reports; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2535/09]

Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources (Deputy Eamon Ryan): Details of the cost of printing reports during 2008, by my Department, are contained in the following table. The table includes details of annual reports published and where identifiable, postage costs. It should be noted that the level of reports published will vary from year to year. Reports produced by bodies operating under the aegis of my Department, are a day to day operational matter for those bodies and one in which I have no function.

Table 2008 — Reports published by DCENR

Reports published in 2008	Cost of Publication	Postal Costs
	€	€
Consultation Paper on Next Generation Broadband	2,481.73	n/a
Third Strategic Environmental Assessment for Oil and Gas Activity in Ireland's Offshore Atlantic Waters: Rockall Basin	5,687.00	Nil
Ecofys Study on the Comparative Merits of Overhead Electricity Transmission Lines versus Underground Cables	No external costs – report printed within Department	475 (approx. 500 copies to members of public @ 0.95 per copy)
Handbook on Oil Supply Contingency Measures	Nil – published on Department's website	Nil
Minerals Development Acts, 1940 – 1995 – Report by the Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources for the six months ended 31 December 2007	342.00	75.00
Minerals Development Acts, 1940 – 1995 – Report by the Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources for the six months ended 30 June 2008	502.00	75.00
State Mining and Prospecting Facilities 1st May 2008 Competition	350.00	130.00
State Mining and Prospecting Facilities 1st November 2008 Competition	460.00	130.00
State Mining and Prospecting Facilities 1st February 2008 Competition	60.00	130.00
State Mining and Prospecting Facilities 1st August 2008 Competition	60.00	130.00
An Energy Research Strategy for Ireland	13,618.56 Please Note this Report is not an Annual Publication	Nil
Statement of Strategy 2008-2010	9,631.00	104.60 approx.
DCENR Annual Report 2007	12,465.00	97.10 approx.
GSI Annual Report 2007	7,000	n/a
Gaining Ground	2,142	n/a
All-Island Grid Study	17,021 (incl. VAT)*	n/a

Ministerial Staff.

261. **Deputy Enda Kenny** asked the Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources the cost, in tabular format, including salary and pension payments, of each of the programme managers, special advisers, assistants or other staff appointed by him in 2007 post-election and 2008; the names, titles and duties of each of the staff appointed during these periods; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2607/09]

Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The information requested by the Deputy is contained in the following table.

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Name	Title	Salary Cost 2007*	Salary Cost 2008*	Duties
Morgan Bazilian	Minister's Special Adviser	€ **45,800	€ **144,622	Duties as appropriate to the position of Special Adviser as set out in Section 11 of the Public Service Management Act 1997.
Bríd McGrath	Minister's Press Adviser	48,741	97,855	Duties as appropriate to the position of Special Adviser as set out in Section 11 of the Public Service Management Act 1997
Suzanne Duke	Special Adviser to Minister of State	40,822	91,546	Duties as appropriate to the position of Special Adviser as set out in Section 11 of the Public Service Management Act 1997
Claire Ann Byrne	Minister's Personal Assistant	22,401	51,271	To provide assistance to the Minister
Grace Milton	Minister's Personal Secretary	6,706	29,753	To provide assistance to the Minister

*Salary costs include expenses and Employer's PRSI. All of the above named, excluding Mr. Bazilian, are members of the Non-contributory Pension Scheme for Non-established State Employees.

**Mr. Bazilian is on secondment from his existing position with Sustainable Energy Ireland (SEI) and continues to receive his salary as normal from SEI. My Department refunds the salary cost for his Special Adviser post only, to SEI. Salary costs quoted above include VAT at 21%. Mr. Bazilian retains the pension arrangements of his SEI position.

Telecommunications Services.

262. **Deputy Seán Connick** asked the Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources his plans to provide access to broadband services to individuals who live in areas not covered by the national broadband scheme and who cannot access broadband for local infrastructural reasons. [2657/09]

Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources (Deputy Eamon Ryan): EU State Aid and competition rules prevent States from intervening in the areas already substantially served by broadband. While recognising that some premises within substantially served areas may have difficulties for whatever reason (long lines, pair gains, no line of sight etc) in receiving a broadband service, the NBS scheme cannot cater for such limited instances. It is expected that over time, competing service providers would be attracted to offer services in such areas, given that those areas are already commercially viable for the existing service provider(s).

Foreshore Licences.

263. **Deputy Christy O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food the acceptable timeframe for a sporting club (details supplied) in County Cork to wait for a valuation from the Valuation Office; and if this body has adequate resources to perform its duties. [2487/09]

Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Deputy Brendan Smith): Following confirmation by the Valuation Office that it would not be in a position to supply a valuation service in respect of activities on State foreshore, my Department sought approval from the Department of Finance for the use of valuers from the private sector. A number of applications for foreshore consents currently on hand cannot be progressed without valuation. The urgency of the matter has been brought to the attention of the Department of Finance which has indicated that the necessary approval is imminent.

Proposed Legislation.

264. **Deputy Joanna Tuffy** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if there are plans to amend or replace the Noxious Weeds Act 1936; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2632/09]

Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Deputy Brendan Smith): The Department is currently examining the provisions of the Noxious Weeds Act 1936 with a view to updating and strengthening the provisions in accordance with good agricultural and environmental practice and with realistic penalties.

Farm Improvement Scheme.

265. **Deputy Michael D’Arcy** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food the timeframe for decisions on applications received under the farm improvement scheme prior to its suspension on 31 October 2007 which are being processed by his Department up to the level of funding provided for the scheme in the 2006 partnership agreement, Towards 2016; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2509/09]

Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Deputy Brendan Smith): 12,675 applications were received under the Farm Improvement Scheme prior to its suspension on 31 October 2007. These applications are being processed by my Department up to the level of funding provided for the Scheme in the 2006 Partnership agreement, Towards 2016.

266. **Deputy Michael D’Arcy** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if a decision has been made on an application received under the farm improvement scheme by a person (details supplied) in County Wexford prior to its suspension on 31 October 2007 which is being processed by his Department up to the level of funding provided for the scheme in the 2006 partnership agreement, Towards 2016; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2510/09]

Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Deputy Brendan Smith): 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.

Harbours and Piers.

267. **Deputy Pat Breen** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, further to Parliamentary Question No. 120 of 22 November 2007, the position regarding the development of Doolin Pier, County Clare and the provision of a new building for the Doolin coast guard; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2512/09]

Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Deputy Brendan Smith): The pier at Doolin is the property of Clare County Council and responsibility for its repair and upkeep rests with

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the Local Authority in the first instance. My Department has received an application from Clare County Council for funding under my Department's 2009 Fishery Harbours and Coastal Infrastructure Development Programme for improvements at the pier. Their application for harbour development under the programme is currently being considered. The provision of a new building for the Doolin Coastguard is a matter for the Department of Transport and the Irish Coastguard.

Rural Environment Protection Scheme.

268. **Deputy Martin Ferris** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he is planning to close the REP scheme. [2518/09]

Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Deputy Brendan Smith): Entry to REPS 4 continues to be available to eligible applicants and I have no plans at present to restrict or close entry to the scheme.

Grant Payments.

269. **Deputy Edward O'Keeffe** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if his attention has been drawn to the fact that payment has not issued to a person (details supplied) in County Cork under the disadvantaged area scheme 2008. [2524/09]

Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Deputy Brendan Smith): An application under the 2008 Disadvantaged Areas Scheme was received from the person named on 29 April 2008; the application was accepted on the basis that the person named was awaiting the assignment of a herd number from the Department's Local Office. In this regard, it is understood that the process of assigning a herd number, including the necessary inspection of the holding of the person named, was completed within one month of the application being lodged, with the herd number being assigned on 9 May 2008.

One of the primary requirements of the 2008 Disadvantaged Areas Scheme was that applicants were required to maintain a minimum stocking density on their holding of 0.15 livestock units per forage hectare for at least three consecutive months. However, following initial processing of this application, it was established that the holding of the person named did not meet this minimum stocking density requirement, as the applicant only held the livestock for a period of two consecutive months i.e. stock only recorded as being on the holding in September (37 bovines), October (37 bovines) and December (10 bovines). Therefore, having failed to meet the minimum stocking density requirement, the person named is ineligible for payment under the 2008 Disadvantaged Areas Scheme. The person named is an applicant under REPS 4, payments in respect of which have only recently begun to issue.

Departmental Expenditure.

270. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food the annual cost of printing reports by his Department and agencies under the control of his Department; the corresponding figure for annual reports; the cost of posting these reports; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2533/09]

Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Deputy Brendan Smith): The following table gives details of reports published by my Department during 2008 together with publishing costs and postage costs where available.

Name of Report	Production cost	Postage
	€	€
2007 Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food Annual Report	22,788	50
Annual Review and Outlook	25,134	700
Agri-vision 2015 (2nd Progress Report)	6,070	
2008-2010 Strategy Statement	20,002	50
Audit Committee Annual Report 2007	1,218	
Report on net contribution of Agri-food Sector	2,560	700
Farm Animal Welfare Advisory Committee Review 2007	1,747	600
Cattle Movement Monitoring System (CMMS) Annual Statistical Report	7,780	700
Quality Food Founded on Science — Research Achievements 2007	10,619	
Rural Development Programme 2007-2013	22,089	630
Pesticides Residues in Food Report	8,543	30
Forage Maize Varieties (Irish Recommended list 2008) Grass & Clover (Recommended list for Ireland 2008) Cereal Varieties (Irish recommended list 2008)	4,060	1,000
Agriculture Appeals Office — Annual Report 2007	9,639	27
Annual Report of the Licensing Authority for Sea Fishing Boats	1,732	
Killybegs Marketing Strategy Report	2,585	

The publication of reports by Bodies under the aegis of my Department is a day-to-day operational matter for the Bodies themselves.

Grant Payments.

271. **Deputy John O'Mahony** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food when a person (details supplied) in County Mayo will receive payment under the farm waste management scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2562/09]

Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Deputy Brendan Smith): The person named is an applicant for grant-aid under the Farm Waste Management Scheme. A decision will be made in respect of the application as soon as possible.

272. **Deputy John O'Mahony** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food the reason persons who have been passed for payment and had their works approved under the farm waste management scheme are not receiving their payment; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2563/09]

273. **Deputy John O'Mahony** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food the reason payments for the farm waste management scheme have been stopped since January 2009; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2564/09]

279. **Deputy Michael Creed** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food the reason for the delay in the farm waste management scheme grants; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2678/09]

Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Deputy Brendan Smith): I propose to take Questions Nos. 272, 273 and 279 together.

The deadline for completion of work and the submission of claims for grant payment under the Farm Waste Management Scheme expired on 31 December 2008 although applicants were

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permitted to submit certain supporting documentation up to 9 January 2009. In view of the exceptional number of claims received, my Department is undertaking a review of the situation including assessment of the number of fully documented applications and estimation of the overall cost of the claims and I will be having further discussions with the Minister for Finance on the matter. Inspections by my Department's staff to verify claims are continuing in the meantime.

274. **Deputy Seymour Crawford** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food when a person (details supplied) in County Monaghan will be granted their farm waste management grant; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2571/09]

Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Deputy Brendan Smith): The person named is an applicant for grant aid under the Farm Waste Management Scheme. My Department is currently examining the application and a decision will be made as soon as possible.

Ministerial Staff.

275. **Deputy Enda Kenny** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food the cost, in tabular format, including salary and pension payments, of each of the programme managers, special advisers, assistants or other staff appointed by him in 2007 post-election and 2008; the names, titles and duties of each of the staff appointed during these periods; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2605/09]

Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Deputy Brendan Smith): I have detailed below the annual salary scale for each of the staff appointed by me for the period 7/5/2008 to 31/12/2008:

Name	Title	Responsibility	Salary Scale
Dermot Ryan	Special Adviser	Adviser	€86,168 – €100,191 (plus 10% allowance)
Philip Hannon	Press Adviser	Media Adviser	€86,168 – €100,191
Nuala Brady	Personal Assistant	Constituency Office	€46,588 – €55,030
Celine Mullen	Personal Secretary	Constituency Office	€30,566 – €45,416

With regard to the pension arrangements, one Adviser is in receipt of 11% of current salary in lieu of membership of a Civil Service Superannuation Scheme. The remaining staff are members of the appropriate Civil Service Superannuation Scheme.

Installation Aid Scheme.

276. **Deputy Paul Connaughton** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food his proposals to help young farmers and their parents who had entered into contracts to have the farm signed over with a view to making an application for the installation aid grant in view of the fact that the scheme was suspended in budget 2009; if he is examining situations whereby people have endured financial hardship by this change of policy; if he will look favourably on extenuating circumstances in which such financial hardship has been caused; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2643/09]

Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Deputy Brendan Smith): Only fully completed applications made under the Young Farmers' Installation Scheme and received up to and including 14 October 2008 are being processed by my Department. In the event of the Scheme being re opened for applications, consideration will be given to prioritising certain categories

of farmers who had taken certain actions based on an intention to join the Scheme before its suspension.

Herbicide Controls.

277. **Deputy Joanna Tuffy** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food his Department's policies in respect of the spraying of 2,4,D; if it has guidelines in respect of this or other pesticides or herbicides; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2646/09]

Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Deputy Brendan Smith): Pesticide substances, including 2,4-D, are assessed for health and environmental effects and risks by experts from the European Commission, the European Food Safety Agency and the Member States and are approved if they exhibit no unacceptable risks. Pesticide products, containing those EU approved substances, are authorised in Ireland by the Pesticide Control Service of my Department in accordance with Regulations implementing relevant EU Directives. Only authorised pesticide products may be marketed and used in Ireland and pesticides with unacceptable health or environmental risks will not be authorised.

The Regulations also require that all pesticides must be used in accordance with the Good Agricultural Practice (GAP) specified in the approval and in accordance with Good Plant Protection Practice. Inter alia, the approval sets down the areas to be treated, the rates, timing and frequency of use and contains information on how the pesticide may be safely used.

Fishing Industry Development.

278. **Deputy Seán Connick** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food the potential benefits for the fishing industry in County Wexford that might arise as a result of the recent signing of a memorandum of understanding with Russia on trade in fishery products. [2656/09]

Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Deputy Brendan Smith): The Sea Fisheries Protection Authority signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the Russian Federation on 14 January 2009 in relation to the export of fishery products. This arose from new requirements of the Russian Federation to confirm the sanitary and veterinary status of fish exports. The Memorandum will permit the continued importation of fishery products from European Union Member States. The benefit of the Memorandum for Ireland is that it allows the export of fishery products to continue to the Russian Federation without interruption. Seven thousand, three hundred and seventy eight tonnes of seafood valued at €15M were exported to the Russian Federation in the first nine months of 2008.

Question No. 279 answered with Question No. 272.

Grant Payments.

280. **Deputy Michael Creed** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food the reason for the delay in payment of grants under the rural environmental protection scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2685/09]

Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Deputy Brendan Smith): REPS 4 is a measure under the current Rural Development Programme 2007–13 and is subject to EU Regulations which require detailed administrative checks on all applications, including plan checks, to be completed before the first payments issue. The first payments for 2008 REPS 4 applications will issue this week to those whose applications require no correction following the administrative checks. However queries have arisen during the administrative checks on a significant

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number of REPS 4 applications and these are under examination. Further payments will continue to be made as applications are cleared.

Departmental Agencies.

281. **Deputy Seán Sherlock** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food the names of the members of the board of Bord Bia; the organisations or sectors they represent; the length of time they have been serving members of the board; when each of their terms of office will come to an end; when the new appointment will be made once vacancies arise; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2715/09]

Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Deputy Brendan Smith): The current board membership of An Bord Bia is as follows:

Board Member	Length of service	Expiry of present term	Sector of Experience
Mr. Dan Browne (Chairman)	8 years (Chairman since April 2008)	10/04/2011	
Dr. Noel Cawley	13 years	04/09/2009	Dairy, food
Ms. Brid Rodgers	5 years	14/02/2010	
Mr. Vincent Cleary	9 months	10/04/2011	Organic dairying
Mr. Joseph Hyland	3 years	09/04/2011	Meat
Mr. Ray Carolan	3 years	10/04/2011	Meat, livestock breeding
Ms. Mary J. Byrne	6 years	31/01/2009	Dept. of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food ¹
Mr. Pádraig Walshe	3 years	31/01/2009	President, IFA
Mr. Mel O'Rourke	3 years	31/01/2009	Horticulture
Mr. Jackie Cahill	3 years	14/02/2010	President, ICMSA
Mr. Michael Kilcoyne	9 years	31/01/2009	Consumer requirements ²
Mr. Frank Hayes	2 years	14/02/2010	Consumer foods
Mr. Kieran Dunne	4 years	25/11/2010	Horticulture
Mrs. Katherine O'Leary	4 years	17/09/2010	Farming, domestic science teacher ³
Dr. Paul Cusack	9 months	27/04/2011	Horticulture

¹ Under the Act one member of the board shall be an officer of the Minister.

² Nominated by the Consumer Association of Ireland.

³ Nominated by the Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment.

Grant Payments.

282. **Deputy Seán Sherlock** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if it is sufficient for an applicant under the farmer rate of payment for the native woodland scheme to have a herd number or are there other qualifying criteria required for qualification; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2756/09]

Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Deputy Brendan Smith): Possession of an active herd number in the year the plantation is established will entitle the applicant to the farmer rate of premium.

Alternative Farm Enterprises.

283. **Deputy Seán Sherlock** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if grant

aid is available from his Department or from the EU to encourage farmers to introduce sustainable energy initiatives on their farms; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2757/09]

Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Deputy Brendan Smith): The development of sustainable energy initiatives in Ireland is first and foremost a matter for the Department of Communications, Energy and Natural Resources who have overall responsibility for energy policy. The initiatives undertaken by my Department complement the measures introduced by the Department of Communications, Energy and Natural Resources and are primarily to encourage farmers to produce feedstock for biofuel and biomass production, to support the production of wood energy and to support agri-energy research.

In line with our commitments in the National Bioenergy Action Plan, my Department introduced a National Energy Crop Premium worth €80 per hectare to improve the profitability of growing energy crops. We also introduced a Bioenergy Scheme to encourage farmers to grow willow and miscanthus for heat and electricity generation. We are aiding establishment with grants of €1,450 per hectare. To date the Scheme has aided the planting of some 1,800 hectares. I have provided sufficient funding in 2009 for a further 1,800 hectares. EU supports for energy crops are available in the form of the Single Farm Payment and the EU premium of €45 per hectare under the EU Energy Crops Scheme.

Over the past three years, my Department has greatly enhanced our support for research projects that relate to biofuels and energy crops. Under the Department's Research Stimulus Fund Programme we have awarded grant assistance of over €6 million to 13 projects involving research into liquid biofuels, energy crop production, on-farm anaerobic digestion and second-generation biofuels. Projects supported under the Stimulus programme will complement the research work being done by Teagasc and others in this area. The production of wood energy can generate new market opportunities for farmers and local forest owners. My Department has allocated €1.1m under the Wood Biomass Harvesting Scheme to support developing enterprises in the wood chip supply sector.

As regards aid for on-farm projects, my Department is supporting the development of anaerobic digestion facilities by providing grant aid to farmers for pilot projects under the Scheme of Investment Aid for Demonstration On Farm Waste Processing Facilities. Anaerobic Digestion is a proven technology that extracts energy in the form of biogas from organic waste. In 2007, ten projects were awarded grants under the Scheme. The maximum investment ceiling is €1 million per project and the applicable grant rate is 40%. The 2007-2013 Rural Development Programme provides for the continuation of a grant scheme for the development of such facilities.

Pigmeat Sector.

284. **Deputy Michael Creed** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food the reason for the delay by his Department in slaughtering all the contaminated pigs arising from the recent pork dioxin scandal and in particular the breeding sows; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2761/09]

Minister for Education and Science (Deputy Batt O'Keeffe): There has been no delay in my Department in dealing with the issues that arose in connection with pigs that have been or may have been exposed to contaminated feed. Immediately following receipt of the PCB positive results, movement restrictions were placed on 17 pig farms. There were in excess of 130,000 pigs on the farms from where pigs are to be slaughtered.

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After consultation with the Commission of the European Union, I established a Compensation Framework for the determination of applications for ex-gratia compensation that may be paid as a result of the killing or slaughter of pigs deemed to be unfit for the food chain. Agreement was reached with pig farmers in relation to the calculation of market value for certain categories of pigs and to date some 100,000 pigs have been slaughtered. I acknowledge the co-operation of the farmers in this regard. Payments in respect of pigs slaughtered under the Compensation Framework are being processed on an ongoing basis. Discussions on this approach to market valuations in this case of other categories of pigs, including sows, are nearing completion and I would hope that slaughtering of these can commence shortly.

Physical Education.

285. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Education and Science the action he proposes to take to encourage and promote sporting activities including coaching in schools at all levels with a view to fostering a long-term interest by pupils and students culminating in participation at international level; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2684/09]

Minister for Education and Science (Deputy Batt O’Keeffe): At primary level, physical education (PE) is one of the six secular curriculum areas in the revised Primary Curriculum. The curriculum was revised in 1999 and implemented on a phased basis, with PE being introduced in 2005/6 prefaced by a national programme of in-service training for teachers. At post-primary level, in accordance with the Rules and Programme for Secondary Schools physical education should form part of the curriculum. The programme that each school plans and delivers should be based on the Department’s approved syllabuses and the teaching hours should be registered on the school timetable. A revised syllabus for physical education for junior cycle, as a non-examination subject, was introduced on a phased basis, beginning in September 2003 and a national support team was put in place to assist in its implementation.

Physical education is an integral part of the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) programme. All LCA students must take two modules—Leisure Studies and Health Related Fitness—and there are four additional modules from which they can make further choices. It should be noted that the physical education syllabuses both at primary and second level have been developed on the understanding that facilities available in schools vary. Consequently, they offer flexibility regarding the physical activities undertaken so that each individual school can design a programme appropriate to the needs of its students that can be delivered using the resources and supports available to that school. The provision of new physical education facilities such as PE Halls, general purpose rooms and outdoor play areas, along with the improvement of existing facilities, is normally considered within the design brief for building projects at schools.

Quite apart from physical education classes, schools in Ireland have a strong and proud tradition of developing sport outside of the school time-table. Sports organisations such as the Gaelic Athletic Association, Basketball Ireland, the Football Association of Ireland provide extensive opportunities for schools to participate in sport.

The Irish Sports Council, in co-operation with bodies such as the FAI and Local Sports Partnerships, has developed a national Buntús Primary Schools Initiative through which additional supports — training, resource cards and equipment — are provided to support teachers and others in introducing young people to sport, and to complement the Physical Education curriculum. The initiative aims to raise the profile of physical activity and sport, improve in-service training opportunities for teachers, assist governing bodies of sport to develop and deliver appropriate supports for teachers, and provide enjoyable and meaningful activity for children which supports the delivery of the curriculum.

A special PE funding package of €3 million issued to post-primary schools in 2007, providing a grant of €4,000 per school towards the cost of replacing and upgrading PE equipment. This grant was issued, as a once-off measure, to enable schools to replace older equipment such as goalposts, PE mats, benches etc. The second ‘State of the Nation’s Children’ report launched by the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs found that children in Ireland are doing well on physical activity, ranking first across the 41 participating countries in being physically active for at least 4 hours per week.

School Staffing.

286. **Deputy Ciarán Lynch** asked the Minister for Education and Science the action he will take to avoid pupils being sent home unexpectedly from a school (details supplied) in County Cork in the absence of a special needs teacher on uncertified sick leave; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2488/09]

Minister for Education and Science (Deputy Batt O’Keeffe): As a result of the 2009 Budget provisions for Education, arising from current economic challenges and following subsequent proposals from the management bodies of primary schools, new arrangements are being put into place for substitution cover for uncertified sick leave for teachers in primary schools. In primary schools there will be substitute cover for teachers on uncertified sick leave other than on the first day of absence. In a school where more than one teacher is absent on the first day of uncertified sick leave, substitute cover will be provided for the second and subsequent teachers that are absent. In schools with two teachers or less cover will be provided where any classroom teacher is absent. Circular 0115/2008 outlining the full details has been posted on my Departments website at www.education.ie.

Substitution cover will continue to be provided for all other categories of absences currently available such as certified sick leave and maternity leave. In the period until the end of the school year, there will be a full review of the substitution and supervision scheme and related matters in conjunction with the school management bodies and teacher unions with a view to making up the additional expenditure and thereby ensuring that the budgetary parameters are met.

As we manage through this difficult period I am asking teachers in all schools to co-operate fully with school managers in coping with this change in the interest of the students. I am also requesting the school managerial bodies to ensure that the supervision/substitution scheme is operated with maximum effectiveness in all schools.

Schools Building Projects.

287. **Deputy Billy Timmins** asked the Minister for Education and Science the position regarding the proposed new building for a school (details supplied) in County Wicklow; if sanction will be given in order that the building can proceed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2496/09]

Minister for Education and Science (Deputy Batt O’Keeffe): The project to which the Deputy refers is at an early stage of architectural planning. The progression of all large scale building projects, including this project, from initial design stage through to construction phase will be considered in the context of my Department’s multi-annual School Building and Modernisation Programme. However, in light of current competing demands on the capital budget of the Department, it is not possible to give an indicative timeframe for the progression of the project at this time.

Educational Disadvantage.

288. **Deputy Pat Breen** asked the Minister for Education and Science if his attention has been drawn to the impact that education cutbacks are having on a school (details supplied) in County Clare; his proposals to address this lack of funding; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2497/09]

Minister of State at the Department of Education and Science (Deputy Seán Haughey): The school to which the Deputy refers is among the schools that were judged by an independent identification process in 2005 not to have a sufficient level of disadvantage among their pupils to warrant their inclusion in DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunities in Schools), the Action Plan for educational inclusion. The next identification process is scheduled to be held at the end of the current DEIS programme which runs from 2005-2010. There will not be an opportunity before this to be included in the current DEIS programme of supports.

This school together with 26 other urban primary and 73 post primary schools retained resources, both human and financial services under pre-existing schemes and programmes for addressing educational disadvantage. When DEIS was introduced, a commitment was given as a concessionary measure to these schools that they would retain a level of support for the duration of the DEIS Initiative.

While it is appreciated that the discontinuation of these resources will impact on these schools, given the current volatile and challenging economic climate, difficult decisions had to be made in order to contain public sector spending. One of these decisions was to advance the withdrawal of such supports from non-DEIS schools to the beginning of the next school year.

The main focus of Social Inclusion measures will be to retain resources in DEIS schools. There is a need to focus targeted resources on the schools in most need and this approach is in line with the broad thrust of the recommendations of the Comptroller and Auditor General which are set out in his report on Primary Disadvantage of 2006, which recommended that my Department should focus its educational disadvantage measures on those schools serving the most disadvantaged communities. The grant provided to the school referred to, for the provision of teaching English to newcomer children, has not been affected by the 2009 Budget announcements.

School Staffing.

289. **Deputy Pat Breen** asked the Minister for Education and Science, further to Parliamentary Questions Nos. 450, 451, 452, 453, 455 and 456 of 4 November 2008, if his attention has been drawn to the impact that the education cutbacks will have on a school (details supplied) in County Clare; his proposals to redress the problems for this school; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2507/09]

Minister for Education and Science (Deputy Batt O’Keeffe): The 2009 Budget required difficult choices to be made across all areas of public expenditure. These decisions were made to control public expenditure and to ensure sustainability in the long run. In this respect Education, while protected to a much greater extent than most other areas of public expenditure, could not be totally spared. The various impacts at school level in relation to both staffing and grant levels were included in the Budget day announcements. Even with the budget measures in place there will still be a significantly increased borrowing requirement in 2009.

My Department will be advising individual schools in the normal way in relation to their staffing allocations. The staffing schedule will be published and it is a transparent and clear way of ensuring that schools are treated consistently and fairly and know where they stand.

The preparatory work for staffing allocations has commenced with the processing of enrolment data that has been received from schools. The staffing allocation processes including notification to schools will commence shortly. The allocation process includes appellate mechanisms under which schools can appeal against the allocation due to them under the staffing schedules. The final allocation to a school is also a function of the operation of the redeployment panels which provide for the retention of a teacher in an existing school if a new post is not available within the agreed terms of the scheme.

I have no difficulty in setting out for this House or for the public generally the overall net impact of the budget measures on aggregate levels or teacher numbers in schools for the 2009/10 school year. I can do this when the allocation process has been completed. At this time the priority for my Department within the resources available to it is to carry out these processes in a timely manner. Diverting resources in order to create staffing or funding profiles for the school referred to be the Deputy could not be justified and would in fact impede the process.

Schools Building Projects.

290. **Deputy Michael D’Arcy** asked the Minister for Education and Science his plans to ensure that all schools constructed under public private partnerships in the future will be of the full-build type rather than pre-constructed units as a means of generating employment; if building workers based here will be used in their construction; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2514/09]

Minister for Education and Science (Deputy Batt O’Keeffe): My Department is responsible for all aspects of the assessment and approval of schools including the decision to procure schools via Public Private Partnership (PPP). This included the setting of project budgets, the development of output specifications in accordance with Department guidelines and other service requirements and agreeing the Public Sector Benchmark (compiled with the assistance of the National Development Finance Agency (NDFA)).

Once my Department has carried out these functions, the project bundle is handed over to the NDFA for procurement. All Education PPP projects are offered to the market by the NDFA in accordance with EU and National procurement guidelines and are advertised in the Official Journal of the European Union (OJEU), Government e-tenders website and in the National Media. It is then open to all developers and building contractors wishing to participate to submit an expression of interest to the NDFA for any particular PPP project either independently or as part of a consortium.

When the shortlisted bidders are selected (usually 3 bidders) they are required to design and deliver schools that meet the Department’s requirements as outlined in the output specifications and the proposed designs are evaluated by my Department and NDFA to ensure they are in accordance with the Department’s building guidelines for new schools.

Departmental Expenditure.

291. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Education and Science the annual cost of printing reports by his Department and agencies under the control of his Department; the corresponding figure for annual reports; the cost of posting these reports; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2538/09]

Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Deputy Brendan Smith): In 2008, the total cost of printing reports by my Department, including the cost of design work prior to printing, was

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€338,524.89. This figure is inclusive of €22,577.05 for the design and printing of annual reports including the Department's Annual Statistical Report.

The amount spent by my Department on posting reports to schools etc. cannot be separated from the overall cost of postage including bulk postage issued from my Department. My Department's total expenditure on bulk postage, which is the general means of distributing reports, was €1,655,664.61 in 2008. This figure includes the cost of posting a variety of materials to schools and teachers including payslips (approximately 2.1 million payslips are issued annually), publications, circulars etc. It should also be noted that my Department agrees on occasion to circulate relevant materials produced by other organisations to schools, and that therefore the postage cost given above does not exclusively relate to material emanating from my Department.

My Department regularly reviews its postage arrangements with a view to achieving maximum value for money. In this regard, my Department introduced a system of regular bulk mailings to schools in order to avail of discounted rates and to minimise postal costs. In addition, the roll-out of the Department's Online Claims System, which enables schools to submit claims electronically to the Department, has resulted in a reduction in postage costs at both Department and school level of approximately €500,000 per annum. In a further effort to reduce the costs of printing and distribution of publications in 2009 it is now corporate policy within my Department that all publications will be web based and will only be printed and distributed by post in exceptional circumstances.

With regard to bodies under the aegis of my Department the expenditure incurred in relation to printing costs is a matter for each agency and this information is not collated centrally.

Site Acquisitions.

292. **Deputy Leo Varadkar** asked the Minister for Education and Science if his Department has entered into discussions regarding the purchase of land adjacent to a school (details supplied) in Dublin 15 for educational purposes; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2552/09]

Minister for Education and Science (Deputy Batt O'Keeffe): I wish to advise the Deputy that my Department purchased a site for the school in question. There are no ongoing discussions by my Department in relation to adjacent lands for the school referred to by the Deputy.

Schools Building Projects.

293. **Deputy Billy Timmins** asked the Minister for Education and Science the position regarding the proposed new building for a school (details supplied) in County Wicklow; if sanction will be given in order that the building can proceed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2561/09]

Minister for Education and Science (Deputy Batt O'Keeffe): I am pleased to inform the Deputy that on the 23rd January last, I announced details of 10 major school building projects which are to proceed to tender and construction. The project for the school to which the Deputy refers, which is for a new school, is included in this list. While all of the projects concerned were previously offered for tender, they will now be re-offered under the new form of contract for public capital projects to get better value for money. The projects are now to start the re-tendering process so that construction work can get under way as quickly as possible. My officials will contact each school shortly to guide them on the next steps to be taken.

294. **Deputy Enda Kenny** asked the Minister for Education and Science the position regarding the provision of a new primary school for Mayo Abbey, Claremorris, County Mayo; if his attention has been drawn to the availability of a suitable site and that all other requirements are being met; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2575/09]

Minister for Education and Science (Deputy Batt O’Keeffe): My Department received an application from the school in question in December 2008 for funding for a proposed new 3 classroom school. My Department will be in contact with the school in relation to its application.

ICT Support Service.

295. **Deputy Enda Kenny** asked the Minister for Education and Science if an information and communications technology adviser has been appointed to the Mayo Education Centre; if his attention has been drawn to the fact that 230 schools as a consequence are without the benefit of professional advice in this regard; the number and centres to which they are appointed; the budget allocated for 2009; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2576/09]

Minister for Education and Science (Deputy Batt O’Keeffe): A Value for Money Review of the ICT Support Service, addressing the work of the National Centre for Technology in Education (NCTE), the ICT Advisory Service and specific posts assigned to the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, was undertaken by my Department. While concluding that the ICT Support Service was generally effective and efficient, the Report recognised that each school must plan and execute its own policy for ICT integration across the curriculum. It concluded that, ten years on, the resources utilised by the ICT Advisory Service operating from the regional Education Centres would be better employed focussing supports for ICT leadership and change within each school.

There were three vacancies among the 21 ICT Advisor posts attached to the regional full-time Education Centres in June 2008 and a further post was due to be vacated following the retirement of an ICT advisor. Of the remaining 17 posts, 14 were filled by teachers on secondment from their teaching duties and three were filled on a non-secondment contract basis. These posts had been renewed annually. Against this background, the Education Centres were advised by the NCTE that my Department was not prepared to renew secondment arrangements for the 14 teachers seconded as ICT Advisors. The implementation of these arrangements was discussed with the Education Centres and schools concerned and any difficulties arising in specific schools due to the return of the teachers concerned were addressed by my Department. The position in relation to the three non-seconded ICT advisor posts is that my Department authorised the NCTE to fund the relevant Education Centres to offer temporary short-term contracts for the persons concerned for the remainder of the calendar year. While I understand that the three persons concerned did not wish to avail of this offer, my Department is engaged in ongoing discussions with the relevant Unions.

The NCTE continues to provide advice and support to schools on the integration of ICT into teaching and learning and to provide a range of ICT continuing professional development courses for teachers. The NCTE is working closely with the support services supported by my Department. The role of the school’s ICT coordinating teacher, with the support of the school principal, is being prioritised as central in the provision of ongoing ICT support and advice to teachers. Local school-based and peer to peer support has been identified internationally as the most effective way to further ICT integration in schools. This emphasis on “in school” promotion of, and support for, ICT integration in teaching and learning is consistent with

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the Reports of the Strategy Group, Investing Effectively in Information and Communication Technology in Schools 2008-2013, and the evaluation report undertaken by my Department’s Inspectorate, ICT in Schools, which I published last July.

In this context, the NCTE is finalising a handbook, Planning and Implementing e-Learning in your School, for principals and ICT co-ordinating teachers. A professional development course for ICT coordinating teachers on the development of e-Learning Plans is also available. It is intended to provide nationwide seminars on e-Learning and the first tranche of these seminars, targeting ICT coordinating teachers in post-primary schools were held late last year. The NCTE has set up a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE), accessible by all ICT coordinating teachers who have attended the seminars. This VLE will be used as a method of organising CPD and support groups at local level. It is also an efficient channel of communication for the NCTE with this group of teachers, who are already actively exchanging resources and ideas in this online community.

Schools Building Projects.

296. **Deputy Enda Kenny** asked the Minister for Education and Science the reason fees due have not been paid to a firm (details supplied) in respect of work submitted; when these fees will be paid; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2577/09]

Minister for Education and Science (Deputy Batt O’Keeffe): In December last, my Department wrote to the school to which the Deputy refers approving payment of fees in respect of the stage which that building project has reached. My Department is currently awaiting the submission of invoices for the fees in question.

297. **Deputy Enda Kenny** asked the Minister for Education and Science the reason stage three at a school (details supplied) in County Mayo has not been approved; the reason a firm involved has not been authorised to issue a fee account after ten months; his views on the fact that the firm involved has had to pay costs, salaries and overheads; if he will therefore direct that payment due from his Department be made forthwith; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2578/09]

Minister for Education and Science (Deputy Batt O’Keeffe): Officials from the Planning & Building Unit of my Department have recently been in contact with the school in relation to this matter. The school has been informed that the stage submission has been accepted in principle and that it is now in order for the design team to submit fee invoices in respect of their work to date.

Ministerial Staff.

298. **Deputy Enda Kenny** asked the Minister for Education and Science the cost, in tabular format, including salary and pension payments, of each of the programme managers, special advisers, assistants or other staff appointed by him in 2007 post-election and 2008; the names, titles and duties of each of the staff appointed during these periods; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2610/09]

Minister for Education and Science (Deputy Batt O’Keeffe): The information requested by the Deputy is set out in the table. In June 2007, following the General Election, the Minister for Education and Science Ms Mary Hanafin, T.D., appointed the following staff:

Name	Title	Salary scale at time of appointment	Pension Arrangements
Ms. Averil Power	Special Advisor	€82,016 – €101,440	Member of the Non-contributory Pension Scheme for Non-established State Employees Member of the Spouses and Children's Contributory Pension Scheme for Non-established State Employees (Contribution of 1.5% of net salary)
Ms. Geraldine Butler, Civil Servant	Press Officer	€62,990 – €78,543	Member of the Non-contributory Scheme for Established Civil Servants Member of the Spouses and Children's Contributory Pension Scheme for Established Civil Servants (Contribution of 1.5% of net salary)
Mr. Carl Gibney	Personal Assistant	€44,314 – €56,250	Member of the Non-contributory Pension Scheme for Non-established State Employees Member of the Spouses and Children's Contributory Pension Scheme for Non-established State Employees (Contribution of 1.5% of net salary)
Ms. Paula Power	Personal Secretary	€22,064 – €42,571	Member of the Non-contributory Pension Scheme for Non-established State Employees Member of the Spouses and Children's Contributory Pension Scheme for Non-established State Employees (Contribution of 1.5% of net salary)

I have appointed the following staff since I was appointed Minister for Education and Science:

Name	Title	Current salary scale	Pension Arrangements
Ms. Deirdre McDonnell	Special Advisor	€90,702 – €112,191	Member of the Contributory Pension scheme for Established Civil Servants (Contribution of 5% broken down to 3.5% of net salary and 1.5% of gross salary) Member of the Spouses and Children's Contributory Pension Scheme for Established Civil Servants (Contribution of 1.5% of net salary)
Mr. Bernard Mallee	Special Advisor (with responsibility for press and communications)	€86,168 – €107,485	Member of the Non-contributory Pension Scheme for Non-established State Employees Member of the Spouses and Children's Contributory Pension Scheme for Non-established State Employees (Contribution of 1.5% of net salary)
Ms. Katherine Woods	Personal Assistant	€46,558 – €55,030	Member of the Non-contributory Pension Scheme for Non-established State Employees Member of the Spouses and Children's Contributory Pension Scheme for Non-established State Employees (Contribution of 1.5% of net salary)
Ms. Mary O'Keefe	Personal Secretary	€30,566 – €50,410	Member of the Non-contributory Pension Scheme for Non-established State Employees Member of the Spouses and Children's Contributory Pension Scheme for Non-established State Employees (Contribution of 1.5% of net salary)

These appointments and the salaries paid are in accordance with the Department of Finance Instructions relating to the Appointment of Ministerial Private Office Staff.

Special Educational Needs.

299. **Deputy Seán Sherlock** asked the Minister for Education and Science the minimum number of pupils with special needs required to establish a special needs class within a mainstream primary school; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2655/09]

Minister for Education and Science (Deputy Batt O’Keeffe): The pupil teacher ratio for the establishment of special classes for children with special educational needs attached to mainstream primary schools and special schools is determined by reference to the recommendations outlined in the Report of the Special Education Review Committee, 1993, also known as the SERC Report. These ratios range from 6:1 to 11:1 depending on the level of disability.

The Deputy will be aware that my Department’s policy is to support the inclusive education of students with special educational needs across the schools system. In this context, a range of supports are provided to schools to enable them cater for pupils with special educational needs. The supports available include additional teaching support, special needs assistant support, school transport and grants for the purchase of teaching materials and specialised equipment.

As the Deputy will also be aware, the National Council for Special Education (NCSE), through the local Special Educational Needs Organisers (SENOs), is responsible for processing applications from primary and post primary schools for special educational needs supports. This includes the establishment of special classes in various geographical areas as required. All schools have the names and contact details of their local SENO. Parents may also contact their local SENO directly to discuss their child’s special educational needs, using the contact details available on www.ncse.ie.

Institutes of Technology.

300. **Deputy Seán Connick** asked the Minister for Education and Science, further to Parliamentary Question No. 539 of 29 October 2008, when consideration will be finalised on the application by Waterford Institute of Technology for designation as a university. [2658/09]

Minister for Education and Science (Deputy Batt O’Keeffe): The position is that applications have been received from three higher education institutions for designation as Universities; Waterford Institute of Technology, Dublin Institute of Technology and Cork Institute of Technology. The issue of university designation does not just affect the institutions and the regions from which applications have been received; it will also have a major impact on the future structure of the higher education system throughout the country. The Government wants to build on our strengths and to provide an environment where all our higher education institutions can develop in a way that best serves the country as a whole as well as the regions where they are based. Consideration of the three applications will be finalised as soon as possible.

School Transport.

301. **Deputy Seán Connick** asked the Minister for Education and Science if he will allow school pupils who attended their nearest national schools which are designated feeder schools for a secondary school, but who live outside the catchment area of those secondary schools, to avail of the school transport scheme. [2659/09]

Minister of State at the Department of Education and Science (Deputy Seán Haughey): Under the terms of my Department’s Post Primary School Transport Scheme, a pupil is eligible for transport if s/he resides 4.8 kilometres or more from her/his local post primary education centre, that is, the centre serving the catchment area in which s/he lives.

The scheme is not designed to facilitate parents who choose to send their children to a post-primary centre outside of the catchment area in which they reside. However, children who are fully eligible for transport to the post-primary centre in the catchment area in which they reside may apply for transport on a concessionary basis to a post-primary centre outside of their own catchment area — otherwise known as catchment boundary transport. These children can only

be facilitated if spare seats are available on the bus after all other eligible children travelling to their 'own' post-primary centre have been catered for. Such children have to make their own way to the nearest pick up point within that catchment area. Families should liaise with the Transport Liaison Officer, for the county in which they reside, regarding the availability of spare seats on school transport services.

I am pleased to advise the Deputy that a Steering Committee to oversee the Value for Money Review of the School Transport Scheme, including catchment boundaries, has been established. This review will be carried out as part of the 2009-2011 round of Value for Money Reviews recently approved by Government and, when completed, will be published and submitted to the Oireachtas Select Committee on Education and Science.

Schools Building Projects.

302. **Deputy Billy Timmins** asked the Minister for Education and Science the position regarding funding for improvement works at a school (details supplied) in County Carlow; the last correspondence issued by him on the issue; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2673/09]

Minister for Education and Science (Deputy Batt O'Keeffe): The project to which the Deputy refers is currently at an advanced stage of architectural planning. A stage 4/5 submission has been received by my Department and is currently being reviewed and evaluated. The progression of all large scale building projects, including this project, will be considered in the context of my Department's multi-annual School Building and Modernisation Programme. However, in light of current competing demands on the capital budget of the Department, it is not possible to give an indicative timeframe for the progression of this project at this time.

Special Educational Needs.

303. **Deputy Michael Creed** asked the Minister for Education and Science if he will supply the contact details of the special education needs organisers for all primary and post-primary schools in County Cork; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2686/09]

Minister for Education and Science (Deputy Batt O'Keeffe): I will arrange for the information requested to be sent to the Deputy as soon as possible. In the interim, I understand that the Deputy can access the contact details of all special educational needs organisers on the website of the National Council for Special Education at www.ncse.ie.

Schools Building Projects.

304. **Deputy Seán Sherlock** asked the Minister for Education and Science if discretionary funding will be made available to a school (details supplied) in County Cork; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2716/09]

Minister for Education and Science (Deputy Batt O'Keeffe): My Department is not aware of any such application having been received from the school in question. However, if the temporary storage area is raising health and safety concerns, the school may apply for emergency funding, taking into consideration that there is a replacement storage area in place.

Energy Efficiency.

305. **Deputy Seán Sherlock** asked the Minister for Education and Science if action can be taken for schools under the national insulation scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2758/09]

Minister for Education and Science (Deputy Batt O’Keeffe): My Department is at the forefront of design with respect to energy efficiency in school buildings and this performance has been recognised at both national and international level with sustainable energy awards for excellence in Design and Specification. The Department’s Technical Guidance Documents which set the benchmark for low energy design in schools are clearly focused on energy efficiency and are based on solid energy research projects.

My Department’s policy is supported by a strong research programme with over thirty research projects at various stages currently in hand. A programme for thermal improvements in existing schools is currently being developed and the Planning and Building Unit of my Department is developing a technical and administration guidance document that will provide school authorities with the necessary criteria and specifications to implement an insulation programme. Case studies will also be provided.

In addition, an Energy Management Guide for Schools is being developed in partnership between my Department and Sustainable Energy Ireland and this will be available on line later this year. This guide will be specifically directed to schools and will provide school managers with advice and guidance on how to improve energy management within the school and thereby reduce costs.

Schools Building Projects.

306. **Deputy Michael Creed** asked the Minister for Education and Science the status of an application for a new school (details supplied) in County Cork; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2762/09]

Minister for Education and Science (Deputy Batt O’Keeffe): A site has been identified for the proposed new 16 classroom school referred to by the Deputy. My Department made an offer for this site in November 2008, based on an independent valuation, and a response is awaited. Once the site issues have been resolved, the further progression of the building project in question will be considered in the context of my Department’s multi-annual School Building and Modernisation Programme. However, in light of current competing demands on the capital budget of the Department, it is not possible to give an indicative timeframe for the progression of the project at this time.