

DÁIL ÉIREANN

Déardaoin, 3 Samhain 2011.
Thursday, 3 November 2011.

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

Paidir.

Prayer.

Leaders' Questions

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: Tá a fhios ag an Tánaiste an leagan a úsáidtear san iarthar, bhí orthu dul ar an mbád bán. The Tánaiste is probably familiar with a saying about emigration common in the west of Ireland, which is that people had to take the bád bán. Forced emigration and unemployment are two of the biggest challenges that we face. The Government programme made jobs a priority. We were promised a jobs budget, but we got a damp squib. We were told in the programme for Government that job creation is central to any recovery strategy. The Exchequer returns yesterday made very disturbing reading on this front. At the end of September, the USC income tax return was €125 million ahead of profile, and by the end of October, it had fallen to €147 million behind profile. That is a turnaround, relative to profile, of €372 million. When comparing forecast to forecast, we have had a massive turnaround in a month. The only logic that one can get from the figure is that there is a sudden downward trend in employment in the economy, despite the so called jobs initiative.

The live register is to be published today. The Tánaiste has the figures and I do not. However, one would expect it to show a decline at this time of the year. If it does show a decline, will that be because people are taking the bád bán and emigrating?

The Government's jobs initiative is in tatters and the pension funds were raided. All we seem to be getting is employment figures in decline. What hope can the Tánaiste give to the people of the country who are currently unemployed that the Government will tackle this issue and come to grips with it? For the Government to blame the situation is wearing thin, as it was elected on the basis that it would rectify all these issues and that it would deliver especially on jobs.

Deputy Joe Costello: The Deputy and his party were 14 years——

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: I was 18 years creating jobs——

(Interruptions).

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputies, please, through the Chair.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: As the Deputy is no doubt aware, I spent 18 years at the coal face creating jobs, and I have huge experience in getting my hands dirty and creating jobs.

[Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív.]

Will the forthcoming budget be a propoer jobs budget? Will the Government have something real to offer those who are watching today and whose main concern is the creation of real employment and an alternative to the bád bán?

Deputy Shane McEntee: There were 70 jobs in north County Dublin and only three Irish people applied for them, because of the Deputy's system.

Deputy Dara Calleary: It's the Government's system now.

The Tánaiste: I know that Deputy Ó Cuív is a great student of history, and from my own knowledge of history, the master skipper and entire crew of the bád bán were Fianna Fáil over the decades. The emigration records of this country occurred during periods of Fianna Fáil Government. The commitment to reduce unemployment and create jobs is the Government's primary objective. The revenue from income tax on a year on year basis was up last year, which was the case for the first time in three years. The figures are broadly on target. It is true that from one heading to another, there is some variation, but when the November returns come in, we will have a fuller picture and we expect that to be broadly on target.

The Government has already introduced a jobs initiative which was successful. The Government is continuing its efforts to attract investment to this country. The attraction of investment to this country is dependent on the country's reputation being restored. We have made considerable progress on that. The commentary about Ireland on the day that the Deputy left office was embarrassing to read. It would be difficult to conceive of anybody seriously investing in this country in circumstances where that kind of commentary was being made about us. Following eight months of this Government's stewardship, the commentary being made about Ireland now is entirely different and is more conducive to attracting the kind of investment into this country that will create jobs.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: Mar is eol don Tánaiste, an t-am ba mheasa ina raibh an imirice ná sna 50í nuair a bhí Fine Gael agus an Lucht Oibre i rialtas le chéile. The Tánaiste has said that income tax is up year on year, and that is because of the universal service charge that he was going to abolish or reduce. Income tax returns are up, but Exchequer returns spell out month after month that the reason they are up is the USC.

The Tánaiste states that the jobs initiative has been successful, and I am very interested to hear that. As he is privy to information, can he give me the increase in total employment in the economy over the last three months? If the Tánaiste has that information, it would be a good idea to share it with the House. If he does not, I wonder how he can tell me the job initiative is successful when all the figures point to exactly the opposite.

Yes, the commentary about Ireland is good. Why is it good?

Deputy Arthur Spring: Because it was bad.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: Effectively, up to now, the Government has been implementing the policies and the programme we laid out. The problem is——

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: Do not go there.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: ——that the promised jobs initiative is a total failure based on these figures.

The Tánaiste: The jobs initiative has been a success. Both the tourist industry and the hospitality industry, at which we targeted the reductions in VAT, saw significant increases in business during the course of this season.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: Can the Tánaiste show us the employment figures?

The Tánaiste: No. I am not going to give top-of-the-head figures.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: Is it not about jobs?

The Tánaiste: The Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport has placed on the record of the House the improved situation in the tourism industry and the Minister for Social Protection has previously told the House about the improvements resulting from JobBridge and the labour activation measures that were contained within it.

With regard to the wider issue of restoration of reputation, the reason this country's reputation has been restored is that the Government that is now in place enjoys confidence at home and respect abroad. The measures the Government has been pursuing, including the changes it has successfully secured in the bad agreement the previous Government made with the ECB and IMF, are producing results. Those results are seen abroad and are contributing to a better investment climate, which will create jobs and reduce the level of unemployment. Getting people back to work is the Government's main priority and will remain so until the level of unemployment is reduced sufficiently.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy Mary Lou McDonald.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: She is back.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Yesterday, we saw the Tánaiste's Government hand over €700 million to unguaranteed bondholders.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: No, Anglo Irish Bank did.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: We see evidence today of tax revenues falling. Of particular note is the drop in VAT receipts, a further reflection of the decimation of the domestic economy and people's spending power due to austerity measures directed at middle and low income earners. Tomorrow we expect to see the Government's growth projections revised downwards yet again.

We also found out recently that a €3.6 billion accountancy error meant the State's outstanding debt would be reduced by some 2.3% of GDP. A total of €3.6 billion is one hell of an accountancy error. I note this matter was discussed at Cabinet yesterday. The Tánaiste might share with us the Government's view of this accountancy error. I might also ask the Tánaiste, given the massive salaries those in the NTMA are earning — 14 of them are paid more than a quarter of a million euro — if he still retains confidence in the work they do.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: They found it.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Behind the sofa.

Deputy Finian McGrath: It fell down behind the sofa.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: What about the Department of Finance?

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: Bertie left it there.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Order, please.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The NTMA claimed it alerted the Department of Finance about this issue in August 2010.

Deputy Noel Coonan: It is a good job it was not in the bank.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The current Secretary General of that Department presided over this blunder, yet the Government proposes to appoint this man to a plum job at the European Court of Auditors. On what basis can the Tánaiste possibly defend the appointment of this individual to anything, let alone the European Court of Auditors, given this blunder? Does he still have confidence in the appointment of this man to that post?

The Tánaiste: There has been a long-standing practice in this House that attacks are not made on individuals who are not in a position to defend themselves——

(Interruptions).

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Order, please.

Deputy Barry Cowen: Economic treason and all that.

Deputy Dara Calleary: They did five years of it.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Order.

Deputy Dara Calleary: Do they remember that?

Deputy Timmy Dooley: Is there going to be a sea change?

Deputy Barry Cowen: Economic treason.

Deputy Colm Keaveney: Is the protest over?

The Tánaiste: ——and in particular on civil servants who are not permitted to engage in political or public debate. If Members of the House want to change it, that is another debate. I ask Members, including the Deputy, to respect that and to respect the rights of the individuals concerned.

The medium-term fiscal plan will be published on Friday and will contain the latest macro-economic and fiscal forecasts of the Department of Finance. These will inform the Government in its ongoing budgetary deliberations.

As part of the ongoing technical work on debt projections, the NTMA recently drew to the attention of the Department of Finance and the Central Statistics Office the fact that there was a change in its relationship with the Housing Finance Agency that has an impact on the accounts of the two entities. Previously, the NTMA acted as an agent for the HFA, but since late 2010 it has loaned directly to the HFA. These loans appear as assets in the NTMA accounts and liabilities in the HFA accounts. The liabilities of the HFA are included in the general Government debt, but the corresponding assets of the NTMA were included in the liquid assets of the NTMA, which are also part of general Government debt, effectively resulting in a double count. Removing the impact of this double count reduces the estimate of the 2010 general Government debt by €3.6 billion, or 2.3% of GDP.

The Government needs the most up-to-date fiscal information to best plan the path to Ireland's recovery. This kind of accounting mistake is unacceptable and all safeguards will be

investigated to ensure it is never repeated. The Minister for Finance made it clear yesterday that he is pursuing his own inquiries into the matter and intends to put in place the most robust system to ensure there is not a repeat of this kind of accounting error, which is unacceptable, in the future.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Before I call on the Deputy, I must say that I will not permit reference to persons outside the House.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I have the utmost respect for the Civil Service and public servants generally. However, there must be accountability when mistakes are made — when an accountancy error to the tune of 2.3% of GDP is made. I make no apology for calling to account very senior civil servants on very big pay packages with very generous pension entitlements to give an account through the Tánaiste and the Taoiseach as the Heads of Government. I find it rather puzzling that the Tánaiste would make a statement such as he did. I understood his Government was to herald a new dawn of accountability at the most senior levels. I will not apologise for naming the NTMA big rollers, and if I have the opportunity and their names I will read them into the record of the Dáil, because these people are paid through the public purse and need to be accountable to the House.

11 o'clock

The accountancy error of €3.6 billion, which the Tánaiste finds so unacceptable, does, as the Tánaiste correctly said, adjust the debt burden down by 2.3% of GDP. What implication will this have for the upcoming budget? This represents an improved scenario in terms of our debt burden and I am sure it has an implication in terms of interest repayments and debt servicing. Can the people of this country expect, after the uncovering of this unacceptable accountancy blunder, that the Government might relieve them of some of the harshest cuts it is clearly planning to introduce in a short few weeks?

The Tánaiste: This Government insists and will continue to insist on accountability from everyone who works in our system, whether in the Civil Service, State agencies or anywhere else. If Deputy McDonald or any Member wishes to bring any of the relevant officials before the relevant committees and put questions to them, they are entitled to do so. That is parliamentary accountability and that is the fair and proper way to do it. Officials are brought before the relevant committee, one asks them questions and one allows them an opportunity to answer. It is not right to come in to the House and make allegations under the privilege of the Chamber when the officials concerned do not have the opportunity to come in.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: They are not allegations.

The Tánaiste: If the Deputy wishes to bring them before a committee or use the committee system——

(Interruptions).

The Tánaiste: Let us talk about fairness. We are not talking about secret court martials. We are talking about people being given the opportunity or a right to respond. If Deputy McDonald wishes to use the Oireachtas committee system to do so, that is fine. That is the fair way to do it but she should not come to the House——

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: And expect the truth.

The Tánaiste: ——and make allegations about individual public servants who do not have the opportunity to reply to what she has had to say.

Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin: No allegations were made.

The Tánaiste: Deputy McDonald asked whether the discovery of the €3.6 billion or the accounting error would have an implication for the budget. It does not because the interest rates calculated on the level of debt were calculated on the lower level, in other words, on the corrected level.

Deputy Joe Higgins: Will it ever dawn on the Tánaiste that the Government's programme of savage austerity, far from creating jobs and recovery, will plunge our society into ever deeper economic crisis? Is this not clear to the Tánaiste given the shortfall of €383 million in VAT to date reflecting a stagnation in retail sales and services and as a result of the savage austerity that the Government continues to impose on ordinary people while, at the same time continuing to transfer billions of euro in resources to banks, bondholders and assorted speculators? Is it not clear to the Tánaiste that the baleful social effects of austerity, with almost half a million people on the live register, are evident?

The Society of St. Vincent de Paul is expecting an unprecedented level of demand for its services from desperate individuals and families this Christmas. Should the disaster that is the Greek economy not make the Tánaiste re-think his blind adherence to this policy? Three years ago, the Greek people were promised that if they accepted the savage programme of cuts they would be on the way to recovery by now. Instead, they have been plunged into greater misery and more crises. Will the Tánaiste explain the point of the Irish Labour Party given that it brings to the debate on the current crisis absolutely nothing different in the slightest from Merkel, Sarkozy and all the high priests and hawks of right wing, neoliberal capitalism?

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: Does Deputy Higgins want to join the Greeks?

Deputy Joe Higgins: The Tánaiste slavishly submits to the diktats of the financial markets and those faceless institutions that hold the lives of tens and hundreds of millions of Europeans in their grip. The Tánaiste has no word of opposition to say or an alternative to put.

(Interruptions).

Deputy Joe Higgins: Will it ever dawn on the Tánaiste that capitalism is in a systemic crisis at this time and it will not find a way out? Major private conglomerates are on a strike of capital. Only by a complete change of policy and particularly by major public investment in infrastructure and services can we recreate and rebuild our economy, recreate the tens of thousands of jobs needed and put people back to work.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: There is no money.

Deputy Joe Higgins: If the Labour Party does not bring such an alternative, should it not merge into the grey mass that surrounds it on the Government benches rather than pretend there is something distinct anymore called the Irish Labour Party?

(Interruptions).

The Tánaiste: The Deputy asked me when a number of things will dawn on me. It appears that one thing has dawned on the Deputy and, presumably, other Members opposite during the course of the past two weeks, that is, we should not go the way Greece has gone.

Deputies: Hear, hear.

The Tánaiste: The last time I was here answering questions I was asked why we had not done what Greece has done. I notice no one is asking me that today.

(Interruptions).

Deputy Timmy Dooley: Why does the Government not do what it said it would do?

The Tánaiste: As far as Deputy Higgins is concerned, when will it dawn on him that one cannot spend what one does not have?

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: The Government is spending it on bailing out the banks.

Deputy Joan Collins: There are choices to be made.

The Tánaiste: This country is in a serious deficit. Let us suppose one wishes to borrow to bridge the gap between what one is spending and getting in. One cannot borrow from people if one tells them one will not pay their money back, which seems to be what Deputy Higgins is advancing. He asked me the purpose of the Labour Party so let me tell him the purpose. The purpose is to solve the economic mess we have inherited, to get the country out of the economic hole in which we found it last March, to get people back to work and to build a better and fairer society.

Deputies: Hear, hear.

Deputy Dara Calleary: That is what the Tánaiste said last February.

Deputy Seamus Healy: What about cuts to gas and electricity and everything for older people?

The Tánaiste: This will require difficult decisions and difficult times but we will do this in order to bring about the recovery that people in the country seek rather than have people continue in unemployment and continue in the difficult situation they are in. It would be welcome if, occasionally, Deputy Higgins and other Deputies who criticise so frequently would come in here with the odd constructive proposal about how we might do this.

Deputies: Hear, hear.

(Interruptions).

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I call Deputy Higgins. Order, please.

(Interruptions).

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy Stagg, please. Order, please. The Chair is on his feet. I have called Deputy Higgins, who has one minute.

Deputy Joe Higgins: Obviously since they are being denied any impact whatsoever on Government policy, the only way the Labour Party backbenchers can find their voice is by clamour in the Parliament.

(Interruptions).

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: We are on Leaders' Questions, please.

Deputy Joe Higgins: In case the Tánaiste did not hear me, I stated precisely that the country should not take the road Greece has taken. That is the point I made.

(Interruptions).

Deputy Joe Higgins: This is because the road the Tánaiste's colleague, Mr. Papandreou, has taken, and New Democracy before him, during the past two years has been a disaster. That is clear and the suffering of the Greek people is testament to it. The policy of austerity is ruining Greece and its people. The Tánaiste says one cannot spend what one does not have. But apparently the Labour Party and Fine Gael can give billions of euro that we do not have to bankers, bondholders and speculators.

Almost 100 years ago the great socialist James Connolly, who co-founded the Labour Party, and would reject with contempt its current role——

Deputy Emmet Stagg: What about Trotsky? The Deputy should give some credit to him.

Deputy Joe Higgins: What did Connolly do, having found the European people confronted with the looming catastrophe of the First World War and abandoned by virtually all, even the social democratic parties which slavishly followed their imperialist masters supporting the war? He stood boldly out and called for mass resistance and an alternative. He said we should resist until the last capitalist bond and debenture will be shrivelled on the funeral pyre of the last warlord.

Today the Irish Labour Party believes that the last bond and debenture should be repaid to the European speculators and bondholders at enormous cost to the Irish people and to the further deterioration of our economy. Even if Deputies do not listen to the man who founded the party and would revile what it is doing today——

Deputy Michael McCarthy: The Deputy is obsessed with the Labour Party.

Deputy Joe Higgins: ——there are non-socialist economists who carry great authority in economic circles such as Nouriel Roubini, Paul Krugman, Joseph Stiglitz and others. They all now say categorically that continuing the programme of austerity is a disaster.

Will the Government learn the lessons from Greece and fundamentally abandon the disastrous policy——

A Deputy: Join the dots.

Deputy Joe Higgins: ——of salvaging the living standards of working class people, pensioners and the poor and embark on an alternative policy of public investment, massive job creation and the re-creation of our economy?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Order, please.

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Higgins for his kind remark about the Labour Party backbenchers. I am sure he will have noticed their number has been added to by one with the election of Deputy Nulty last week in the same constituency as Deputy Higgins.

Deputy Dara Calleary: The first U-turn will be later today.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: There will be competition there the next time.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Tánaiste, please.

The Tánaiste: I could not help but notice yesterday that Deputy Higgins had difficulty congratulating Deputy Nulty because, unusually for some reason, he found himself in the corner when Deputy Nulty was introduced to the House.

Deputies: Hear, hear.

The Tánaiste: Perhaps he will take the opportunity to congratulate him today.

Deputy Joe Higgins: I shook hands with him in the depths of the night in Citywest.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy, resume your seat.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: He did not do it yesterday when he had the chance.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Tánaiste, without interruption please.

The Tánaiste: I share the interest of Deputy Higgins in the history of the early part of the 20th century, such as 1911 and 1912. Unfortunately, I do not get as much time these days to read about that as Deputy Higgins clearly does because my focus and that of my party is what happens in 2012, 2013 and 2014——

Deputies: Hear, hear.

The Tánaiste: ——and getting people back to work. We have to deal effectively with the economic crisis, reduce the budget deficit and deal effectively, as we are doing, with the banking situation.

Deputy Higgins will have noticed the approach the Government took earlier this year on the banking situation is working. Private investment is now going into Irish banks, including the recent private investment in Irish Life & Permanent. We are pursuing a strategy which is about investment and getting people back to work. That is the focus of the Government.

It would be helpful if, instead of using 100 year old rhetoric, Deputy Higgins would make some modern proposals for today's world to deal with the problems of those experiencing unemployment, mortgage and other difficulties. We want to deal with those issues. That is what the Government is focused on and what we will deal with successfully.

Order of Business

The Tánaiste: Business today is as agreed by the House yesterday and Private Members' business shall be No. 31, motion re social welfare (resumed).

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: There are no proposals to be put to the House.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: There were 30 pieces of legislation promised on the A list to be published before the beginning of the next session. Can the Tánaiste indicate to us, now that we are at the halfway stage, the position regarding the A list and how many Bills will be published, including those published to date, before the beginning of the next session?

The Tánaiste: To date, eight of the Bills have been published and it remains the intention of the Government to publish the remainder before the next session.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: Will the 22 remaining Bills be published before the beginning of the next session? Can we hold the Tánaiste to that?

The Tánaiste: That is the intention, but as the Deputy knows from experience sometimes due to constraints in drafting or whatever it is not always possible to publish all of them. There is no change in the intention of the Government to publish them.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I refer to the climate change Bill. The Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government, Deputy Phil Hogan, has decided it is not a matter of priority. I assume he is aware of the severe episodes of flooding in Dublin and elsewhere across the State. I ask the Tánaiste to outline the position in respect of that Bill and his view on it.

The temporary agency workers Bill will give effect to the directive on temporary agency work. When will it be published and debated in the Dáil? I also ask the Tánaiste to confirm the State will not seek a derogation from the directive in any form.

The Tánaiste: Later today, the Minister, Deputy Hogan, will publish an update of our performance on climate change targets. The good news is that Ireland will have met its targets for 2008-12. Challenging targets have to be met between 2013-20. The Minister is undertaking a review of how those targets might be met and has asked the NESC to produce some research on how they might be met, in particular given the performance of different sectors of the economy.

The review will inform the Government's policy on how we can meet our targets. There is a commitment in the programme for Government to enshrine that in legislation. I am sure the Deputy will agree it is necessary that we know what we are doing before we enshrine it in legislation. I understand from the Minister that there will be a very open consultative process which will engage all stakeholders in regard to how the challenging targets from now to 2020 are to be met.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: What about the temporary agency workers Bill?

The Tánaiste: The Bill has been approved by Government. It is being drafted and it is intended to publish it shortly. It will be debated in the House during this session.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Will there be no derogation?

The Tánaiste: The issue of a derogation only arises if there is agreement with the social partners. I understand discussions are taking place between the Minister for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation, Deputy Richard Bruton, and the social partners.

Deputy Catherine Murphy: A number of members of the Technical Group submitted requests under Standing Order 32 yesterday on the issue of the Anglo Irish Bank bond. Those matters were ruled out of order, despite the fact that they were of specific importance, were in the public interest and required urgent consideration. We are seeking to discover why they were ruled out of order, particularly as they complied with the terms of Standing Order 32. Is the Leas-Chathaoirleach in a position to provide some guidance with regard to Standing Order 32 and why such matters could be ruled out of order? Is there an option for Members to bring forward matters under the terms of Standing Order 32?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I did not have any notice that this matter was going to be raised. I suggest that the Deputy take it up with the Office of the Ceann Comhairle because I am not in possession of any information relating to it.

Deputy Dara Calleary: The Exchequer figures published yesterday highlight the serious crisis that is engulfing the retail sector. When will the Government be bringing forward the legislation relating to upward-only rent reviews?

The Tánaiste: That legislation is still under consideration by the Government. When a decision is made on it, we will bring it before the House.

Deputy James Bannon: I have raised the matter of expediting the public health (sunbeds) Bill on a number of occasions during the past two years. I am surprised a definite date has not yet been set for the publication of this much needed legislation which is designed to regulate the use of sunbeds, particularly by young people under the age of 18. In light of the high incidence of cancer in this country, is the Tánaiste in a position to provide a specific date for the introduction of this legislation in 2012?

The Tánaiste: I do not have a specific date but it is intended to bring the legislation forward at some point in 2012.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Is there promised legislation — I am aware there is a commitment in the programme for Government — regarding the issue of people who were affected by the use of thalidomide? This matter was first raised in the House in 1962. There was a great deal of rhetoric uttered and quite a number of promises made during the lifetime of the previous Dáil, when we had many meetings with the people concerned. I note that the Government now appears to be hiding behind the advice given by the Attorney General, which is unfair. This is a worthy cause and a proper resolution must be found to it.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I do not know whether there is promised legislation in this area.

The Tánaiste: The programme for Government does not contain a commitment in respect of this matter and there is no Bill relating to it on the legislative list. However, I understand the matter was raised as a Topical Issue yesterday. I am sure the Minister for Health will certainly take on board the submissions that have been made.

Deputy Dessie Ellis: As the Tánaiste is aware, local authorities are preparing their budgets for 2012. It has been signalled within the local government sector that the Government is considering a major adjustment to the rates system which will involve a change to primary legislation. Is the Tánaiste in a position to indicate whether this is the case? When will the relevant legislation be published?

The anti-democratic privatisation of waste services is continuing, with the Dublin city manager threatening to privatise waste collection in the city in December. A national waiver system has been promised in the past. Will the Tánaiste indicate when legislation relating to such a system will be published?

The Tánaiste: Legislation is not promised in the context of changes to the system of local authority rates. The only legislation that has been promised, which will be dealt with this session, relates to household charges.

A major contributory factor with regard to the privatisation of refuse collection services related to the campaigns of non-payment that were run and advocated——

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Give us a break. Services were privatised throughout the country. There were no campaigns in the remainder of the country.

The Tánaiste: Those campaigns were conducted exclusively against local authority services and, as far as I can recall, not against the services provided by private operators.

Deputy Catherine Murphy: Of course they were not aimed at private operators.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: We will debate that issue on another day.

Deputy Colm Keaveney: We can debate it now. The Deputy should ask a question.

Deputy Paul Kehoe: The Deputy knows he is wrong.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Deputy Kehoe must be kidding. Those opposite were responsible for privatising refuse collections and year after year they voted in favour of the imposition of bin charges.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: We are on the Order of Business.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Give me a break.

Deputy Michael McCarthy: On a point of order——

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: There is no point of order.

Deputy Michael McCarthy: ——the Deputy can only ask questions on the Order of Business, he cannot lecture the House.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I know that Deputy McCarthy.

A Deputy: He can walk out the door.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Large numbers of people were badly affected by the flooding that occurred on Monday, 24 October last. Many of these individuals are repeat victims of flooding. In Blackrock, which is in the constituency the Tánaiste and I represent, I met people whose houses have been flooded and badly damaged for the umpteenth time as a result of the Maretimo Stream overflowing. Is legislation being brought forward in respect of compensation for flood victims, particularly those who cannot take out insurance as a result of the fact that their properties were flooded on previous occasions? The Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, Deputy Brian Hayes, has indicated that the Government is giving consideration to providing assistance to families who have been affected by flooding. Will the Government be bringing forward legislation or proposals in respect of providing assistance, compensation and support to the many families that have been affected by flooding?

The Tánaiste: Assistance is already being provided by officials the Minister for Social Protection has deployed to deal with this matter. The Government discussed this matter on Tuesday, 25 October. It is intended that the particular needs of people who found themselves in extreme difficulties as a result of the floods will be addressed. The Departments of Social Protection and the Environment, Community and Local Government and the Office of Public Works, OPW, are working on some remedies in respect of this issue.

The other matter on which we are working and on which we will be receiving a report in the near future is that of the difficulties some householders — as a result of the fact that their homes were flooded last year — have faced in obtaining insurance. These people's homes have been flooded for a second time but they now have no insurance. We are considering what can be done to address the insurance requirements of those householders going forward. Proposals are being developed for people who found themselves in extreme difficulty.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Is there a timeline in respect of this matter?

The Tánaiste: The Department of Social Protection has already done some work in this area.

Deputy Robert Troy: In view of the level of confusion that has arisen among many householders in rural areas with regard to the issue of septic tanks, will the Tánaiste indicate when the Water Services (Amendment) Bill be introduced?

The Tánaiste: The Bill was published this morning and will be introduced in the Seanad in the first instance. It will be brought before the Dáil when the Upper House has completed its consideration of it.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: The Tánaiste will be well aware of the crisis that exists in the farming community as a result of the bad weather. Farmers have been unable to traverse their lands or spread slurry on them. Many of them will take in their cattle for the winter with those tanks still full. I compliment the Ministers for the Environment, Community and Local Government and Agriculture, Food and the Marine, who have already provided an extension in this regard. Is there any proposal on the part of the Government to provide a further extension? Would it be possible for the Government to introduce legislation which would allow farmers to work to prevailing weather conditions rather than to the calendar? As the Tánaiste is aware, that would be a practical and common-sense approach to take to this matter.

The Tánaiste: As Deputy Healy-Rae acknowledged, the relevant Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government has already granted an extension. However, I am not aware that he is planning a further extension. Putting in place a regime which would be weather rather than calendar-related would make a great deal of sense. That matter can be pursued with the Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government.

Deputy Michael McCarthy: I raised the issue of attacks on members of the emergency services, particularly gardaí, a number of months ago. I asked the Minister for Justice and Equality if it was his intention to introduce special legislation to afford protection to people in the emergency services, who are being attacked in the course of their duty, and to sufficiently penalise and punish the perpetrators of those attacks? Given that on Monday night in the city five members of the Garda Síochána were admitted to hospital following such attacks and one was penned to a wall by a jeep and narrowly escaped serious injury or death, will the Minister give a commitment that he will keep the situation under review? Given what happened during the past week has the Government any plans to introduce legislation?

The Tánaiste: The Minister for Justice and Equality and the Government as a whole take very seriously the attacks on members of the Garda and members of other parts of our emergency services including fire brigade staff and other staff. As that matter is under consideration by the Minister for Justice and Equality I will ask him to respond directly to the Deputy.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: I wish to raise three issues. The first two concern long-promised legislation, the national vetting bureau Bill which is imminent and the judicial council Bill which also has been promised. What progress has been made on the compilation and heads of the Bills and when they are likely to come before the House, given their urgency? The other issue is a different type of question.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: There is still a small amount of time remaining.

The Tánaiste: The national vetting bureau Bill is due this session and the judicial council Bill is due early in the next session.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: The other issue is in anticipation of the possible reply to Parliamentary Question No. 113 on today's Order Paper. I ask the Tánaiste — I will understand

[Deputy Bernard J. Durkan.]

if he does not have the information readily to hand — if it is intended to introduce supportive legislation in view of the abhorrence to the guillotine in this House and outside?

The Tánaiste: The Deputy is asking me to anticipate the reply to a parliamentary question which has not yet been replied to. I suggest he await the reply to the question.

Deputy Seán Ó Feargháil: On a day when climate change is again making the headlines, will the Tánaiste tell the House the Government's position on the Antarctic treaty?

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: A chilling question.

The Tánaiste: I will reply directly to the Deputy in regard to the Antarctic treaty.

Private Members' Business

Social Welfare Code: Motion (Resumed)

The following motion was moved by Deputy Barry Cowen on Wednesday, 2 November 2011:

That Dáil Éireann:

- recognises that the social welfare budget trebled from 2000-2010 and forms a vital safety net for vulnerable members of the community and those adversely affected by the economic crisis that has hit Europe;
- in addition recognises the reductions in benefits borne already by social welfare recipients due to the crisis and the need to achieve the fiscal targets laid out under the EU/IMF programme;
- agrees that these savings can be achieved through tackling social welfare fraud and increased employment, rather than further reductions to present social welfare rates;
- acknowledges the economic need and moral duty to protect the most vulnerable in our society and provide adequate supports to the large numbers of people unemployed due to the economic crisis;
- recognises the need for more labour activation measures and interaction between the taxation and welfare system to ensure that work is worthwhile;
- notes that the creation of every thousand jobs reduces the Social Protection budget on average by €25 million between increased social welfare contributions and fewer on the live register;
- affirms that money distributed on social welfare is primarily spent on necessities by the recipients, generating economic activity;
- calls on the Government to fulfil its promises under the Programme for Government and maintain headline social welfare rates and to introduce means by which

self-employed people can be insured against unemployment and sickness support; and

- further calls on the Government not to reduce social welfare expenditure by stealth and to maintain other social welfare payments such as the Widow's Pension, disability benefits and illness benefits.

Debate resumed on amendment No. 2:

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

- “ — recognises the severe impact on families, individuals and communities as a result of the closure of businesses and loss of employment arising from the economic collapse caused by the policies of the previous Government;
- recognises the vital role played by spending on social welfare in enabling people to live life with dignity;
 - acknowledges the contribution spending on social welfare also makes to sustaining economic activity in communities throughout the State and, in particular, notes that social welfare spending of €20.62 billion accounts for 13% of GDP and recognises the need to ensure that the current deficit in the Social Insurance Fund is addressed;
 - affirms that sustainable public finances are a prerequisite for maintaining an adequate system of social protection as well as achieving future economic growth and stability;
 - welcomes the steps taken by the Government to sustain existing employment, promote job creation and lay the foundation for economic recovery, in particular, the National Employment and Entitlement Service, the jobs initiative including the national internship scheme, JobBridge, Springboard, the halving of the lower rate of employer PRSI and the targeted lowering of VAT for the hospitality and tourism sectors;
 - welcomes the new anti-fraud initiative launched by the Department of Social Protection in September, 2011 and its importance in maintaining the integrity of the social welfare system; and
 - encourages the Government to press ahead with the other social welfare reforms outlined in the programme for Government and in particular to target the development of options and opportunities in education, training and work experience in order to help people to get back to work.”
- (Minister for Social Protection, Deputy Joan Burton).

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Technical Group was in possession and ten minutes remain in this slot.

Deputy Maureen O'Sullivan: Social welfare payments are for the most vulnerable and marginalised in society. I would like to prioritise a certain group, those with disabilities, mental

[Deputy Maureen O’Sullivan.]

health issues and their carers because these groups have enough to deal with in their lives and should not have to live in fear that their social welfare payments are under threat. A civilised just society would prioritise these people and assure them that their payments are not and will not be threatened. Another group that should be left in peace is senior citizens. At a recent forum in the docklands area of Dublin, they outlined their concerns as we approach the budget. They have come through difficult times at other stages in our history and they have real concerns about their lives and their living standards. One further group that is suffering is the self-employed whose businesses have folded. They need protection as they are unemployed and many are without sickness benefits.

There is a considerable budget for social welfare and it must be used wisely. Efforts must be made to eradicate social welfare fraud which is estimated at 2.4% to 4.4% of total annual welfare expenditure, more than €0.05 billion of which would go a long way towards increasing payments for those in need and even, perhaps, bring back the Christmas bonus which has made a huge difference in certain areas.

Research shows that much social welfare funding is lost through administrative and customer error rather than fraud. In 2009 and 2010, almost 70% of over-payments were due to error. Nobody wants to be unemployed. When this happens, those who are unemployed want to get back working, retraining or avail of the opportunity of further education. The system must help people to do that. I acknowledge the huge workload of the staff in the Department of Social Protection. It involves much administrative procedure and payments that go out to more than 2 million people weekly. There is a need to create a simpler benefit system, a system that meets the needs of the people and not the other way around. The recent flooding incident has shown the need for emergency funding while the urgent payments of €250 have not made an appreciable difference for those who are without insurance because of having been flooded previously.

Austerity measures will not bring about growth. If inflation is likely to rise by 1.5% in the coming year, welfare rates must be adjusted accordingly. Without our social welfare system our poverty rate would be very considerable. I support the point made by Social Justice Ireland that we must limit the impact of budgetary measures on those who can least afford to carry them.

The report of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul which it launched yesterday — its pre-budget submission — the title of which reads “Don’t cut their Lifeline, Poverty Hurts Us All”, says it all.

Deputy Catherine Murphy: The design of the social welfare system is part of the problem. There are many poverty traps with which we are all familiar. The design of the system rewards a certain type of behaviour. The structural aspects need to change in tandem with the eradication of social welfare fraud; for example, if a person on social welfare makes application for a medical card and gives two different addresses. The system works against the person who has an entitlement to claim a social welfare payment towards which they have contributed. The 400,000 plus people who are unemployed are embarrassed when they claim that to which they are entitled to claim.

Social welfare is visible. If a person has to make a claim that person is visible. If there is a constant hammering of those who are defrauding the system, how are people to know who is defrauding the system? This further humiliates those who are making a valid claim. The over-emphasis on defrauding the system is seriously problematic.

Fr. Seán Healy of Social Justice Ireland appeared before a meeting of the Joint Committee on Finance, Public Expenditure and Reform yesterday, which I watched on television last night. What he said reminds me of something that was said to me some time ago, that we need people to be working, even if it is on a part-time basis. Essentially, what was said, and it resonated

with me, was that we pay people to do nothing; we pay people to pay them to do nothing and then we pay people to make sure they do nothing. If they are working, even on a part-time basis, it eliminates much of that component of the social welfare system, which is regressive. It is bad enough for people to be claiming social welfare. We have got to be careful in highlighting the defrauding of the system, which has to be eradicated, but we must ensure that those who are already humiliated are not further humiliated by an inappropriate harping on particular aspects of the welfare system.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I am pleased the Minister is present to listen to our comments. I congratulate her on having her colleague elected in her constituency.

I was a member of the Joint Committee on Social and Family Affairs in the last Dáil with Deputy Burton, now Minister. She had many trenchant views on many issues. I had many a good tiff with the then Minister for Social Protection, Deputy Eamon Ó Cuív. The current Minister understands the position and is carrying out reviews on which I support her. As previous speakers have said there are many anomalies in the system.

The social welfare system has failed us. We are in a crisis with huge unemployment. Some 99.9% of the unemployed do not wish to be unemployed. They want to play a meaningful role in providing for their families and paying their taxes.

The former self-employed have been badly treated. They had the energy, enthusiasm and vigour to set up business and employ others. Now that their businesses have failed because of the downturn, they are entitled to nothing. They are deemed ineligible for back to work initiatives and so on, on the basis of their spouses' income or some other silly reason. It amounts to discrimination. These are people with vision, passion and enthusiasm — like many others on social welfare — who could provide us with a way out of this morass. If they receive sufficient support they will each be in a position to employ one, two or more persons and thus make a major dent in the unemployment rate. They must be allowed to avail of back to education initiatives in order to acquire the new skills necessary to create jobs and stimulate the economy.

Social welfare fraud must be tackled. Deputy Catherine Murphy pointed out that we are paying people to be idle while also paying others to police them and ensure they are out of work. We must change the focus entirely and ensure we have a pro-work system. Those who want to work should be encouraged to do so. I take this opportunity to compliment the community welfare officers who came to the fore during the recent flooding in Dublin, as in other crises. They do incredible work every day and are at the coalface of the current recession.

Deputy Joan Collins: I was astonished to see this motion on the Order Paper. That Fianna Fáil Members who were instrumental in making massive cuts in social welfare benefits to the most vulnerable in our society should put forward this type of motion is incredible. The current Government is implementing many of the cuts introduced by its Fianna Fáil predecessors. Thus we have Fianna Fáil past, the Government effectively operating as Fianna Fáil present and a pretence at Fianna Fáil future in the stance of that party in opposition. It is all poppycock.

I support the Sinn Féin amendment to the motion. The Minister for Social Protection, Deputy Joan Burton, made a poor choice of words when she referred to “lifestyle choice” in respect of people who are unemployed through no fault of their own. The new anti-fraud initiative referred to in the Government amendment is also a cause for concern. Much of the savings that could be made under this initiative relate to administrative errors within the Department rather than fraud on the part of claimants. However, some people are turning into Citizen Smith in this regard. They are able to call the Department anonymously and declare that a particular person is engaged in welfare fraud. A welfare officer is then required to visit the home of the accused person, whose dignity is thereby attacked. If no fraud is proved, the

[Deputy Joan Collins.]

person who made the claim is not accountable in any way. Urgent change is required in this regard. If a person claims another individual is guilty of fraud, the former should be obliged to provide his or her name, address and PPS number and, where the claim is found to be untrue, be subject to a fine.

I seek a categorical assurance from the Minister that there will be no reduction in the rate of child benefit in the upcoming budget. This is a crucial benefit which has been reduced three times in the past three years. There must be no further reduction in this vital support.

Deputy Ann Phelan: Notwithstanding the national concerns in respect of the upcoming budget, I welcome the opportunity to commend the Department of Social Protection on its efforts to restore fiscal stability by eradicating abuse of the social welfare system and instigating job creation methods. The only way to alleviate our difficulties is to create jobs. We are all acutely aware of the financial constraints facing householders throughout the State and that individuals and communities are fearing the implications of budget 2012. The public is fully aware of the adverse effects of the economic crisis of recent years, particularly in the context of the high level of unemployment which, in turn, has resulted in emigration.

There are extensive challenges ahead, but it is imperative that we, as a Government and as a people, are realistic. The Government will take in €42 billion in tax and PRSI this year, of which an estimated €20 billion will be spent by the Department of Social Protection. Readjustments must be made within the Department if a stable budgetary position is to be reached. Moreover, there is a requirement on the Government to achieve the fiscal targets set out in the EU-IMF programme. All Departments have had to re-examine their methodologies in order to achieve fiscal stability.

The past 14 years saw the previous Administration introduce a series of giveaway budgets which have inevitably left us economically deficient, with a level of expenditure which far exceeds our income. That Administration was asleep at the wheel, allowing bankers, developers and international private investors free rein to bring this country to its knees in their quest for a quick profit. Under its watch, economic stress testing was an inane practice. Moreover, there was a complete and unmerited disregard of the services sector in general, with the primary focus being on the lucrative construction industry. Many sectors within the services industry suffered significantly as they were abandoned in pursuit of rapid financial gain. In the past three years we were subjected to the draconian initiatives of a Fianna Fáil Government whose sole purpose was to protect the wealthy by imposing unnecessary cuts on the vulnerable.

That is not the practice of this Government. Our primary aim is to protect the vulnerable, sustain employment, promote job creation and lay the foundations for economic recovery. The level of constraint placed on the shoulders of the Minister, who must operate within the parameters of the EU-IMF deal, is an unforgivable legacy of the previous Administration. That legacy deal makes her room for manoeuvre extremely limited. However, I welcome the stimulus measures she has initiated in recent months. I refer in particular to the halving of employer PRSI and the introduction of a national training fund levy. One of the most affirmative initiatives of the Department has been its concentration on reducing social welfare costs by encouraging those currently on the live register to take up employment and self-employment.

The results have proved encouraging, with the implementation of the JobBridge scheme producing 2,508 opportunities with host organisations and sole traders. To date, 2,185 interns have commenced work under the scheme. The Government is determined to provide the maximum number of people with the opportunity to define and improve their training and skills. JobBridge offers a great opportunity for individuals to gain experience within niche

industries which may in turn lead to full employment. I welcome the steps taken by the Government to nourish existing employment and promote job creation.

I also commend the Minister on the introduction of the new anti-fraud initiative. In 2011, the total budget for social welfare is estimated at €20 million, which equates to 39% of gross Government expenditure. It is a mind-blowing statistic. The Department estimates that the level of fraud and error in the system ranges between 2.5% and 4.5% of total annual expenditure, with several specific benefits identified. However, similar patterns occur throughout the Continent. In other words, we are not greatly out of sync in this regard. Most social welfare subsidies which go awry tend to do so due to administrative and customer errors rather than intentional efforts on the part of claimants to defraud the system. I also recognise that the integrity of our national social welfare scheme depends on fairness so that those who have been hit by hard times and need the most get the most. As the net contributors of funds, the taxpayers are demanding the best possible stewardship of their contributions so that scarce resources go to those who merit them. In that regard I welcomed the inclusion of stronger measures to extend powers to social welfare inspectors to investigate employers' contractors and subcontractors.

I am aware that the Department is fully committed to recovering 100% of overpayments arising as a result of fraud or error. Australia has cross-checking of data with information consistent across all public bodies. However, it has the advantage of having a national database against which to check records which we do not have. The USA has similar schemes and systems in place. I realise the importance of relative cost effectiveness in analysing efficient counter-fraud actions especially given that social welfare represents €20 billion of the €42 billion earned from tax and PRSI. The number of anonymous reports has increased significantly in the past nine months, with more than 12,000 reports made up to the end of September compared with less than 9,000 in the same period in 2010. Advertising campaigns have been launched to combat fraudulent activities in the system. There is an ever-increasing acceptance among the public that they do not want to see the State defrauded.

The Department of Social Protection has recently undergone one of the most profound organisational transitions in the public service with the transfer of the community welfare service into the Department. This combined with the transfer of community and employment services activated under FÁS to the Department is a welcome component of the programme for Government and once completed should provide a more direct and efficient mechanism in providing income maintenance and support to families.

We all recognise the difficulty a person from a disadvantaged area faces. I do not envy the onerous task the Minister faces in trying to stay on course. However, she finds herself in such a situation as a result of what happened in the so-called boom. Where were the audits, and the checks and balances over the past 14 years that allowed the country to get so out of sync? What audits were done on all the houses built? Many of those who are unemployed came from the construction sector. It was a very bad administration that allowed one section of the economy to become a complete bubble and not consider the other sectors. Everybody is talking about jobs and we understand the equation that by getting people back working the social welfare costs reduce.

Since 2002 I carried out an exercise beginning with Spectra Photo Labs in Tralee. From 2002 — I did not look before that — we lost 50 jobs every week. The Minister, Deputy Quinn, tried to raise that matter on numerous occasions in this House during the term of the previous Administration but he was completely ignored.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Michael McCarthy): I wish to clarify that Deputy Ann Phelan is sharing this slot with Deputies O'Mahony, Lawlor and Ciarán Lynch.

Deputy John O'Mahony: I thought I would have more time to contribute to the debate. However, with the time constraints I will stick to a few points that are meant to be constructive. The motion and the amendments all contain points we would all support. I want to avoid the blame game about what people should have done in the past. The bottom line for the upcoming budget is that the most vulnerable need to and must be protected. I know the Minister and her Government colleagues have tried in every way possible to do that since they took office and they will do so in the budget also. However, the task is to distribute the €20 billion that is available in an even-handed and fair way.

The best way to reduce the need for social welfare expenditure is to protect and create jobs. The jobs initiative announced when the new Government took over did not solve everything but was a significant step and pointed us in the direction in which we need to go. My experience is that all the people I meet want work. In particular young people want a start in life and structure on their life. They want to get up in the morning and go out. That is the culture we need to promote. While I know it will not be able to produce 100,000 jobs in coming months, CE schemes represent tremendous value for money. There is a perception that there is a very limited range of work that can be done in communities with them. However, these schemes employed 40,000 people in the 1980s, but there are only 22,000 now. There is potential for giving people that structure to their lives and giving them a start in work.

A few weeks ago I sat in a room with 20 participants on a CE scheme in County Mayo. If the Minister is ever in that area I invite her to come and see that scheme. I came away uplifted by each of them articulating what it meant for them to be on the scheme, what work they were doing and the services they were delivering to the local community. There is great potential for expanding those schemes. While we know there is limited money, those schemes can both deliver value for money and give people a meaning in life.

In addition to increasing the number of schemes we should also expand the criteria for them. At the moment people under 25 cannot join them. In my constituency more than 13,000 people under 25 are unemployed. It would represent a start for them because many of the people I mentioned a few minutes ago are in the process of moving on to setting up their own businesses as a result of the skills they learned on the schemes, which is what they should be about.

I previously raised the matter of people wanting to reskill. Some university graduates have lost the potential for employment given the degrees they have. They have gone back to try to reskill at a lower level but will not get a back to education grant as a result of it being a lower skill. They want to work but they are trapped. Flexibility needs to be introduced and the barriers need to be eliminated.

We need to look at the self-employed. These are people who have contributed to the economy and have employed people. All the people they previously employed are getting their entitlements but they are not entitled to anything. I am not suggesting it will be easy but those people need help and that inequity in the system needs to be addressed. The Minister has a difficult task in which I wish her well. I know she will protect the vulnerable as much as possible.

Deputy Anthony Lawlor: Unlike the previous speaker, I have a criticism of the amendment tabled by Sinn Féin and I would also like to make a few points to the Minister. The Sinn Féin amendment is extraordinary and that party is like a two-headed beast, with one head in this part of the island critical of what is going on with regard to social welfare payments and constantly seeking a reversal of cuts made by the previous Administration and proposed by the current one and the other, which is involved in Government in the North, reducing public spending between 2011 and 2015 by £4 billion stg and current spending by 8%. While the head in this part of the island is totally opposed to the introduction of rates, the head in the North is increasing household rates, affecting the most vulnerable. The head up North is also imposing

cuts in the social housing budget. I find it difficult to stomach the Sinn Féin amendment to this motion, which is critical of what is happening here. Would Sinn Féin, if head of the Irish Government, seek to reduce the widow's pension of €188 to £100 stg or its equivalent of €118? I find Sinn Féin's amendment, which criticises the Fianna Fáil motion, cynical.

I compliment the Minister on the information I received from her in response to a parliamentary question in regard to the jobs initiative and JobBridge scheme. I also welcome that her Department is checking out people applying for places on these schemes. As mentioned by the previous speaker, we need to come up with ways of reducing the overall social welfare budget. One such way is to get people back to work. The jobs initiative announced earlier this year is being worked through. As mentioned by Deputy Phelan, approximately 2,200 people have already taken up internships. I was delighted to hear by e-mail this week from a person whom I helped get an internship that he has taken up a full-time position and that the company for which he is working is to take on an additional ten people. I welcome that there are currently more than 2,500 companies involved in the scheme.

I welcome also that the Department of Social Protection is seeking tenders for evaluation of the JobBridge scheme, an initiative of the Minister which came to my attention by way of the e-tender list. This will ensure money is being well spent. Evaluation of the scheme will involve assessment of the impact of the scheme on the unemployed so as to inform future policy development in this area. I welcome that initiative and hope it will be introduced in respect of other schemes and programmes in this area.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Michael McCarthy): The Deputy has one minute remaining.

Deputy Anthony Lawlor: I welcome that evaluation of the JobBridge scheme will be undertaken by an external body. Often people from outside the Civil Service have a different perspective and viewpoint on issues. People at the lower level of the Civil Service who have direct contact with social welfare recipients often have knowledge of people actively engaged in social welfare fraud. It is important they are brought into the fold and that the information they may have is utilised. People at management level are often too far removed from the contact zone and as such have no idea of what is going on.

I welcome the Minister's initiatives in this area and look forward to working with her into the future. I again thank her for the information provided to me by way of response to parliamentary questions.

Deputy Ciarán Lynch: I welcome the opportunity to speak on this motion and thank Deputy Cowen for tabling it. In responding to the motion before the House, I would like to deal with three particular issues, including what Government action has been taken since this Government took office at the beginning of this year and the Sinn Féin amendment. I note Sinn Féin's absence from the House this morning. It is one thing to be absent for a debate but to absent when one has an amendment before the House is bad manners and disrespectful. The final issue on which I will speak is the Fianna Fáil motion before the House.

The EU-IMF agreement commits the Government to a further adjustment of at least €3.6 billion in the forthcoming budget, including a reduction in expenditure of €2.1 billion. The Department of Social Protection has a major contribution to make in achieving a more balanced budget as it accounts for almost 13% of GDP. The Department of Social Protection is a major area of expenditure in this State and will have to be examined in the context of the forthcoming budget. Examples of expenditure in the Department can be broadly divided into three areas, the first of which is supports for people of working age, which accounts for approximately 55% of overall expenditure or just under €11 billion, including job seeker's allowance and benefit and carer's allowance in respect of which the amount is €762 million per annum.

[Deputy Ciarán Lynch.]

The second area of expenditure is retired and older people, which accounts for almost 29.6% of overall expenditure or nearly €6.1 billion. Some 60% of the Department's budget allocation of €3.6 billion is spent on the contributory State pension, which is the single biggest social welfare scheme. A further €951 million and €920 million will be required in the future for State and non-contributory State pensions and widow and widower's contribution pensions respectively. The third area of expenditure is support for children and families, which accounts for almost 12% of expenditure or just under €4 billion of the Department's annual budget. More than €2 billion is spent on child benefit. It is estimated that almost €700 million will be spent on the qualified child increase and that almost €200 million will be spent on family income supplement. These are major areas of expenditure.

This debate is about finding the most effective way of dealing with unemployment and the social welfare issue in this State. We know that when a job is lost the cost to the Exchequer in social welfare payments and ancillary supports, be it mortgage interest supplement, rent supplement and so on, is approximately €20,000. That does not take into account the personal cost of unemployment and the type of anguish and long-term difficulties it can cause for families and individuals. The most positive way of addressing the social welfare issue is to reduce the number of people who are unemployed and to facilitate the maximum number of unemployed people to take up employment or become self-employed, which is the main priority of the Government. The Government set out its stall in this area as soon as it took office by way of the jobs initiative in respect of which a budget of €500 million has been provided, a budget we were told by the outgoing Administration could not be provided because the EU-IMF deal could not be renegotiated. However, within a short period the Government set out its stall and showed that job creation is its number one priority.

Some examples of the jobs initiative approach is the reduction from 8.5% to 4.25% in the rate of employers' PRSI payable on behalf of employees on the national minimum, which is a significant incentive for employers to take on new staff. There has also been a reduction in VAT from 13.5% on 9% in respect of a range of tourism related goods and services. Feedback from that sector indicates this measure has been positive. For example, hotel accommodation in the constituency of West Cork, which is the constituency of the Acting Chairman, Deputy McCarthy, increased following the introduction of this measure. Many tourist regions in Ireland have recorded a positive impact of this measure during the summer in 2011. As mentioned by my colleague, Deputy Phelan, the national internship programme, which provides work placement for six or nine months, was also introduced.

JobBridge assists in breaking the cycle in which jobseekers are unable to secure a job without having experience as a result of being new entrants to the labour market following education, or as unemployed workers who have trained in new skills. The scheme also gives a real opportunity to gain valuable experience to bridge the gap between study and the beginning of a working life.

Another aspect of JobBridge needs to be explained. At present, graduates leaving university and institutes and education are unable to use their qualifications in the employment market. JobBridge allows them to obtain work experience so that when the economy picks up they will have both their qualifications and some real work experience. The scheme allows people to continue their studies in the workplace and it gives them an edge when looking for long-term employment. I am happy to report that as of Thursday, 27 October 2011, a total of 2,508 internship opportunities with host organisations are available on the website. In addition, 2,185 interns have commenced internships under the JobBridge scheme. The participation in the scheme has been successful.

Another measure implemented by the Government and which was a key commitment in the programme for Government is the establishment of a commission on taxation and social welfare. Its task is to examine the operation and the interaction of the tax and social welfare protection systems; to recommend cost-effective solutions as to how employment disincentives can be improved to achieve better outcomes in the area of child poverty; and to identify the specific practical, institutional and administrative improvements of their operation.

This is just one of a number of reforms which the Government proposes. Organisational transformation is required. For example, as has been mentioned by other Deputies, the community and employment services operated by FÁS and the community welfare service which was formerly part of the HSE, are being transferred to the Minister's Department. These transfers are a key element and have been set out clearly in the programme for Government. We have seen the waste in these Departments during the time of the previous Administration. We have restructured these services in order to target those participating in those programmes rather than being for the benefit of those running the services. When fully completed, this will be a new organisation providing efficient and complementary income maintenance and related services to families with children, people of working age and retired and older people.

It is surprising that Sinn Féin Deputies are not present in the Chamber to listen to the debate on their proposed amendment.

Deputy Dara Calleary: They are all on Twitter.

Deputy Ciarán Lynch: Perhaps they are in Stormont implementing cuts and are too busy to attend this Chamber.

The proposed Sinn Féin amendment to the motion does not make any mention of reform or of dealing with social welfare fraud. It contains the usual litany of accusations against the Government. It attacks a quote from a Minister. If we were to document Sinn Féin's quotes and actions over the years, we would run out of time in this debate. Sinn Féin's approach is very disingenuous. The Sinn Féin alternative is about collapsing the Irish economy. This is the end game of its argument.

Mr. Papandreou in Greece is smoking out those who share the Sinn Féin argument. I would be very surprised if any Sinn Féin Deputy were to refer to Mr. Papandreou's actions as an argument to support its own when he is smoking out those holding such views in the Greek Parliament and nailing them down.

The Fianna Fáil motion refers to protecting the vulnerable. It states that households on social welfare spend their money on the weekly necessities, which is true. However, so do people on the minimum wage. The greatest attack ever made on low income families was the attack made by Fianna Fáil on the minimum wage this time last year when that Government took €40 out of the pocket of every low income worker in this country.

Deputy Dara Calleary: What about the JLCs?

Deputy Ciarán Lynch: Fianna Fáil did this in a most disingenuous manner when it said this was a demand——

Deputy Dara Calleary: Which the Deputy supports.

Deputy Ciarán Lynch: ——made by the troika and by the IMF.

Deputy Seán Ó Feargháil: The Government took it back.

Deputy Ciarán Lynch: It was no such thing. It was later discovered in this House that this was a Fianna Fáil proposal. When we came into office and renegotiated that deal, it was very evident from our discussions with the troika that this had been a Fianna Fáil proposal because the troika——

Deputy Barry Cowen: The Deputy will make a few choices himself in a few weeks.

Deputy Ciarán Lynch: ——had no difficulty with the removal of the proposal. I say to Fianna Fáil Deputies that they are welcome to the real world.

Deputy Robert Troy: The Deputy's party is in the real world now. They have sold everything.

Deputy Barry Cowen: The real world will be in six weeks' time.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Michael McCarthy): Thank you, Deputy, your time is up.

Deputy Ciarán Lynch: We will take on board what they are saying today but the hubris they exercised in this House over the years has come to an end and the mark they left on this House by taking €40 a week out of the pockets of the most vulnerable workers will not be forgotten. They will be continually reminded of it.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Michael McCarthy): The time slot is 30 minutes. Deputy Ó Feargháil and Deputies Troy and Calleary will have ten minutes each. Deputy McConalogue will have speaking time after two other speakers.

Deputy Seán Ó Feargháil: Tá mé ag roinnt mo chuid ama leis na Teachtaí Robert Troy, Dara Calleary agus Charlie McConalogue.

Ar an gcéad dul síos, ba mhaith liom a rá go bhfuil áthas orm deis a bheith agam páirt a ghlacadh sa díospóireacht seo, díospóireacht atá tábhachtach agus muid ag druidim anois leis an chéad cáinainéis don Rialtas nua seo.

There have been some very positive contributions to the debate today and last evening. In adding my few words I wish to be positive. There is a large degree of consensus among all Deputies that we want to see the most vulnerable in Irish society protected. I wish the Minister, Deputy Burton, well because I believe she is committed to that exercise and this motion can help her in the very onerous challenge she faces at Cabinet in battling to secure the resources she will need to meet the needs of those on social welfare.

We in Fianna Fáil understandably point to the substantial increases in the social welfare budget over the decade when the financial allocation rose from €6.7 billion in 2000 to €20.9 billion in 2010. Increasing social welfare payments at a time of economic buoyancy is one thing, as we know, but protecting the progress made by the less well-off in society, at a time of financial crisis, is by far the greatest challenge. I, for my part, am satisfied that at a time of unprecedented difficulty for our country, the previous Fianna Fáil-led Government displayed a genuine commitment to those in need by bringing forward and implementing budgets that were progressive, ensuring that those who could pay most did so.

There is no denying, however, that the reductions in benefits borne already by families and individuals, has impacted adversely on the living standards of many. This is why the election promises of Fine Gael and the Labour Party attracted such support and it is why the vulnerable in society want to see the Government fulfil its promises by maintaining the headline welfare rates to which it committed itself in the programme for Government and which the Tánaiste and the Taoiseach reiterated on a number of occasions.

Few could deny that further sharp reductions in welfare spending, as well as causing severe hardship to individuals, would impact on domestic demand at a time when retail sales continue to fall. In its quarterly report, the troika agreed that a balance must be struck between the correction of the public finances and the need to grow demand in the domestic economy. With a 3.3% year on year drop in retail sales being recorded this September, we can see the precarious state of the economy and its vulnerability to a decline in the spending power of social welfare recipients who are most likely to spend a large proportion of their income in the local economy.

The previous Government made a decision to protect the incomes of elderly people dependent on the State pension. They were right to do so. In spite of this, 10% of older people live on incomes below the poverty line, many of them living alone, although some 44% of older couples live on incomes in the bottom 20% of the income distribution. Without the State pension 88% of our population aged over 65 would be living in absolute poverty. If the Government is to renege on its promise to welfare recipients, as it has on many of its election promises, I exhort the Minister not to abandon the needs of the elderly.

It is in this context that the issue of fuel poverty arises. At a time of rapidly rising energy prices and in the aftermath of a number of exceptionally bad winters, elderly people in particular live in terror of not being able to heat their homes. Those most at risk live alone, sometimes in poor-quality accommodation where there are low occupancy rates. They spend a disproportionately high percentage of their income on fuel costs. We have all heard anecdotal evidence of older people retiring to bed early on a winter's evening to save on fuel costs and keep themselves warm. Recent research by the University of Ulster on the rate of excess winter deaths makes shocking reading. The research found that between 1,500 and 2,000 excess winter deaths, namely, the number of additional deaths when compared to figures for other times of the year, occurred on the island of Ireland during the winter of 2009-10. It was further suggested that deaths from cold-related illnesses may be underestimated by as much as 25%. Budget 2011 recognised the vulnerability of people living in fuel poverty and budget 2012 needs to do likewise.

The past three Fianna Fáil-led Governments did much to address the issue of child poverty by significantly increasing child benefit and investing in preschool education in an initiative that should be mirrored in other areas because it effectively showed how the State can sometimes do more with less. We moved from a process of cash support for young children to the early childhood education programme where each child received the guaranteed benefit of a preschool intervention. The consistent child poverty rate, which had fallen from 11% in 2005, in tandem with benefit increases, is now reversed due to unemployment, reductions in family incomes and social welfare cuts. In 2009, almost 19% of children, namely, more than 200,000 children or one in every six children aged under 17, were considered to be at risk of poverty. No doubt the situation has deteriorated in the interim.

It is vitally important, therefore, to consider the scale of child poverty within the family context. As each of us sees in our constituency clinics, one-parent households are at a high risk of poverty. The most recent statistics available to me indicate that 30% of all those in such households, adults and children alike, are vulnerable. We need to work collectively and, in the period ahead, this Government must act responsively to ensure that the welfare system in all its manifestations operates to guarantee that children are supported and protected from poverty while their parents are assisted and encouraged to return to education or training, or to re-enter the workforce. I share the view expressed by Deputy John O'Mahony, who spoke of breaking the poverty cycles and focusing on this area.

[Deputy Seán Ó Fearghaíl.]

In the run-up to each of the past four budgets, as a member of the Fianna Fáil parliamentary party, I exhorted the then Government to give priority to children at risk of poverty. I again ask the Minister of State, Deputy McEntee, to convey to the Minister, Deputy Burton, the need to make certain that such children are given every possible assistance to reach their potential and, in so doing, break the cycle of poverty into which so many of them were born.

The Fianna Fáil motion before the House further calls on the Government not to reduce social welfare expenditure by stealth, and to maintain other social welfare benefits such as widows' pensions, disability pensions and illness benefits. If the Government is to honour its promise to maintain headline rates, pressure will no doubt come from the Department of Finance to radically reduce or eliminate other expenditure programmes within the remit of the Department of Social Protection. In the limited time available to me, I wish in that regard to mention the work of the family resource centres throughout the country. There is a manifest benefit in continuing to support these centres which are mostly located in areas of significant social need. I have seen at first hand that the benefits experienced by families using the two existing family resource centres in my constituency, in Newbridge and the Curragh.

It would be remiss of me to conclude without referencing the current difficulties being experienced by many members of the public when seeking to avail of services from the Department of Social Protection. Inordinate delays are now being experienced by people applying for a variety of benefits. It now takes, on average, 17 weeks to process a one-parent family payment; family income supplement takes 17 weeks on average and the non-contributory pension 15 weeks. The carer's allowance, a particularly sensitive and important payment, takes 13 weeks. If all these issues are important, so too are the areas of appeal. A variety of figures are quoted to us, ranging from 19,000 outstanding appeals to approximately 37,000.

I am unsure what the accurate figure for appeals is, as they continue to clog up the system but one matter is clear. The staff working in the Department of Social Protection are doing a superb job. They work in very pressurised conditions and are unfailingly helpful and courteous to the public they serve. The Minister must divert resources from within her Department to these front-line areas to ensure that people in dire need have their applications processed expeditiously, and that where appeals arise, they are dealt with much more speedily. It takes 45.5 working days, on average, for an appeal for many of the benefits which are essential for people to keep body and soul together.

I believe this Minister intends to do well and that she is well-motivated. We on this side of the House wish to support her in ensuring that she and the Government honour the firm commitments they made to the people in the election and in the programme for Government. I commend the motion to the House.

Deputy Robert Troy: I compliment my colleague, Deputy Barry Cowen, for introducing this motion. My party has nothing to apologise for in so doing. Some people seem to think that because we got a significant beating in the recent election we should crawl under a stone or run away but we should not. We have a mandate. I have a mandate to be in this House representing the people who put me here, just as my 18 colleagues similarly received a mandate. It was diminished, as judged by previous elections, but we have a mandate. We were elected the main Opposition party and our job is to hold the Government to account. We should never fall back or renege from that.

I attended a public meeting recently where a man told me a government is only as good as its opposition. I question where——

Deputy Ciarán Lynch: Do not forget the past, then.

Deputy Barry Cowen: You must have been good, to leave us there for 14 years.

Deputy Ann Phelan: Enough said.

Deputy Ciarán Lynch: You must have been a terrible Opposition that day.

Deputy Robert Troy: We received our mandate and the Government received its mandate.

Deputy Barry Cowen: You will make it easy for us in a few weeks' time.

Deputy Robert Troy: The Government has a large mandate. It went to the country and made certain promises, in particular in regard to social welfare, the subject of our discussion today. Not only did the Government parties make promises in their pre-election manifestos, they made them in the programme for Government, renewing them when they were 100 days in office. Therefore, there can be no ambiguity. They cannot say they were not sure where they stood or how bad the finances were. The financial situation was well-known. I was not a Member of the previous Dáil but never before, in the history of the State, were Government books opened up so widely and freely to all Members of the Oireachtas who wished to look at them. People know exactly where they stand. I hope, therefore, the Government will renew the proposals it outlined. It is true that when we introduced a four-year plan in November of last year, we aimed to achieve savings of €2.8 billion in social welfare expenditure. It was envisaged that this would be done through a combination of control measures, labour activation and structural reforms. We hoped at that time that there would be no further reductions in the rates.

We have listened to Government Deputies saying all the low-hanging fruit has been picked. I question whether last year's cuts in carer's allowance, blind rate pension and widow's and widower's pensions were low-hanging fruit. Those decisions were very difficult. They rightly met with severe opposition at the time. No one wanted to be in a position to make such decisions, but they had to be made, unfortunately, in order to achieve the €6 billion in cuts that were needed last year. We are now on the road to recovery as a result of them.

Government Deputies are falling over themselves every day to welcome the acknowledgement and credit they are receiving from international markets and commentators. They claim it has resulted from the work they have done since they took office but that is not the case. It has resulted from a budget that was vehemently opposed in December of last year and has been fully implemented now. We support the budget parameters for next year but we may differ on how they can be achieved. I understand the Minister for Finance will outline the figures tomorrow. I look forward to Opposition Deputies having an opportunity to look through them to ensure we can propose credible alternatives to what the Government is planning. Perhaps we will be in a position to support what the Government is doing.

It has been suggested that we increased social welfare payments for an electoral gain and benefit. I do not believe Deputies on this side of the House who were in Government before this year's election should make any apologies for increasing pension levels by 130%, unemployment benefits by 130% and child payments by 330%. At the time, Opposition Deputies said that such increases were miserly and that one could hardly buy a loaf of bread, a bale of briquettes or a bag of coal with the moneys in question. Those words were used. I went to a house two nights ago to meet a husband and wife aged 89 and 82. The man in question has been suffering from dementia for the last four years. His wife has been providing full-time care — 24 hours a day, seven days a week — to her husband during that time. By keeping him out of an institution, she has saved this Government tens of thousands of euro. She could do so

[Deputy Robert Troy.]

because the previous Government introduced home help packages which were of major benefit to her.

Deputy Barry Cowen: Hear, hear.

Deputy Robert Troy: She could do so because the previous Government increased the old age pension and introduced a half-rate carer's pay for such families. I was visited them because unfortunately the man in question has gone so bad that his wife is no longer able to look after him. Rather than paying an extra €130 a week to that family, the Government will have to pay a minimum of €700 a week to keep the man in a State home.

We have been ridiculed in this debate for doing what we did. It was suggested that we did it for electoral gain. We did it because we have a strong social conscience. I am fed up attending this House to be spoken down to because I am a member of Fianna Fáil. It is as if we are something one might walk on in the street. Just like people in Fine Gael, the Labour Party, Sinn Féin, the Technical Group or the democratic left alliance or United Left Alliance, or whatever they like to call themselves, many of us in Fianna Fáil have strong social consciences. I do not see why we cannot bring this issue to the floor of the House to be debated. We were elected to articulate our views as we are doing today.

I would like to speak about the issues facing self-employed people who created jobs and paid PRSI, tax and VAT during the good times. In recent years, many of them have gone out of work and are finding it hard to get any sort of social assistance. Their problems must be addressed quickly. It should have been done previously. Perhaps it was a slip of the tongue when the Minister said that being on social welfare is a lifestyle choice. That is not true in the vast majority of cases. I suggest that at least 300,000 of the 440,000 unemployed people in this country never received unemployment benefit until the last three or four years. They did not make a lifestyle choice to go from earning €500, €600 or €700 a week to earning €188 a week.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: Why are they in that position?

Deputy Robert Troy: I do not believe——

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: The economy is wrecked.

Deputy Robert Troy: ——anybody made that choice.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: Who made the choice? The previous Government made it for them.

Deputy Robert Troy: Can I also say——

Deputy Barry Cowen: Nobody makes that choice.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: Deputy Cowen is right. Nobody would have made it until it was made for them.

Deputy Barry Cowen: The Deputy should have a bit of respect.

Deputy Robert Troy: We must ensure we do everything in our power to get people back to work. That is the only way we will maintain the social welfare budget at a low level. We need to do everything in our power to get people back to work.

I wish the Government well in its endeavours. I have always said that Fianna Fáil will be constructive in opposition. We will support those who need to be supported. I will not make

any further apologies for being democratically elected by the people of Longford-Westmeath. As long as I am here, I will hold the Government to account as an Opposition Deputy, which is what I was elected to do. I make no apologies for that.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I thank my colleague, Deputy Cowen, for giving us a chance to discuss social welfare in advance of the budget. I would like to pick up on what Deputy Ó Fearghaíl said about the staff of the Department of Social Protection around the country. They are performing an admirable job under huge pressure, particularly those who man the Oireachtas inquiry lines. Other Departments could study how the Oireachtas inquiry lines in the Department of Social Protection work in terms of providing information and assistance. The Department's staff throughout the country are doing a superb job.

Deputy Ó Fearghaíl briefly mentioned the situation with regard to social welfare appeals. All of us deal with social welfare appeals in our constituency offices. When I checked in my own office this morning, I found that the average delay on an appeal at the moment is between 12 and 14 months. Nobody in here should accept or be happy with that. If such a waiting list existed in a hospital or for a grant payment for something else, there would be a hullabaloo over it and task forces would be established. Surely it is within our ability in this House to come up with some sort of system whereby experienced civil servants from various Departments can be brought in to tackle this backlog. We fully accept that people with experience are needed to process appeals but it is not rocket science to assess eligibility or conditions.

I often think that many of those on social welfare are best placed to do this work themselves. Those who may be entitled to a payment, perhaps in the circumstances described by Deputy Troy, cannot be expected to wait for 14 months to have their appeals assessed properly. I appeal to the Minister to examine the possibility of establishing a specific initiative without incurring extra costs, for example by bringing in people from other Departments, to tackle this problem. Perhaps it can be tackled on a geographical basis.

Over the past two days, Deputy Troy and many other speakers have referred to the position of the self-employed. People whose businesses have collapsed through no fault of their own often come to our constituency offices to tell us how incredibly frustrating it is to have employed dozens of people and paid tax and PRSI and everything else, only to find that their former employees are in full receipt of social welfare whereas they cannot get any social welfare.

ISME has provided information on the distinction that is made between employees and the self-employed. It shows that unlike an employee who has an immediate entitlement to benefits depending on the waiting list to which Deputy Ó Fearghaíl referred, the self-employed do not have any immediate entitlements. They are means tested, their savings and income, including that of co-habitees, are fully assessed, as is the value of property other than the family home, and they are not covered for invalidity or disability. The difficulty associated with assessing property values is that despite many properties being no longer worth anything to their owners, they have attached to them a nominal amount which precludes the owner from receiving a proper and fair payment. I ask the Minister to consider specifically the introduction of a provision to give the self-employed, who are wealth and employment creators, a proper and fair chance. If she does so, she will do the country some service.

A number of speakers referred to the provision in the so-called jobs initiative to reduce employer PRSI. Having contacted the Department of Social Protection on the issue, I note that a catch applies in this regard. The community services programme, CSP, does phenomenal work, from providing meals on wheels services to caring for older people and promoting tourism. However, it is not allowed to transfer savings it secures as a result of the reduction in PRSI into its administration budgets, which are being cut to reflect savings. If we are serious

[Deputy Dara Calleary.]

about the services provided by the community services programme, we should offer it every possible support. As Deputy Troy stated, the CSP saves the State substantial amounts of money.

Deputy Ó Fearghaíl referred to the work done by family resource centres. I fail to understand the reason the Government transferred responsibility for the centres from the Department of Social Protection to the Department of Children and Youth Affairs. I am concerned about the allocation of their budgets and the standing they enjoy now that they appear to be boxed into the latter Department. Given that they do much more than deal with children, we should be wary about transferring them to the Department of Children and Youth Affairs. I ask the Minister to respond.

Given the significant work done by the previous Government to address fraud, it is a little rich for the Minister to trot into the House or state in the media that she is the queen of anti-fraud measures. She needs to address a number of specific areas. Some people from across the Border are using addresses in this State or various programmes to gain access to payments which are higher in this part of the island than in the other part of it. Various task forces were established in recent years — the former Ministers, Deputy Ó Cuív and Mary Hanafin, were particularly strong in this regard — involving the Garda Síochána, Revenue Commissioners and other bodies to tackle this aspect of social welfare fraud. The measures taken had a direct impact in some Border counties. These measures must continue to be enforced to ensure that those who claim benefits across the country are fully entitled to them. We must also be careful not to overstate the problem as the data available indicate that so-called false claims are not higher in Ireland than in most other European countries. For this reason, we must be wary of presenting welfare fraud as a major problem. Public representatives know that some of those who come to our offices are not entitled to social welfare benefits. Perhaps we must collectively decide to tell such people that they do not have an entitlement and refuse to deal with their case.

The Minister indicated she is seeking reductions from the ESB in respect of the fuel allowance. Thus far, she has managed to get away with cutting the fuel allowance because the cuts have not kicked in on ESB bills. Given some of the Minister's previous utterances in the House about these allowances, it is extraordinary that she has chosen to reduce them. As we move into the winter months when most people switch on their heating systems, I believe this issue will come back and bite the Government. The cut in the allowances may have been small but it was heartless given the type of people who will be most affected.

I wish the Minister well and hope she shows the same determination and vigour she has shown in pursuing the ESB when she pursues RTE to secure a reduction in the cost of television licences for people on social welfare. It is ridiculous that RTE has not agreed to reduce the television licence for those on social welfare. Various well paid RTE presenters are the first to lecture Members of the House and people in every other part of the economy about cutting expenditure. It is ridiculous, and in this respect I am being critical of former Ministers from my party, that this issue is only now being addressed. RTE must cut its cloth to reflect the current economic conditions. Rather than cutting the payments of pensioners and others with an entitlement to social welfare benefits, the Minister would be better engaged reducing incomes in RTE.

The coverage of social welfare is frequently reduced to soundbites and slogans targeted at particular audiences, depending on the speaker's particular political view. We have heard references to "deadbeat dads" and "scroungers" and arguments that people have been put on the bread line as a result of cuts in social welfare. When the Government was being formed I was struck by the fact that the Department of Social Protection, which has responsibility for one

third of expenditure, was viewed as a junior Department. Irrespective of who was appointed Minister and the circumstances surrounding that appointment, the Department, as one of the most important Ministries in expenditure terms, should be the lead Department in breaking the cycle of poverty. It should lead the Departments of Education and Skills and Health in selling the message that social welfare is a temporary option for most people and send out a message to the children born into families who are on social welfare that they need not be on social welfare. It should also press the Department of Education and Skills to develop new programmes and revise existing programmes such as DEIS to make them more focused on the people who need them. The media attention given to the Department of Social Protection needs to reflect its importance in government and, more important, the lead role it and the Minister can play, should they so choose, in rebuilding society.

Minister of State at the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Shane McEntee): This is a crucial debate. It is a privilege for any democracy to have a social welfare system. At this difficult time, we must look after those who need social welfare most.

I spoke briefly with the Minister and sincerely hope she is able to address the entire social welfare system. I am privileged to be involved in food, horticulture and forestry. I hope my contribution does not come across as racist. Having visited many factories and yards, I find it incredible that people are much better off not working than working. Last week, I discussed the price of vegetables with representatives of one of the main stores. They informed me that when the company opened a new store in north County Dublin only 63 people applied for 70 jobs. Also in north County Dublin, 70 jobs paying up to €30,000 per annum became available in the spring but only three Irish people applied for them. The other 67 positions were filled by people who moved here from Poland. I visited a meat factory in the midlands with 20 vacancies. Of the three Irish people who started work, all left after the first day whereas the 17 Brazilians who were recruited remained. At a function I attended the other night for a fine gentleman, Fintan Ginnity, the former chairman of the Meath county board, I was seated beside a lady who informed me that her company failed to find recruits for three full-time jobs. I also visited three other factories, one of which employs 327 people, of whom 305 are not from Ireland. These are incredible figures. People from other countries are coming here to take jobs in a number of sectors. We need to reskill people if we are to expand the agricultural sector in the next five years. We must train and encourage people to take jobs in processing, factories and so forth.

Deputy Troy spoke passionately about social welfare. All of us deal with the same type of people and we must ensure they are protected. Since 1 January, some 50,000 people have come into the country and acquired PPS numbers. Since 2007, some 555,000 people have come here and acquired PPS numbers. These are the facts.

I welcome this opportunity to conclude the debate on this motion. The Government is determined to restore our national sovereignty. We want to be financially independent and to pay our own way. As the Minister has detailed, Government spending in 2011 will be roughly €18 billion more than this year's overall Government income. The Government will get €42 billion from tax and PRSI this year, €20 billion of which will be spent by the Department of Social Protection. Despite severe constraints, the Government is determined to do its utmost to protect the most vulnerable people in Irish society. We also recognise that the people who turn to the Department for protection generally had no role in causing the economic crisis. They must, therefore, be shielded from the worst of its consequences. There are considerable challenges ahead, including the need to safeguard, as far as possible, the key income supports and services operated by the Department.

[Deputy Shane McEntee.]

A number of Deputies raised the issues of the fuel allowance and household benefits schemes during last evening's session. Difficult decisions had to be made in respect of these schemes in light of commitments made by the previous Government. A number of measures for savings in 2011 and future years were specified as part of budget 2011, but were not announced by the Government at the time. These included a saving of €30 million in the energy and telephone elements of the household benefits package in 2011 and subsequent years, but the specific way in which the saving was to be made was not specified. They also included the abolition of the smokeless fuel allowance, with a saving of €7.7 million in 2011 and €17.5 million in subsequent years. The number of free units provided under the electricity and gas allowance were reduced from 2,400 to 1,800, with a view to generating savings of €17 million in 2011 and €65 million annually. In 2010, approximately €367 million was spent on the household benefits package. It is expected that up to €371 million will be spent by the end of this year, even when the changes mentioned have been taken into account.

The key element of our transformation from a passive system of income support to a more proactive model is the establishment of the new national employment and entitlements service. The service will merge FÁS employment and community employment programmes as well as community welfare service into the Department of Social Protection. The idea is to create an integrated service providing a one-stop shop for people seeking to establish their benefit entitlements, looking for a job and seeking advice on their training options. FÁS and the Department of Social Protection are already working on a number of pilot projects to identify those who are most at risk of falling into long-term unemployment and the provision of appropriately tailored responses to their needs. These will be rolled out nationwide next year as part of the national employment and entitlements service. This new service will offer users a high level of personalised employment support. It will give special attention to those on the live register most at risk of long-term unemployment through proactive approaches and modern case management systems.

As the Minister has already said, the formulation of budget 2012 presents considerable challenges. The budgetary process will be informed by the comprehensive review of expenditure which has been completed by the Department. This Government will always endeavour to do its utmost to look after the most vulnerable people in our society and to ensure that measures introduced are fair and equitable, while continuing to take the necessary steps to put the country back on the road to economic growth and stability. I commend the amendment to the House.

Deputy Brendan Smith: I compliment my colleague Deputy Barry Cowen on putting forward this constructive and important motion. As Deputy McEntee said, this is an important issue.

I wish to refer to the comment made by my colleague, Deputy Dara Calleary, with regard to the exorbitant licence fees paid to RTE on behalf of taxpayers. There is plenty of room to reduce that subsidy to an organisation where outrageous salary levels still prevail, particularly at presenter level. There is room for dramatic improvement in that organisation.

I am quite a number of years in this House and I appreciate it is not always possible for the relevant Minister to attend. However, it has always been the tradition that an official or senior person from each Department would attend and listen to the debate and bring any urgent issues to the attention of the Minister. The current Government talks about making the Oireachtas and the Legislature more important, yet we are being totally disregarded. We know the debate will be printed by tomorrow, but that is not the point. Officials should be present, particularly when the Minister is unable to attend. This is no reflection on the Minister of State at the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, Deputy McEntee. If the Minister,

Deputy Burton, cannot be here — I am sure she has a good reason for her absence — some of her officials should be present to listen to the debate.

My colleague mentioned the huge improvements during the period when Fianna Fáil led the Government. We improved the living standards of people depending on social welfare. There were huge improvements in the rates of payment to people in receipt of social welfare payments, huge improvements in the household package and in the criteria for availing of carer's allowance. All of those benefits put in place benefited hundreds of thousands of people. It was disingenuous for the Minister, on her trip to Donegal, to talk about those improvements being put in place for electoral gain. This was particularly disingenuous considering the many comments she made when she was on this side of the House. Budget after budget, she complained the increases were not substantial enough. In recent years, the ESRI conducted examinations of tax and social welfare measures taken in our budgets and their examinations confirmed on all occasions that those budgets were progressive.

The Minister has been praised recently for saying she had an “army” of inspectors in place to tackle fraud. I am sure she did not mean “army” in the traditional way. Thankfully, we have got rid of paramilitary groups here, and we want to see their remnants disbanded also. With regard to fraud, the Minister is just continuing the good work that was initiated a number of years ago. The Department has been carrying out a successful anti-fraud programme. We want to see that being even more successful. Considerable sums of money have been saved each year from tackling fraud, almost €500 annually over the past number of years. We hope that will be achieved again this year. There are approximately 600 staff in the Department involved in that work.

We all know about the huge pressure on individual social welfare officials, but within our overall public administration there is scope to transfer more people to pressure areas within the Department of Social Protection. The Minister of State will be aware that when I was Minister in his Department, there was a large transfer of personnel from the Department to the Department of Social Protection. There is still scope within the broader public service to transfer people to areas with a heavy burden. Some months ago, when the Minister, Deputy Burton, introduced the Social Welfare Bill, I spoke about the multi-agency checkpoints along the Border, where extra powers were given to the personnel in the statutory agencies involved in those checkpoints. I welcomed that. I represent two of the southern Ulster counties in this Dáil and my colleague, Deputy Kirk, represents Louth, another Border county. We have seen at first hand fraudulent behaviour by people crossing the Border and welcome anything that will eliminate that and ensure that our people on the southern side of the Border in Ulster can compete on a level playing field in regard to contracts, building work and construction work, etc. I commend the Department and all the agencies involved in ensuring that fraud is eliminated and minimised as much as possible.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: I commend my colleague, Deputy Barry Cowen, our spokesperson on social welfare, on bringing forward this opportune Private Members' motion on the importance of protecting our social welfare payments and of holding the Government to account in terms of ensuring the people who are most vulnerable in these difficult financial times are protected as far as is possible in the upcoming budget.

We bring forward this motion on the back of what has always been a very strong ethos in the Fianna Fáil Party of social solidarity and a very strong social conscience. That goes back to the foundation of our party, right through all those times we were in government. Many of the initiatives introduced over the years were the foundation stone of our party's success. Our party has certainly not lost that social conscience, nor the understanding that it is the job of a party in government to ensure that everybody is looked after, including those who are vulner-

[Deputy Charlie McConalogue.]

able and those who need a leg up when they hit hardship, while ensuring that those who are able and in a position to work do their bit and contribute in a manner that makes sure nobody is left behind. Fianna Fáil's record in government over the last few years would demonstrate these traits. Pension levels were increased by 130%, unemployment benefits increased by 130% and child benefits increased by 330%.

The importance of this is highlighted by the fact that every week, about 1.4 million people receive a social welfare payment of some description. That is absolutely critical to many of those families. We are talking about pensioners, people who are currently unemployed, or people who are carers, as Deputy Troy outlined earlier. All of these people depend on such payments, and by carrying out their work, carers save the State much more money. We spend 20% of our GNP on social welfare payments, whereas that figure is 24% in France and 22% in Germany. We are certainly not out of kilter with the EU in this respect.

I know the Government has a very difficult challenge ahead, due to the financial constraints in which we find ourselves. It has very difficult decisions to make in this budget, as the last Government did in a series of budgets when €20 billion was taken out of the national finances.

1 o'clock We in opposition will be highlighting the importance of protecting the vulnerable, but we will also hold the Government to account for the promises it made not so long ago. We will point out the damage and hardship caused by cuts made not just to those on social welfare, but across the board. We will point that out, as the parties opposite did in the last Dáil. They also made promises a few months ago, in the full knowledge of the national finances, as to what they would do when they got into government, and they asked for a mandate on that basis. As well as pointing out the hardship caused by the Government's cuts, we will also be holding it to account for every promise it made over nine months ago.

I commend this motion to the House. I thank the House and the Acting Chairman for their co-operation, and I urge Members to support the motion.

Amendment put:

The Dáil divided: Tá, 79; Níl, 36.

Tá

Bannon, James.
Barry, Tom.
Breen, Pat.
Broughan, Thomas P.
Burton, Joan.
Butler, Ray.
Buttimer, Jerry.
Byrne, Catherine.
Byrne, Eric.
Carey, Joe.
Coffey, Paudie.
Conaghan, Michael.
Conlan, Seán.
Connaughton, Paul J.
Coonan, Noel.
Corcoran Kennedy, Marcella.
Costello, Joe.
Coveney, Simon.
Creed, Michael.
Creighton, Lucinda.
Daly, Jim.
Deenihan, Jimmy.
Deering, Pat.

Doherty, Regina.
Dowds, Robert.
Durkan, Bernard J.
English, Damien.
Feighan, Frank.
Ferris, Anne.
Fitzgerald, Frances.
Fitzpatrick, Peter.
Flanagan, Charles.
Flanagan, Terence.
Gilmore, Eamon.
Griffin, Brendan.
Harrington, Noel.
Harris, Simon.
Heydon, Martin.
Hogan, Phil.
Howlin, Brendan.
Humphreys, Heather.
Keaveney, Colm.
Kehoe, Paul.
Kenny, Seán.
Kyne, Seán.
Lawlor, Anthony.

Tá—continued

Lynch, Ciarán.
 Lyons, John.
 McCarthy, Michael.
 McFadden, Nicky.
 McHugh, Joe.
 McLoughlin, Tony.
 McNamara, Michael.
 Mitchell O'Connor, Mary.
 Mulherin, Michelle.
 Nash, Gerald.
 Naughten, Denis.
 Neville, Dan.
 Nolan, Derek.
 Nulty, Patrick.
 Ó Ríordáin, Aodhán.
 O'Donovan, Patrick.
 O'Mahony, John.

O'Reilly, Joe.
 O'Sullivan, Jan.
 Penrose, Willie.
 Phelan, Ann.
 Phelan, John Paul.
 Rabbitte, Pat.
 Reilly, James.
 Ryan, Brendan.
 Shatter, Alan.
 Spring, Arthur.
 Stagg, Emmet.
 Stanton, David.
 Tuffy, Joanna.
 Twomey, Liam.
 Wall, Jack.
 Walsh, Brian.

Níl

Boyd Barrett, Richard.
 Browne, John.
 Calleary, Dara.
 Collins, Joan.
 Colreavy, Michael.
 Cowen, Barry.
 Crowe, Seán.
 Daly, Clare.
 Doherty, Pearse.
 Dooley, Timmy.
 Ferris, Martin.
 Fleming, Sean.
 Fleming, Tom.
 Healy, Seamus.
 Healy-Rae, Michael.
 Kelleher, Billy.
 Kirk, Seamus.
 Lowry, Michael.

McConalogue, Charlie.
 McGrath, Finian.
 McGrath, Mattie.
 McLellan, Sandra.
 Murphy, Catherine.
 Ó Caoláin, Caoimhghín.
 Ó Cuív, Éamon.
 Ó Fearghaíl, Seán.
 Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.
 O'Brien, Jonathan.
 O'Sullivan, Maureen.
 Pringle, Thomas.
 Ross, Shane.
 Smith, Brendan.
 Stanley, Brian.
 Tóibín, Peadar.
 Troy, Robert.
 Wallace, Mick.

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Emmet Stagg and Paul Kehoe; Níl, Deputies Aengus Ó Snodaigh and Seán Ó Fearghaíl.

Amendment declared carried.

Question put: "That the motion, as amended, be agreed to."

The Dáil divided: Tá, 78; Níl, 37.

Tá

Bannon, James.
 Barry, Tom.
 Breen, Pat.
 Broughan, Thomas P.
 Burton, Joan.
 Butler, Ray.
 Buttimer, Jerry.
 Byrne, Catherine.
 Byrne, Eric.
 Carey, Joe.
 Coffey, Paudie.
 Conaghan, Michael.
 Conlan, Seán.

Connaughton, Paul J.
 Coonan, Noel.
 Corcoran Kennedy, Marcella.
 Costello, Joe.
 Coveney, Simon.
 Creed, Michael.
 Daly, Jim.
 Deenihan, Jimmy.
 Deering, Pat.
 Doherty, Regina.
 Dowds, Robert.
 Durkan, Bernard J.
 English, Damien.

Tá—*continued*

Feighan, Frank.
 Ferris, Anne.
 Fitzgerald, Frances.
 Fitzpatrick, Peter.
 Flanagan, Charles.
 Flanagan, Terence.
 Gilmore, Eamon.
 Griffin, Brendan.
 Harrington, Noel.
 Harris, Simon.
 Heydon, Martin.
 Hogan, Phil.
 Howlin, Brendan.
 Humphreys, Heather.
 Keaveney, Colm.
 Kehoe, Paul.
 Kenny, Seán.
 Kyne, Seán.
 Lawlor, Anthony.
 Lynch, Ciarán.
 Lyons, John.
 McCarthy, Michael.
 McEntee, Shane
 McFadden, Nicky.
 McHugh, Joe.
 McLoughlin, Tony.

McNamara, Michael.
 Mitchell O'Connor, Mary.
 Mulherin, Michelle.
 Nash, Gerald.
 Neville, Dan.
 Nolan, Derek.
 Nulty, Patrick.
 Ó Ríordáin, Aodhán.
 O'Donovan, Patrick.
 O'Mahony, John.
 O'Reilly, Joe.
 O'Sullivan, Jan.
 Penrose, Willie.
 Phelan, Ann.
 Phelan, John Paul.
 Rabbitte, Pat.
 Reilly, James.
 Ryan, Brendan.
 Shatter, Alan.
 Spring, Arthur.
 Stagg, Emmet.
 Stanton, David.
 Tuffy, Joanna.
 Twomey, Liam.
 Wall, Jack.
 Walsh, Brian.

Níl

Boyd Barrett, Richard.
 Browne, John.
 Calleary, Dara.
 Collins, Joan.
 Colreavy, Michael.
 Cowen, Barry.
 Crowe, Seán.
 Daly, Clare.
 Doherty, Pearse.
 Dooley, Timmy.
 Ferris, Martin.
 Fleming, Sean.
 Fleming, Tom.
 Healy, Seamus.
 Healy-Rae, Michael.
 Kelleher, Billy.
 Kirk, Seamus.
 Lowry, Michael.
 McConalogue, Charlie.

McDonald, Mary Lou.
 McGrath, Finian.
 McGrath, Mattie.
 McLellan, Sandra.
 Murphy, Catherine.
 Ó Caoláin, Caoimhghín.
 Ó Cuív, Éamon.
 Ó Fearghaíl, Seán.
 Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.
 O'Brien, Jonathan.
 O'Sullivan, Maureen.
 Pringle, Thomas.
 Ross, Shane.
 Smith, Brendan.
 Stanley, Brian.
 Tóibín, Peadar.
 Troy, Robert.
 Wallace, Mick.

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Emmet Stagg and Paul Kehoe; Níl, Deputies Aengus Ó Snodaigh and Seán Ó Fearghaíl.

Question declared carried.

Topical Issue 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 27A and the name of the Member in each case: (1) Deputy James Bannon — the need to designate Longford as a sub-office of the newly amalgamated Longford Westmeath Vocational Education Committee; (2) Deputy Brendan Griffin — possible changes to the ambulance service in County Kerry; (3) Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív — an gá atá le cead a fháil cuid de na haonaid tithíochta sóisialta ag Áras

Rónáin, Cill Rónáin, Árann a athrú ó thithe soisialta go aonad cúram príomhúil faoi chúram an HSE agus nach n-iarrfaí aon aisíoc ar an deontas a tugadh don ionad ó tharla go mbeidh sé in úsáid ag an HSE don phobal; (4) Deputy John O'Mahony — the need to avoid disruption for examination pupils when teachers retire at the end of February 2012; (5) Deputy Mattie McGrath — the need to reorganise the Valuation Office to ensure property re-valuations are carried out by personnel other than those who set the initial valuations; (6) Deputy Simon Harris — the current problems faced by commuters using DART and mainline rail services; (7) Deputy Gerald Nash — the payment of €200 million to private sector recruitment firms to provide nurses, doctors and other health care workers; (8) Deputy Mary Lou McDonald — to ask the Minister to make a statement on the nine revised points of eligibility for ring-fenced projects agreed by the FÁS-lead community employment, CE, drugs rehabilitation working group of the national drug strategic framework, NDSF, during a recent review, why local drug task forces and community employment scheme operators were not aware or party to the review and the impact of the new eligibility rules on the latter organisation's service provision; (9) Deputy Robert Dowds — the need to tackle diesel fuel smuggling; (10) Deputies Michael McCarthy and Ciarán Lynch — the future of the Cork to Swansea ferry service; (11) Deputy Dan Neville — the increase in persons presenting to hospitals due to deliberate self harm; (12) Deputy Noel Harrington — the construction of the Bantry bypass, County Cork; (13) Deputies Sean Fleming and Charles Flanagan — the future of the district hospital, Abbeyleix, County Laois; (14) Deputy Michael Healy-Rae — the need to extend the period for spreading slurry; (15) Deputy Brendan Smith — the need to extend the period for spreading slurry; (16) Deputy Seamus Kirk — the need to alleviate overcrowding at the emergency department at Our Lady of Lourdes Hospital, Drogheda, County Louth; (17) Deputy Mick Wallace — the need to lift the moratorium on the hiring of midwives at the maternity unit at Wexford General Hospital; and (18) Deputy Tom Fleming — the need to extend the period for spreading slurry.

The matters raised by Deputies John O'Mahony, Michael McCarthy, Ciarán Lynch, Sean Fleming, Charles Flanagan and Seamus Kirk have been selected for discussion.

Topical Issue Debate

School Staffing

Deputy John O'Mahony: I thank the Leas-Cheann Comhairle for selecting this topic and I thank the Minister for coming in to hear it. The matter is simple. As everyone is aware, by 29 February next a large number of teachers will have retired because of the changes to be introduced in pension and taxation calculations. I have raised this issue on several occasions previously. If the changes go ahead as scheduled it would create a great deal of confusion and disruption in the classroom, especially for examination classes.

This is especially relevant for those sitting the leaving certificate examination. The changes will come during the final ten to 12 weeks of the school year, the most important part of their education in secondary school. During this time there are mock examinations, oral and practical examinations and the final lead-in to the leaving certificate examination. At that stage, the teacher is not only a teacher, but a mentor for the students and a calming influence. Teachers offer guidance on the crucial areas to revise and suggest areas likely to be examined. This takes place in the final days before the examinations.

If the planned changes go ahead it would represent an impossible task from the student's point of view for any new teacher who might step into the classroom on 1 March to oversee a smooth or seamless transition. I emphasise that I have in mind the student's point of view and

[Deputy John O'Mahony.]

this is no reflection on the competence or qualifications of any new teachers that might enter the classroom.

I raise the matter for a second reason. A newspaper report some weeks ago suggested the Minister was considering some way of alleviating this disruption. This has ignited a good deal of confusion, tension and concern on behalf of the students with regard to what will happen in February. I understand there is some time to go but will the Minister confirm, inasmuch as he can at this stage, what will happen in classrooms, especially for leaving certificate students? If there was an indication of what will happen, students could put their minds at ease, know exactly what was happening and be able to concentrate on getting the maximum points in the leaving certificate next June.

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Ruairí Quinn): I thank Deputy O'Mahony, with whom I served on the committee on education and skills in the last Dáil, for raising this matter.

The previous Government provided for a reduction in the pay of public servants in 2009. Under the public service pension rights order 2011, 29 February 2012 was set as the final date on which public servants could retire and have their pension entitlements calculated on the older, higher rates. It is possible, due to this effect on pensions, that there may be an increased turnover of teaching staff in the next few months. Deputy O'Mahony is an expert in this field as a former teacher.

The Government is very aware of the potential impact on students preparing for the two State examinations of an increased number of teachers retiring between now and next February. To reduce this impact I intend to permit schools to re-employ teachers who choose to retire between 1 December 2011 and 29 February 2012 and who, immediately before their retirement, had been teaching students preparing to sit the junior or leaving certificate in 2012. These teachers may be re-employed until the summer holidays for the teaching duties for which they were timetabled immediately before their retirement.

Where a teacher's pre-retirement duties included teaching and non-teaching duties, such as in the case of an assistant or deputy principal, the teacher may be re-employed for his or her teaching hours only. These measures will be confined to teachers teaching State examination classes in post-primary schools and do not apply to teachers with no exam classes or primary school teachers.

Where teachers retire who are not involved in teaching in some classes then replacements should be employed until the end of the school year, in accordance with normal recruitment practices. This involves a full recruitment process for appointments in excess of 24 weeks or, where the vacancy is for less than 24 weeks to the end of the school year, the school should appoint a substitute teacher. Officials in my Department have discussed this matter with second level management bodies and expect to issue an information note to schools in the next week.

Deputy John O'Mahony: I thank the Minister for addressing the situation ahead of time. What he has said will be very good news for students at this critical stage of the school year. I ask him to confirm that all State examinations will be covered, including the junior certificate. Does the Minister know how many teachers have indicated they will retire in the coming months to 29 February in primary and post primary schools?

Deputy Ruairí Quinn: The Deputy has asked two specific questions and I propose to answer him in the order in which he asked them. This transitional facility will apply to teachers who are involved in the junior certificate examination as well as those teaching the leaving certificate. If teachers were assistant principals or principals they will be paid the teaching rate as a regular

teacher and not receive any additional rates after they receive their lump sum and entitlements. It is confined to bridge the gap. February was, relatively speaking, an arbitrary date. The scheme is to be introduced to make sure there is continuity to the end of the academic year and ensure there is no disadvantage to students doing mock exams and leaving and junior certificate examinations.

What was the second question?

Deputy John O'Mahony: I asked about the numbers who have indicated they wish to retire.

Deputy Ruairí Quinn: It is a voluntary scheme. Teachers have three months in which to signal their intention to retire and we cannot anticipate what the quantum will be. There is an expectation, not just in the education sector but across the public service, that people will avail of the option to retire if it suits their position in life to do so. The matter is entirely up to people to decide. Therefore, I cannot give the Deputy a concrete figure.

Ferry Services

Deputy Michael McCarthy: The Fastnet line has been placed into interim examinership. The genesis of the service was a co-operative movement in west Cork. It is hugely valuable and has been very important economically in the Cork and Kerry region. The service has been hampered by fuel costs. It will be shelved and from 2012 will no longer run between October and March. Fastnet predicts that services will resume on 6 April 2012 until the end of September, as per its restructured viable business plan.

As part of a broader restructuring of the management team over the past four months, with the principal focus on improving and stabilising the financial status of the company, the decision to cancel the service between Cork and Swansea has happened in a sudden and unexpected manner. It is of profound concern to people across the south west, including passengers, staff members and shareholders. The business employs several full-time shore employees in Cork and there is an average of 53 full-time contract staff on board the *MV Julia* at any given time.

The move has also had immediate implications for the 400 shareholders who have generously invested in the company and whose unprecedented support for the service since its inception can never be underestimated. These people need comprehensive assurances and explanations on the appointment of the examiner and the implications for them.

Deputy Ciarán Lynch: I thank the Leas-Cheann Comhairle for allowing this debate. The Cork to Swansea ferry has announced the suspension of sailings. The service was launched on 10 March 2010 following the acquisition of a new ship, the *MV Julia*, and has carried 150,000 passengers to date. Fastnet suspended all services on 1 November following its placement into examination by the High Court. The company has debts in excess of €10 million. However, all intending passengers have been offered refunds on their fares which is a welcome development.

The original service linking Cork to Swansea ran from 1987 to 2006. Following the wind-up of the company it was terminated and recommenced in 2010 when a new company set up under a co-operative which engaged with many small local businesses in Cork, Kerry and Munster. It was seen as a venture which would have a mutual and broad beneficial gain for businesses in the region, particularly those involved in tourism. It was also perceived that the roll-on roll-off freight service from the UK to Ireland would benefit other ancillary businesses. As Deputy McCarthy said, current fuel prices have also contributed to the difficulties the company has faced.

I welcome the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport to the Chamber to discuss this important issue. The news of the Fastnet line examinership has come as a huge shock to many

[Deputy Ciarán Lynch.]

in Cork and Kerry. I spoke to Deputy Arthur Spring this morning. In the second quarter of this year tourism figures increased by 15%, which must be related to the reintroduction of the ferry service.

The company has stated its intention to resume sailings in the summer period next year, albeit on a more restricted basis. It is a welcome development. I will be interested in hearing what assistance, if any, the Minister's Department can provide in the context of recommencing the ferry service between Swansea and Cork.

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Leo Varadkar): I thank the Deputies for raising this matter. I share their concerns and their disappointment regarding this development.

Neither the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport nor any of its agencies has any function in respect of or, more pertinently, finance for the subsidisation or provision of ferry services for this or any other route. Following the suspension of the service offered by the Cork Swansea Ferry Company in 2007, the West Cork Tourism Co-Op was formed in early 2009 with the objective of relaunching the service. In September of that year, the co-op purchased a vessel, the *MV Julia*. This transaction was financed through equity raised from local small investors and a bank loan. I take this opportunity to acknowledge the substantial local support afforded to this project.

In October 2009, the co-op announced further investment opportunities through an additional share offer and by means of a sale of secured corporate bonds. As a commercial State entity under the aegis of my Department, the Port of Cork Company took a commercial decision to purchase bonds totalling €300,000 in the service. This was a small investment relative to the size of the port company. The most recent investment was approved by my Department and the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform. Four other parties took up the public offer to purchase bonds. These include three public bodies — Cork County Council, Cork City Council and Kerry County Council — and the Clona Milk Co-Operative. In 2010, Enterprise Ireland approved an investment in Fastnet Line Operators Limited of €1 million in redeemable preference shares, on full commercial terms, to complete the funding round. This investment represented less than 10% of the overall funding round.

Enterprise Ireland made investments in Fastnet Line Operators Limited in 2010 and 2011 totalling €1 million by way of redeemable preference shares, on full commercial terms. Furthermore, Finance Wales, a body under the auspices of the Welsh Assembly, also agreed to invest in the business. The Fastnet Line had sufficient funds to launch and operate the service from March 2010. In that year, the ferry service recorded a €2.5 million operating loss over ten months. This was despite the increase in the number of passengers using ferry services as a result of the volcanic ash crisis.

The Cork-Swansea ferry resumed sailings in March 2011, after the winter months, and it was planned to extend the sailing schedule in 2011. On 1 November 2011, ferry sailings were suspended when the High Court appointed Grant Thornton as an interim examiner to the company. As the Deputies will be aware, this is a court process over which neither Parliament nor the Government has any control.

In addition to the commercial investment made by the Port of Cork in the ferry service, as well as Enterprise Ireland's investment, my Department, from the tourism side, has been supportive of the development of the Cork-Swansea route by the Fastnet Line. However, we are bound by the EU state aid rules and limitations these impose. That said, however, early on both Fáilte Ireland and Tourism Ireland were — as is the case with other air and sea access routes — involved in discussions with the promoters to support the service through active promotion and marketing. Subsequently, advertisements were placed, on a co-operative mar-

keting basis with Tourism Ireland, in UK national and regional newspapers in order to promote the service to British tourists.

Fáilte Ireland also worked with the Fastnet Line to provide it with business support training. The training on offer ranged from web to marketing, finance, sales and practical culinary and hospitality-customer service supports. These were designed not only to ensure a quality passenger experience but also to deliver benefits such as cost savings and increased sales and revenue and, ultimately, to improve viability. In addition, Fáilte Ireland granted BES certification to the enterprise to assist it in raising finance and the line launched a drive to raise €1.5 million in funding. That kind of support from Fáilte Ireland and Tourism Ireland will remain available to the current operator, if it can resume sailings, or to a replacement operator.

I am disappointed that the service has run into difficulties. I am aware that there is a great deal of community and business support behind it. An access route such as this into the south west is beneficial to the region and I hope that the operator can find new financing to continue the service. I understand that a restructured business plan has been presented by the company as part of the examinership process and forecasts that the ferry service will resume in April 2012. However, ferry services must operate on a commercial basis and to do so must have the support of a sufficient customer base. It is not the function of the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport — nor is the facility available — to provide finance for such ferry services. Moreover, to do so could, if traffic from unsubsidised services were to be displaced as a result, constitute illegal aid on the part of the State.

Deputy Michael McCarthy: I thank the Minister for coming before the House to take this matter. To date, the service has carried over 150,000 customers, 75% of whom have UK addresses. This highlights the absolute dependence of the south-west region on tourism. The Minister came to the region during the summer to open the Mizen Head Bridge, which has been short-listed for an international engineering award. The ferry service is vital and the benefits to be had from tourism have an impact throughout the entire south west. In many ways, retention of the service would have the knock-on effect of reducing the reliance people who have lost their jobs have on social welfare payments. This matter highlights the importance of tourism to the region.

Deputy Ciarán Lynch: I thank the Minister for his reply. I acknowledge his comments to the effect that no State intervention can be made because this could be perceived as a breach of European Union state aid rules. It is a matter of EU law that neither this nor any other member state can subsidise private ferry operators.

In view of the unique structure relating to the company which provides the service, that is, the fact that businesses, local authorities and other interests in the south-west region were involved in getting it up and running, will the Department provide assistance in the context of analysing where the company went wrong? If such an analysis were carried out, it might facilitate the putting in place of a business plan whereby a new ferry service could be provided, albeit on a more limited basis, during the summer months. I am of the view that there would be merit in the Department carrying out a detailed analysis with regard to how a new service might be put in place and how it might operate.

Deputy Leo Varadkar: Deputy McCarthy was absolutely correct when he stated that rising fuel costs have not been of assistance in this matter. The difficulty we face with regard to ferry and airline services is that fuel costs are going to rise in the long term. Such costs may fluctuate but their long-term trajectory will be upwards. When new environmental regulations relating to the sulphur content of fuels, ferry services will become much more expensive. That is an underlying problem with which we will be obliged to deal.

[Deputy Leo Varadkar.]

While State aid has not been provided, a great deal of assistance has been forthcoming in the form of commercial investment. Such investment was made not just by local people, but also by the county and city councils, Enterprise Ireland and the Port of Cork Company. However, there comes a point where investment of this nature is no longer commercial. The support provided by Tourism Ireland and Fáilte Ireland remains available and will still be in place in the future. I recognise the tourism benefits of facilitating direct access to the south west. People have the alternative of entering the country through Rosslare. Given that the latter is situated quite a distance from the south west, however, tourists may not be prepared to continue their journey to the region. I will make representatives from Fáilte Ireland and Tourism Ireland available to work on business plans and marketing and co-operation initiatives. I am happy to take on board the suggestions put forward by the Deputies in that regard.

Hospital Closure

Deputy Sean Fleming: I wish to share time with Deputy Stanley. I thank the Ceann Comhairle for allowing me to raise the issue of the closure of Abbeyleix Community Hospital. I wish to condemn the decision that has been made in this regard. The decision is wrong and it should be reversed. The 21 patients and the 60 or so staff at Abbeyleix Community Hospital were stunned when the decision was announced yesterday. The former were obliged to contact their families and relatives to inform them of it. No one saw this decision coming and, as a result, it caused major shock. It is not necessary to close Abbeyleix Community Hospital and if the decision is the subject of a proper re-examination, then I am of the view that it will be reversed.

The HSE is moving with indecent haste in this matter. It wants to transfer the patients from their long-term home — some of them have been there for a number of years — to alternative accommodation. Many of the patients are elderly and they have become accustomed to life in the hospital. I take this opportunity to compliment the staff at the hospital on the quality of care provided there. HIQA has had no difficulty with the facility in recent times.

While the HSE has not made any announcement in respect of the 90 people who attend the day-care facility for the elderly at the hospital or those who access the speech and language therapy, physiotherapy and meals on wheels services provided there, I am concerned that when the main unit is closed these services will be discontinued next year. The matter will be the subject of a fudge until all the patients are removed from the hospital. The decision to close Abbeyleix Community Hospital is purely financial in nature; it does not relate to making savings. I am of the view that it should be revisited because there are no real savings to be made in this instance. I ask the Minister to address this matter.

Deputy Brian Stanley: I thank Deputy Seán Fleming for sharing time. The decision to close this facility, which was announced yesterday, is absolutely devastating, particularly for the people of south Laois. It is a top-class facility and there are no safety issues relating to it. We have been informed that the decision to close it relates to budgets. However, as of this morning, the local senior manager at the HSE was not in a position to indicate how much money will be saved through the closure of the hospital.

There are 45 staff at the hospital and they care for 32 people — 28 nursing patients and four respite patients. The Minister can lift the embargo because the number of staff is adequate. The issue of HIQA has been raised. Major refurbishments have taken place in that hospital in recent years. It is a top class facility and I do not believe that issue can be used. It is simply part of a privatisation agenda.

We have an ageing population and south Laois is not exempt, or is the county of Laois. Relatives of mine have been inpatients of that hospital. Friends, neighbours and family

members have been in that excellent facility. I ask the Minister to reverse the decision. It is shameful that it was announced four hours after €711 million was handed over to unguaranteed bondholders in Anglo Irish Bank. I ask the Minister to revisit this decision. I believe the facility is viable and I ask him to reopen it, keep it open and ensure it remains in place in Abbeyleix.

Deputy Charles Flanagan: I too wish to express my disappointment in the HSE on foot of this decision which I regard as hasty and unnecessary. It is dressed up as a cost saving. I ask the Minister to inform the House of the efforts made by the HSE to save costs in administration in other areas rather than hit front line services in Laois.

I visited the regional hospital in Portlaoise last week and saw 21 people on trolleys by dent of the fact that all the medical and surgical wards are occupied by people who are undergoing long-term treatment, most of whom are elderly. Where are these people in Laois to receive long-term residential care? Abbeyleix must be linked closely with Mountmellick. St. Vincent's hospital, Mountmellick, is an excellent facility, where at least two wards have been closed for some time. I take it the staff in Abbeyleix will be redeployed to Mountmellick and that Mountmellick will re-open, expand and develop. I ask the Minister to reassure the residents who must leave Abbeyleix nursing unit that they will be looked after and to state where they will be looked after.

On foot of what study or information on long-term care of the elderly was this decision made? I understand there are more than 2,000 adults in Laois, all of whom are over 80 years of age. Most of those who needed care received it either in St. Brigid's hospital, Shane, the district hospital in Abbeyleix — which I understand is to close — and in St. Vincent's hospital, Mountmellick. There is a question mark over the future of St. Brigid's hospital, Shane, which I want cleared up and the matter addressed. I ask the Minister to assure the people of County Laois that care of the elderly will be such as is required by the thousands of people who have reached old age, most of whom have served the State well in terms of paying their taxes and their contribution to society and who have a question mark over their final years. This is a wrong decision which was hastily taken. I would like to see a full briefing note as to how the HSE decided to undertake this move in Laois at a time when hard-pressed families are experiencing grave difficulties.

Minister for Health (Deputy James Reilly): I thank the Deputies for raising this issue. It provides me with an opportunity to update the House on this matter.

Abbeyleix community nursing unit provides continuing care, day care and respite services to people in Laois and Offaly and the bordering areas of Kilkenny, Carlow, Tipperary and Kildare. It is a two-storey building, formerly a fever hospital, acquired by the Midland Health Board in 1960. Residents live on the ground floor which is divided into two separate units. The unit has a maximum capacity of 50 beds. At present there are 28 residents, all with maximum dependencies. Four respite beds are in use.

The Health Service Executive has advised that the reducing funding allocation being experienced across all HSE services, together with staff losses as a result of the public sector moratorium, combined with the anticipated losses of staff between now and the end of the year, make it essential that it now moves to consolidate the overall provision of long-stay care within the Dublin and mid-Leinster region.

An inspection report published by HIQA in February 2011 concluded that the ratio of staff to residents at the Abbeyleix unit was not adequate to meet the needs of the mainly maximum dependency residents. It also noted that the building is old and has a number of multi-occupancy bedrooms which do not meet the requirements of the national standards. Taking all these factors together, the HSE took the decision to proceed with the closure of Abbeyleix

[Deputy James Reilly.]

community nursing unit. It will also consult and communicate with residents families, staff, public representatives and key people in the wider community including Friends of the Hospital, Age Action, local GPs, clergy and the Garda.

The selection of an alternative placement for residents will be informed by the medical and care needs of each resident as evaluated by clinical staff. The implementation plan will also take into consideration the proximity of the identified nursing unit to the relatives. It is intended that the residents will be transferred to public units, where appropriate, and that the remaining residents will be transferred to private nursing homes. Staff from Abbeyleix community nursing unit will be transferred to re-open closed beds and-or prevent the closure of other public beds resulting from moratorium losses in the area.

In relation to the other services provided at Abbeyleix community nursing unit, I can confirm that the day care services will continue to cater for the needs of the 90 clients — approximately 24 per day — who use the service, and there are plans to further enhance this service in the future. The respite service for the current eight clients will continue, but it is intended that this service will transfer to a private provider following consultation with the families concerned. I also assure the House that the primary care centre located on the grounds of the facility will also continue in line with the HSE primary care strategy.

The changes to the service I have outlined will help to ensure that the HSE will achieve the highest standards of care for the most efficient deployment of resources.

Deputy Sean Fleming: I thank the Minister for the bland and general response and failure to deal with the issue. The decision to close Abbeyleix community nursing unit is exclusively a financial one. I ask the Minister to take this on board as the basic situation in Abbeyleix community nursing unit. The payroll bill is €2.6 million. All the staff can be redeployed to Portlaoise, Mountmellick and other areas so there can be no savings as a result of the closure. Most of the 30 patients will transfer to private nursing homes at a cost of approximately €1,000 per week for 50 weeks of the year, incurring an additional cost to the HSE of private nursing care of €1.5 million. This decision is solely about the HSE making a decision to replace one set of private operators, that is, agency staff, with another set of private operators, namely, nursing homes. This is purely a financial decision. The Minister did not deal with the figures. We want to see the case being made on financial grounds, as stated by the Minister. He said the decision was based on anticipated losses. Therefore, he is only guessing what might happen. That is not a reason to make a decision now.

In regard to where the residents will have to move he said the “selection of an alternative placement for residents will be informed by the medical and care needs of each resident as evaluated by clinical staff”. In other words, they will be told where to go by the medical staff. That is not good enough and I ask the Minister to address the issue.

Deputy Charles Flanagan: I ask the Minister to reassure the House and, in particular, the Deputies who represent the area that the long-term health care needs of the elderly in County Laois will be adequately catered for, notwithstanding the decision of the HSE. I would like to know when and how this will be done.

Deputy Brian Stanley: May I ask one question?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Yes, just one question to the Minister.

Deputy Brian Stanley: Has an examination of the building been carried out given that the Minister and the HSE has stated that it may not be adequate in 2015 to meet HIQA standards?

Has a technical examination of the building been conducted? The last time I was in it, the building looked very well. I would like an answer to that question.

Deputy James Reilly: I agree with Deputy Flanagan that we must provide for the needs of people as they grow older. That is something we absolutely endeavour to do. Those needs can be met through various mechanisms, including hospital services, home help, home care programmes, long-term care and sheltered housing. Our aim is to allow people to remain in their homes as long as possible and to ensure they are treated at the lowest level of complexity, subject to considerations of safety, timeliness and efficiency, and as close to home as possible. That is the underlying principle of policy in this area.

Deputy Stanley asked whether there has been a technical examination of the building. While there is nothing in my notes to indicate that such a review has been carried out, I have been informed verbally that assessments have been made in the past and that the cost of refurbishing the hospital and bringing it up to standard was found to be prohibitive. However, I do not wish to mislead the Dáil and will not depend on my memory in this matter. Instead I will come back to the Deputy with a written response.

To Deputy Fleming, and his time machine, I will emphasise two points. First, all of the clients will be looked after. They will certainly be assessed as to their medical needs, as is proper and correct. However, their placement will be decided upon in consultation with their relatives; that is an absolute. Second, the Deputy claims that no saving will arise because the staff will be redeployed. Staff are redeployed to keep other services open, so there is a considerable saving. As I indicated, it is my understanding that the cost associated with upgrading the hospital is prohibitive. I undertake to send a written report on that to the Deputies.

The Deputy opposite is well aware that the Government of which he was a member brought this country to financial ruin, that we are suffering as a consequence across all budgets, that we are forced into a position——

Deputy Sean Fleming: The Government is continuing the policies of its predecessor.

Deputy James Reilly: The Deputy does not want to listen. There is none so blind as he who will not see and none so deaf as he who will not listen. The bottom line is that we are obliged to make difficult decisions. We do not make them lightly, but we have little choice given the poisoned chalice passed down to us. However, the situation has improved. In regard to the moratorium on public sector recruitment, the health sector has been responsible for 45% of the reduction in numbers, even though it is responsible for only 33% of the numbers employed. We have done our part. We will continue to seek to keep within budget while maintaining services. Deputy Seamus Kirk's question will afford me an opportunity to outline how that is being done through the special delivery unit.

Accident and Emergency Services

Deputy Seamus Kirk: I thank the Ceann Comhairle for allowing me to raise this important issue for the population of the north east. Will the Minister clarify the situation at Our Lady of Lourdes Hospital in Drogheda in light of the recent announcement by Government backbenchers in the constituency that an additional €700,000 will be made available to alleviate conditions in the accident and emergency department? That announcement suggests a political motivation behind some of the decisions being taken. Are we focusing on spin or are we addressing the significant problems at this and other hospitals?

Unfortunately, the sum mentioned will not go far given the scale of the crisis at Our Lady of Lourdes Hospital. Today, 53 patients are on trolleys there, the highest number in the country.

[Deputy Seamus Kirk.]

It is consistently the worst-performing hospital in the State in terms of overcrowding. This poses a major risk to patient safety and must be addressed immediately. The proposed funding of €700,000 is a short-term provision. We must know what will be done in the medium term and whether there is a long-term plan in place.

I expect that the Minister will refer in his reply to my party's tenure in government. The unit at Our Lady of Lourdes Hospital is the main accident and emergency department for the Louth-Meath hospital group. A new facility was opened in June 2010. It is three times the size of the old unit and was built at a cost of €11.5 million. The department is supported by an interim medical assessment unit, an on-site short-stay unit, a medical assessment unit at Louth County Hospital in Dundalk and a minor injuries unit at Our Lady's Hospital in Navan. The north-east regional colonoscopy screening service opened in Louth County Hospital in December 2010. In September 2010, 331 patients spent time on trolleys in Our Lady of Lourdes, which I accept is too many. However, in September 2011, under the auspices of the new Health Service Executive board which the Minister filled with civil servants from his Department, 842 patients were on trolleys, an increase of 154%.

The accident and emergency department at Navan remains open, yet there has been a leap in the number of patients on trolleys at Our Lady of Lourdes Hospital. The situation will deteriorate even further in the coming months as the winter period is traditionally the worst in emergency departments nationwide. The Irish Nurses and Midwives Organisation has described the situation as a meltdown. It is clearly causing untold human suffering for patients. The INMO has called on the Health Information and Quality Authority immediately to inspect the unsafe conditions that exists in the emergency department at Our Lady of Lourdes Hospital in Drogheda.

I appeal to the Minister to clarify the position. Will he indicate whether the funding which has been referred to by Government backbenchers in the constituency is being made available? What is the medium and longer-term plan to alleviate the State's worst pressure point in the health service?

Deputy James Reilly: I thank the Deputy for raising this issue. To tackle unacceptably long waiting times in emergency departments on a sustainable basis, immediately following my appointment I set about establishing the special delivery unit, SDU. It will not have escaped the Deputy's notice that this problem is the legacy of his Government, although, as the former Ceann Comhairle, he may claim not to have played any part. The aim of the SDU is to unblock access to acute services by improving the flow of patients through the system. The SDU is focusing initially on emergency departments and will work to support hospitals in addressing excessive waiting times for admission to hospital. Our Lady of Lourdes Hospital in Drogheda is working across several levels to reduce the time patients wait on trolleys in the emergency department. The clinical director and group general manager are fully engaged with the SDU in this regard.

As part of the process of forming an overall picture of the emergency departments situation nationally, the SDU has visited units throughout the State and conducted a data analysis. It has identified several hospitals providing unscheduled care that require support. Eight of these, including Our Lady of Lourdes Hospital in Drogheda, require a very high level of support. As part of the process of engagement with the SDU these hospitals have prepared plans setting out measures that could be taken quickly in the hospital and-or closely related community setting that would significantly relieve pressure on the emergency department by, for example, addressing delayed discharges.

This is a new approach. Staff at the SDU visit the hospital and undertake the analysis in co-operation with staff and management. Following that, the SDU asks management to set out what it considers to be required in order to address the hospital's difficulties. The SDU will discuss these proposals with the management, questioning particular costs, asking why particular actions are being taken and others not attempted. The bottom line is that we are seeking to identify how, for a limited expenditure, we can secure maximum results.

Following consideration, and as part of the overall process of SDU engagement, a package of short-term measures has been agreed for Our Lady of Lourdes Hospital in Drogheda. The supports being provided to it and other hospitals and associated community services are dependent on a range of conditions being met. These include a commitment on the part of the hospital to progress implementation of the HSE's acute medicine programme and ensure the hospital has seven-day ward discharge rounds in place. In particular, additional capacity, funded by the initiative, must not be offset by reductions elsewhere.

A sum of €725,710 is being made available in respect of proposals relating to Our Lady of Lourdes in Drogheda between now and the end of this year. The measures being taken, though aimed at easing the pressure on trolleys in Drogheda, involve Louth County Hospital in Dundalk and Our Lady's Hospital in Navan, as well as measures in the community. To reiterate what I said elsewhere, no part of the health service works in isolation.

The measures include additional assisted discharge packages including home help, home care and funding for aids and appliances, which will be implemented immediately; the extension of the hours of the acute medical assessment unit at Drogheda to 18 hours a day seven days a week, which will happen by the end of the month; the opening of eight medical beds in Drogheda by the end of the month; the opening of an additional 28 low-acuity beds in Louth and Navan; and the opening of an additional 27 low-acuity beds in the community.

The funding support is dependent on the hospital meeting the performance conditions set down. The SDU will be monitoring the position closely. Owing to its central position and the expertise that is available to the special delivery unit, it is able to develop and roll out solutions that will quickly resolve situations as they arise. I anticipate that the plans being implemented in Our Lady of Lourdes Hospital will quickly address the unacceptable levels of overcrowding in its emergency department.

Deputy Seamus Kirk: What will be the provision in late winter and early spring? Will there be a continuation of this support or will additional financial support be made available to ensure the winter months and the early spring months, which will represent a real pressure point for the hospital, will be addressed? Will that be borne in mind and will additional resources be allocated to it?

On the logistics of what is proposed, a number of beds in the Louth County Hospital, Dundalk were sold to a Libyan charity. Will they be replaced? Is there a capital provision in this arrangement to replace beds in the hospital? It will take additional people to staff the additional beds when they are provided in the Louth County Hospital. Will the issue of the moratorium be revisited to ensure there are adequate staff to cater for the patients to be accommodated in the hospital?

Deputy James Reilly: Sufficient funds are in place to ensure appropriately staffed beds are available in the hospital mentioned. The Deputy should bear in mind that we are discussing low acuity and not high acuity.

An analysis was done by the SDU on the IT system that was installed at a cost of less than €250,000. Although it is not completely installed throughout the system yet, it is a fraction of the €10 million we were told it would cost and it was completed in 98 days rather than in 18

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months. We now know that early January is the key crunch point. It is not as a result of increased numbers attending the emergency department, but as a result of work practices in hospitals throughout the country. The increase in activity comes as people come back from holidays and many elective procedures take place. Those need to be spread throughout the year to avoid creating the double crunch we get.

I can reassure the Deputy that there will be sufficient resources in my view to deal with the problems. However, this was never about more money but about the way we work. It is about more flexibility from consultants in giving us the Saturday and Sunday discharges we have discussed here. It is about diagnostics at the weekend so that X-rays, and ultrasound and CT scans can be read and patients discharged. It is about nurses working differently and not expecting to work the entire week in three days. It is about NCHDs, GPs and pharmacists working differently. It is about the core principle of treating the patient at the lowest level of complexity that is safe, timely, efficient and as near to home as possible. We do not want the wrong overqualified person dealing with a problem that could be dealt with by somebody at an entirely lower level much more conveniently to the patient and at much less cost to the State.

Ceisteanna — Questions

Priority Questions

Health Service Staff

1. **Deputy Charlie McConalogue** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs if the additional social workers to be employed in 2011 under the Ryan Report Implementation Plan will be in their positions by the end of 2011; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [32621/11]

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Frances Fitzgerald): In line with the programme for Government I am committed to delivering on the Ryan report implementation plan. Earlier this year I personally took over the chair of the Ryan report implementation group and I laid the second annual progress report before the Houses of the Oireachtas in July. While there are significant financial pressures on child and family services, my Department is nonetheless seeking to prioritise implementation of the Ryan report recommendations both this year and in our planning for next year.

The Ryan report implementation plan committed to the recruitment of an additional 270 social workers. Some 200 of these new posts were in place by the end of 2010. The HSE national service plan includes financial provision for the recruitment of a further 60 social workers this year. I have been assured by the HSE that it plans to have these additional staff in place by the end of the year. While the HSE introduced a recruitment pause across all categories of staff over the month of August owing to its adverse financial position, the HSE has prioritised the filling of certain key development posts and decided to process the recruitment of these staff with a view to their taking up employment by year end. This includes the recruitment of the additional social workers. My Department will continue to monitor closely the position with regard to the recruitment of the additional personnel.

The additional social workers will be targeted at priority areas across the system having regard to an overall assessment of workload undertaken by the national director and his team. The recruitment of the additional social workers is one element of a wider change agenda within the HSE, through which I believe we can deliver better outcomes for children and

families. This reform agenda will lead to the establishment of a new child and family support agency which will provide a dedicated focus on child protection and support families in need.

This change agenda seeks to deliver the best outcomes for children and families through achieving a service delivery model that will address a multiagency approach to managing the child welfare and protection system, which is so important; a nationwide consistency of approach in practice and implementation of Children First, and child welfare and protection services generally—

Additional information not given on the floor of the House

—use of standardised definitions, criteria and thresholds for reporting and referrals including prioritisation of cases; the recent launch of a child welfare and protection handbook for HSE staff and the commencement of training courses for staff, including joint-training with gardaí; greater reliance on real-time data on social work referrals and alternative care collated through HSE performance management indicators and the ongoing development of the national child care information system; improved resource allocation responsive to changing needs; and clearer management and budgetary accountability.

This reform agenda will lead to a new child and family support agency which will provide the dedicated focus on child protection. The implementation of these reforms will allow for the best possible services to be delivered within the resources available.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: I thank the Minister for her response. This is the second time I have had to ask about the number of social workers hired this year as a result of the recommendations of the Ryan report as the No. 1 Priority Question. On the last occasion I asked the Minister for specifics on the number of social workers we had on 1 January and how many we have now. The Ryan report commits to employing 200 additional social workers in 2010 with the objective of ensuring that each child in the State's care would have a social worker. A significant number — in the high single digits — of children in the State's care do not have a social worker. That is the specific objective of those additional social workers under the Ryan report implementation plan.

At her last Question Time, the Minister told the Dáil that as of the end of last year the 200 who were supposed to have been recruited last year had been recruited and any vacancies that had arisen had been backfilled last year. In order for us to understand how many social workers are in the system, we need to know the number on 1 January. How many social workers did we have at the start of this year and what is the figure today? On the last day the Minister gave a commitment to the Dáil on behalf of the Government that 60 new social workers would be hired this year. As of the start of November, none of those 60 has been hired. According to a HSE statement reported in *The Irish Times* a week and a half ago, there has been a recruitment pause—

Acting Chairman (Deputy Paudie Coffey): I ask the Deputy to put his question to the Minister and she will respond. She has only one minute.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: —throughout this year, not allowing any further posts to be filled. The Minister is telling us today that the HSE has informed her differently. Perhaps the Minister will clarify the figure as of 1 January this year and as of today, which information I sought from the Minister on the last occasion she took Questions in the House.

Deputy Frances Fitzgerald: I am committed to ensuring that the 60 posts are put in place. The Deputy's information is incorrect. To date, four of the posts have been filled, 11 candidates have accepted offers, in respect of which the necessary clearances are being processed. The remainder of the posts are at various stages of the recruitment process. As stated on the last

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occasion I answered the Deputy's question on this issue, I am assured these posts are not affected by the pause on recruitment. The Deputy will be aware of the extraordinary financial situation of the Health Service Executive, in particular its child and family services which are under enormous pressure. The director of child and family services is working in that context, which should be recognised by the Deputy. The HSE is in serious financial difficulty. Previously child and family services did not receive the type of priority now being accorded to them through the establishment of a separate agency.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Paudie Coffey): The Minister must conclude. The time allocated for this question has elapsed.

Deputy Frances Fitzgerald: The total number of social workers in place as of 31 September 2011 is 2,429. The remainder of the 60 posts will be in place by the end of this year, which fulfils the Ryan implementation group recommendation.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Paudie Coffey): I will allow a brief supplementary from Deputy McConalogue.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: This is the second time I have asked for these figures. We now know that as of 31 September 2011 there are 2,429 social workers in place. In order to know whether the four people recruited are part of that 2,429, we need first to know the figure as of 1 January. Despite this being the second occasion on which I have asked this question of the Minister, I still cannot get the information from her.

I have been told during discussions on this issue with social workers around the country that contracts offered are not being processed and that vacancies as a result of maternity leave and people retiring are not being filled. That is the reality on the ground. It is not good enough for the Minister to come in here and tell us she has been assured by the HSE that four posts have been filled when different reports are being given by the HSE to the media and so on.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Paudie Coffey): I must ask the Deputy to conclude as the time allocated for this question has elapsed.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: Also, the Minister is not able to tell me the figure as of 1 January 2011. It is not good enough to seek assurance in this regard from the HSE. The Minister needs to find out the figure as of 1 January 2011 and the figure now. That is the only way we will know whether any of the 60 posts, which are supposed to be additional, are such. Perhaps the Minister will tell me the figure as of 1 January 2011 so that we can establish the position.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Paudie Coffey): I ask the Minister to correspond with Deputy McConalogue on the questions he has raised.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: Perhaps the Minister will give a brief response.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Paudie Coffey): No. I have ruled on the matter. We are well over time on this question.

Deputy Frances Fitzgerald: I will communicate with the Deputy on the matter.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: This is——

Acting Chairman (Deputy Paudie Coffey): I apologise but we are well over time on this question. I have asked the Minister to respond directly to the Deputy's questions and she has agreed to do so. Only six minutes per question is allowed.

Children in Care

2. **Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs the number of children who have left the care of the State in each of the past five years and to date in 2011; the number of those who received aftercare services in each of the same years; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [32623/11]

Deputy Frances Fitzgerald: The HSE compiles monthly performance reports which provide an overall analysis of key performance data from finance, HR, hospital and primary and community services. These reports include a range of statistics in regard to children in care. A new performance indicator was introduced in 2011 to collect information on the number of young adults aged 18 to 21 years in receipt of an aftercare service. Collection of this data commenced in the third quarter of 2011 and validated data should be available shortly.

The HSE has not, to date, routinely collected national data in respect of children who leave the care of the State each year. While that data is available it is not routinely collated in the manner requested by the Deputy. The data currently available on a national basis sets out the number of children in care and their placement type. Children leave the care of the State on reaching their 18th birthday. However, many remain in their foster care placement as an after-care arrangement. Children may also leave care at an earlier age to return home or, in exceptional circumstances, owing to adoption. Some children may be in care for a short period. There is a great deal of movement in and out of the care system. I have, however, requested my Department to seek information from the HSE on children who have left care this year. I will provide the Deputy with further information as it becomes available.

Since taking office, I have prioritised the need to improve access to timely and accurate data on our child and family services. The availability of reliable data is of critical importance to inform the management, resource allocation and further development of our child and family services. An important element of this is the establishment by the HSE of a national child care information system, NCCIS, to operate as the central system to support social work services and will record and store the case history of every child in care. The procurement of this system is at the pre-tender stage.

The national child care information system will provide for the regular collection of national data in respect of children who leave the care of the State each year.

Additional information not given on the floor of the House

The HSE commissioned an independent external consultant to undertake a review of the capacity for alternative care services, including aftercare services. The audit date for the data was 13 March 2011. The HSE has informed me, based on this data, that a total of 1,051 young people were in receipt of aftercare nationally as of March 2011. The breakdown between males and females was 46% and 54% respectively. I am further advised by the HSE that the number of young people who began to receive aftercare in 2008 and 2009 was 979 and 847 respectively.

Section 45 of the Child Care Act 1991 places a statutory duty on the HSE to form a view, in relation to each person leaving care, as to whether there is a need for assistance and, if it forms such a view, to provide services in accordance with the legislation and subject to resources. All young people who have had a care history with the HSE, be it foster care, residential care or high support, are entitled to an aftercare service based on their assessed needs. The core eligible age range for aftercare is 18 years up to 21 years. This can be extended

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until the completion of a course of education in which the child-young adult is engaged, up to the age of 23 years of age.

Aftercare provision incorporates advice, guidance and practical support. An individual holistic needs assessment identifies a young persons need for accommodation, financial support, social network support and training and education. One of the key features of aftercare support is to advocate on behalf of young people to promote their development as a fulfilled adult in their community. The most important requirements for young people leaving care are secure, suitable accommodation, further education, employment or training.

The HSE national aftercare service is underpinned by a national policy and procedures document which has been developed in co-operation with the key stakeholders, including the voluntary sector agencies involved in aftercare provision and my Department. The policy commits to promoting and achieving the best outcomes for young people leaving care and in ensuring consistency of support to these young people.

The HSE national policy on aftercare is being rolled out nationally under the watch of the HSE's aftercare implementation group, which includes representation from the HSE, mental health, family and disability services, the voluntary sector and a young persons representative from Empowering People in Care, EPIC. I am aware of the challenges facing the aftercare service, the need for information to plan the services, for consistency across all areas, to follow up with young people who may at first reject its services and the need to link in with adult services as necessary. To accommodate such challenges funding was provided in 2011 to support the recruitment of ten additional aftercare workers. Additionally, funding was provided to EPIC to develop a national advocacy and support service for young people in care, leaving care and after care.

Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin: I thank the Minister for her reply. She will recall that this issue was addressed extensively during the passage of the Child Care (Amendment) Bill. The Minister indicated that the national child care information service is at pre-tender stage. Perhaps she will indicate how soon it will be in situ? Also, will it address what has not heretofore been routinely collated, namely, the data I am seeking? Can the Minister give an assurance in that regard?

Section 45 of the Child Care Act 1991 places a statutory obligation on the HSE to form a view in regard to each person leaving care, in terms of his or her need for assistance. The Minister relied extensively on that provision, in my efforts to amend the more recent Child Care (Amendment) Bill, to guarantee aftercare to young people in State care post-18 years. The Child Care Act 1991 states, "subject to resources", which in my view is the fault-line in terms of young people leaving care at 18 years of age and finding themselves with no aftercare provision. This does not occur in a traditional family environment of whatever making in Irish society today. Children in care should be no less deserving of a continuum of support at what is a difficult point in their adult lives.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Paudie Coffey): Does Deputy Ó Caoláin have a question for the Minister?

Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin: Does the Minister propose to review that section of the Child Care Act 1991 to allow children leaving care to access the aftercare services they need, based not as has been the practice heretofore on what resources are available to the HSE but on need?

Deputy Frances Fitzgerald: I thank Deputy Ó Caoláin for his question. I agree with him on the need for young people to continue to receive help. The Deputy might perhaps be reassured by some of the following information. A review of numbers was carried out by an external consultant. The audit date for this data was March 2011. I am informed that in March 2011 a total of 1,051 young people nationally were in receipt of aftercare. The breakdown in this regard between males and females was 46% and 54% respectively. I am also informed that the number of young people who received aftercare in 2008 and 2009 was 979 and 947 respectively. This data may however relate to young people who left care not only in the years stated but at an earlier stage. It appears from those figures that the HSE is using section 45 to assess the needs of young children leaving care and is taking a view in regard to their need for assistance. I will get the figures for this year for the Deputy. I expect that the new system for data collection will include the type of data sought today by the Deputy.

I am shocked given it is easily accessible that it is not available today. I have asked my officials to get from the four districts the data in regard to the number of children leaving care this year. This will then give us a picture of what percentage of children leaving State care are actually receiving aftercare or are being assessed as in need of it.

Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin: Where a child is assessed and the need for aftercare is established, what happens when resources are not available? We are all aware of what has happened across a whole range of services under the umbrella of the HSE. What happens to a child when the need is there and the funding issue becomes the issue of resources? I am asking because that is my clear and continuing concern. What can the Minister do to remove that potential obstacle, an obstacle I fear which has been employed in the past?

Deputy Frances Fitzgerald: Resources are an issue. There are problems because of the demands of the services when it comes to the base funding available for child and family services within the HSE. The question of priority must be addressed and better management and better inter-agency work. Quite a number of areas need to be addressed to answer the Deputy's question about resources.

Ten additional after-care workers were recruited and this should help. Money has been given to EPIC, the group working with young people who have been in after-care. The HSE must assess priority and proper assessment of the needs of these young people will have to be carried out. This will demand some form of prioritisation.

Child Poverty

3. **Deputy Joan Collins** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs if her attention has been drawn to the UNICEF report *The Child Left Behind* — a table of inequality in child well-being in the world's rich countries, in particular the finding that our child poverty rate was 13.5% with taxes and social transfers taken into account (details supplied); if she will fight the case for child poverty and defend children from direct and indirect social transfer cuts; her plan to tackle child poverty here; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [32627/11]

Deputy Frances Fitzgerald: The UNICEF report card published in 2010 shows that in terms of material inequality, Ireland is close to the OECD average. Ireland is ranked 13th, with the best performing country identified as Switzerland. In terms of inequalities in education and health outcomes, Ireland is ranked in second and seventh place, respectively, to the best performing countries. I am very glad to note this information because some key health issues are not currently being addressed. We need to do some better screening and there are serious issues of obesity affecting three-year olds.

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Tackling child poverty is a priority for Government and a goal of the National Action Plan for Social Inclusion 2007- 2016, co-ordinated by the Department of Social Protection. As the report highlights, children are more likely to be poor if they are living in lone parent households with low labour market participation and dependant on income support. The Departments of Social Protection, Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation, and Education and Skills, are working to deliver a range of measures aimed at getting people back to work. A job is the best way to lift people out of poverty.

My Department works closely with other Departments with shared objectives to secure better outcomes for children and young people. The Department is represented on the advisory group on tax and social welfare established by the Minister for Social Protection to examine issues to do with the interactions of the tax and welfare systems to provide good incentives for work and thereby contribute to the reduction of child poverty, in particular.

My Department has responsibility for a number of programmes which are very important in improving children's outcomes. One of the points in the UNICEF report is the importance of early childhood care and how this can improve educational and other outcomes for children, in particular, when aimed at low income families. These are important priorities for me and the Department. I will do everything possible to ensure that the ECCE scheme, the early childhood care scheme, is protected in the forthcoming budget. Some €166 million is being spent by my Department on a universal, free preschool year and a further €43 million is being made available to provide additional targeted child care support for low income parents under the community child care subvention scheme. I would like to see early intervention enhanced as this supports children who are falling behind their peers. The plans for the new child and family support agency are being developed with the advice of an expert task force under the remit of my Department. This agency will have an important role in improving the effectiveness of supports available to children and in particular those children from vulnerable families.

Deputy Joan Collins: I thank the Minister for her reply. There are many facets to the UNICEF report, *The Child Left Behind*. As regards the assessment of the material well-being of children in the 24 richest countries, Ireland is listed at 22nd with only Poland and Hungary below us. That assessment was based on the percentage of children in homes with incomes below 50% of the national average. The second assessment was the percentage of families without an employed adult, a point made by the Minister. The third assessment was the percentage of children living in homes with fewer than ten books in the home.

The role of taxes and social transfers in this country plays a key role. A total of 13.5% of our children are kept out of poverty because of these transfers because without them, the rate would be up to 35% and this is an important marker. In most countries, the marker would be about 10% to 15%.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Paudie Coffey): Has the Deputy a question for the Minister?

Deputy Joan Collins: The Minister made a point about the protection of preschool payments. It is vital that in this budget the protection of child benefit payments must be sacrosanct. Will the Minister commit to oppose any cuts in child benefit?

Deputy Frances Fitzgerald: The provision for the various income support systems in 2012 will be a matter for consideration by the Minister for Social Protection and the Government in the budgetary process. I appreciate the Deputy's point about the role of child benefit payments and the support it offers to families, particularly the families who are most vulnerable and most marginalised. I will work with other Departments to ensure that we give the very

best supports to children and families and protect the vulnerable within the extraordinarily difficult financial situation which faces the Government.

It is important to have a look at that report. We hear a great deal of bad news but it is encouraging that the report awards Ireland an overall score of seven out of a possible eight points for its overall performances. It places Ireland in the better than the OECD average overall, along with Iceland, Norway and Sweden. There is good news in this report but I certainly take the Deputy's point about child poverty. It is clear that children are vulnerable to child poverty when there is unemployment in a household. This is why we must focus on job creation. Children are poor in the context of their families and there is a clear and strong link between poverty and unemployment and children in jobless households are three times more likely to experience consistent poverty than children in general. I take the point that there is no room for complacency.

Deputy Joan Collins: I agree that job creation is crucial for taking families out of poverty. However, this will take time. I ask for a commitment from the Minister that in this budget the child benefit will be protected and that the Minister will actively oppose any cuts in child benefit until some time in a few years when there is more employment.

Children in Care

4. **Deputy Charlie McConalogue** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs if she agrees with Dr. Helen Buckley that the workload of the National Review Panel is virtually impossible to carry out owing to the number and breadth of inquiries it must investigate; if she intends to assign more resources to the panel; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [32622/11]

Deputy Frances Fitzgerald: In January 2010, HIQA published Guidance for the Health Service Executive for the Review of Serious Incidents including Deaths of Children in Care. The guidance became operational from March 2010. The guidance required the HSE to establish a panel of appropriately skilled professionals, both internal and external, to review cases under specified criteria. According to the HIQA guidance, the panel should have an independent chair and deputy chair and professionals from a range of disciplines appointed for their professional expertise.

In accordance with the HIQA guidance, last year, the HSE established a national review panel to undertake these reviews. Dr. Helen Buckley, senior lecturer and research fellow at the school of social work and social policy, Trinity College Dublin, was appointed as chair. Dr. Bill Lockhart, retired CEO, Youth Justice Agency, Northern Ireland, was appointed as deputy chair. There are 20 ordinary members on the panel, 18 of whom are external to the HSE. In addition, a senior professional manager and a senior administrative manager were assigned to support the work of the panel. While the national review panel has been established under the auspices of the HSE, it remains functionally independent, making findings of fact and producing reports that are objective and independent of the HSE.

I thank Dr. Buckley and all involved in the recent report. The 2010 annual report covers the period from March to December 2010. During this period, 22 cases of death were notified and eight serious incidents. Of the 22 deaths, reported, six of these were due to natural causes, four were drugs overdoses, four were as the result of suicide, four were due to road traffic accidents, two were homicide and two were as a result of accidents other than road traffic accidents.

The report states that the criteria for the cases to be reviewed are broad by international standards. This is an important point to note. The report also states: "the NRP is concerned that the HIQA guidance places virtually impossible obligations on it. The combination of timel-

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ines, detail required and unanticipated volume of notifications presents difficulties for the NRP that were never intended.” The national review panel report goes on to suggest ways in which the process of reviewing serious incidents and child deaths could be improved.

Additional material not given on the floor of the House.

Furthermore the report states:

Is it necessary, or even beneficial, for every case to be reviewed? It would, and perhaps, should, be possible for the independent chair of the NRP to select representative cases from which a maximum of learning can be extracted without running the risk, as has happened in other jurisdictions, of services being drowned in a flood of similar conclusions and recommendations.

Given the fact that this is a new process, it is not surprising that the review panel has remarked on the nature of the process itself and challenges in putting into operation the HIQA guidance. The HIQA has already agreed to review the guidance and are engaging actively with the national review panel and the HSE children and family services in this regard. These are matters which will be considered by the HIQA in the first instance and by my officials in the context of related policy and legislative developments already in train.

The first annual report of the NRP is the subject of consideration by the HSE and I would expect that any measures falling directly to the HSE which are necessary to strengthen the effectiveness of the review process will be implemented.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: I thank the Minister for her response. As she pointed out, the national review panel was set up in response to the poor recording of child death over the years within the HSE and the failure on the part of the State to investigate and assess the problems and weaknesses in each area.

I also commend Dr. Buckley and the review panel for their work on this. They were asked to look into 36 cases, of which six were included in the report published some weeks ago. These cases are not merely paper files but represent real children who suffered, in some cases, death, in others, serious incidents. In her report Dr. Buckley stated that the number of deaths was not out of kilter with the national average, a relevant point here.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Paudie Coffey): A question to the Minister, please.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: The key point is that each child was in the care of the State. Children need to be assessed to discover whether weaknesses are present which need to be acted upon immediately. Worryingly, Dr. Buckley stated she did not have the resources to deal appropriately with the cases. What are the Minister’s plans to deal with this and ensure resources are available so that when the next report is published there is no need for Dr. Buckley to say she cannot get through the workload?

Deputy Frances Fitzgerald: The death of every child is a tragedy and I offer every sympathy to the families whose children were reported upon by this review panel. It is interesting to note in the review that no case of death or serious incident was related to an action or inaction of the HSE child protection services. That is a very important point coming from this review and worth noting.

It is not surprising, given this is a new process, that the review panel has remarked on the nature of the actual process. Some of the guidance it has been given, along with the suggestion that this ought to be reviewed presents a challenge. The report states, for example:

Is it necessary, or even beneficial, for every case to be reviewed? It would, and perhaps, should, be possible for the independent chair of the NRP to select representative cases from which a maximum of learning can be extracted without running the risk, as has happened in other jurisdictions, of services being drowned in a flood of similar conclusions and recommendations.

The panel is reviewing the guidelines it was given. I have met with the HIQA which set the original guidelines. It is important that the HIQA should review what has emerged from this report and make some recommendations, taking up some of the points Dr. Buckley made in regard to the very wide remit. I asked the HIQA to review the guidance already given and it is engaging actively with the national review panel and the HSE children and family services in this regard. These will be considered by the HIQA in the first instance, as well as by my officials in the context of related policy and legislative developments already in train. The first annual report is subject to consideration by the HSE and I would expect that any measures falling directly to the HSE that are necessary to strengthen the effectiveness of the review process will be implemented. I await comments from the HIQA. The future of the review panel will be determined by its response to its first report and by the comments of Dr. Buckley and the other people involved in it. There are matters to be learnt from this report about how we should approach this work in the future.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: As the Minister pointed out, the report did not indicate that any of the deaths were directly attributable to inaction by the HSE. It did, however, highlight failures in terms of HSE practice in regard to child care over a period of years, breaches of Children First guidelines, etc. The key point is that each of those cases be investigated, and if the HIQA highlights that extra resources are needed that they be given. That is crucial.

Family Support Services

5. **Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs her plans for the family resource centre programme; the way she envisages same within the new Child and Family Support Agency; if she can assuage fears regarding funding support for the coming year; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [32624/11]

Deputy Frances Fitzgerald: There are 107 family resource centres throughout the country funded by the Family Support Agency. My Department assumed responsibility for the FSA when it was established earlier this year. I welcome the opportunity this provides to promote effective operational relationships between the family resource centres and other providers of services to children and families.

The aim of the family resource centre programme is to combat disadvantage and improve the functioning of the family unit. The programme emphasises involving local communities in tackling the problems they face, and creating successful partnerships between voluntary and statutory agencies at community level. In 2011, funding of €15.897m has been provided to the Family Support Agency for the programme. Funding for the programme in 2012 will be a matter for Government consideration in the context of the deliberations on the annual Estimates and budget.

In September, I established a taskforce to advise my Department regarding the necessary transition programme to establish the new child and family support agency. The taskforce has been asked, *inter alia*, to provide advice as to the appropriate service responsibilities of the new agency. In doing so, it will consider the services within the HSE that relate to children and family services and the services for which the Department of Children and Youth Affairs and its agencies have operational responsibility. No decisions have been made as yet with

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regard to future arrangements for the family resource centre programme but I can assure the Deputy that the Family Support Agency will be consulted as part of the deliberations of the taskforce on the service responsibilities of the new agency and any issues arising.

Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin: Only last week the Minister launched the annual report for 2010 on behalf of the family resource centre national forum. In the course of the address by the chairperson of the FRCNF, Mr. Packie Kelly spoke about loss of employment and reductions in household incomes being very isolating experiences for families. He further stated that Ireland's network of family resource centres has been actively building up a range of initiatives that enable families to stay in touch and feel supported through difficult periods. They have found that after-school clubs and arts programmes are excellent ways of reaching out to families who are not otherwise engaged in community activity. They outline an entire range of activities including homework clubs or parent and toddler groups. Mr. Kelly stated that some such interventions might seem trivial but that is not at all the case. From my knowledge and experience of the four family resource centres in my constituency, namely, Killeshandra, Cavan, Clones and Monaghan, I can state they do excellent and critically important work. It is very important that this work is allowed to continue and flourish, particularly in these more challenging and difficult times.

In the absence of the Minister's ability, pre-budget, to give me the assurances I would like and which family resource centres need, can she indicate how many times the taskforce on the child and family support agency, which was established in September, has met? Is it being resourced in regard to the work it must undertake? Will the taskforce examine issues of financial distress as being among the reasons children are placed in care? This is an extremely important issue. If families are in distress and that is the underlying reason children may not be able to continue in the home environment, this of itself requires an intervention by other Departments. That needs to be highlighted. If that is the case and the taskforce discovers and highlights it — I know of cases where that box would be ticked — will it be addressed accordingly? How long will the taskforce continue its deliberations? When does the Minister expect it to report?

Deputy Frances Fitzgerald: The Deputy's question relates to the Family Support Agency and family resource centres. The overall allocation to the FSA was €31.7 million in 2011, of which €16 million was allocated to the resource centre programme. Substantial funding is given to local centres and I wish to support them in whatever way possible, given budgetary constraints. The Deputy knows our budgetary constraints are significant.

The taskforce has met on a number of occasions. I will get back to the Deputy with the exact detail. The task force is working actively. A number of subgroups of the taskforce are working on various issues relating to governance, management and the transition from the HSE to the new agency. I expect to receive preliminary reports within the next couple of months. I am working towards the establishment of the new agency by January 2013. I hope that will happen.

Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin: I would like the taskforce to focus on examining issues of financial distress. Deputies from a variety of constituencies have spoken previously in the House about the continuing cutbacks, which are causing distress and breakdowns in family units. We are contributing to a deteriorating situation by moving children away from the family supports they have enjoyed in more ideal settings. Will the taskforce highlight the need for this problem to be addressed through social protection? In these difficult times, there is an urgent need to recognise that we may be contributing to the displacement of children from the situations that are best for their futures.

Deputy Frances Fitzgerald: The Deputy has raised the complex question of the reasons children come into care. It happens for a variety of reasons. Physical abuse is one of the reasons. Increasingly, neglect is the reason most children come into care. The financial pressures on families can have an impact on such neglect. Drink and drug issues are a significant factor in children coming into care at present. Issues relating to the use of alcohol in families are putting substantial pressure on family units and leading to children coming into care. It is clear that financial pressures are contributing to this problem. The taskforce will examine the number of children who need care and attention. One of the particular aspects it will address is the links to other agencies. It will examine the family support services in communities, including financial support services, fostering support services and parenting groups. The taskforce will examine the range of services that are available to families. Undoubtedly, the task force is aware of the financial strain on families, which is a key pressure at present. Its primary task will be to work out the transition arrangements in moving child and family services from the HSE to a new agency, rather than focusing on the details of the pressures on families. That will be a big challenge.

Other Questions

Out of Hours Services

6. **Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs her plans to expand the pilot out-of-hour social work service currently being tested in two locations as provided for in the implementation plan published following the report of the Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse. [32517/11]

Deputy Frances Fitzgerald: The HSE provides out of hours emergency services for children who are at risk. The service is provided in the greater Dublin area through the crisis intervention service and outside the greater Dublin area through the emergency place of safety service. The crisis intervention service provides an out of hours emergency social work service to young people under the age of 18 who are in crisis. The service operates across the greater Dublin area in counties Dublin, Kildare and Wicklow. Referrals are made by service providers, such as gardaí, hospital and ambulance service personnel, outside normal working hours. The HSE operates the emergency place of safety service outside the greater Dublin area. Under this service, gardaí can access emergency placements for children who are found to be at risk out of hours. This service involves the out of hours placement of a child in a family setting until the next working day, when the local social work service assumes responsibility for the case. As part of this service, gardaí have access to advice and information from a non-HSE off-site social work resource, which is provided on a contract basis. I recently met Garda officials to discuss how this service is working.

The HSE national service plan for 2011 includes a commitment to evaluate a pilot out of hours social work component to supplement the emergency place of safety service. The two pilot projects that are being undertaken are in Cork and in Donegal. The projects involve the provision by local HSE staff of on-call social work support out of hours, when that is deemed necessary by gardaí. Both of the pilot projects have commenced. I have received preliminary reports on how the out of hours service is working. I have to say there has not been a huge demand on the service. I emphasise that the report is a preliminary one. Obviously, it is important that the service is in place. The HSE has established a national oversight group to monitor the progress of the pilot projects. It is hoped a decision on progression to a national roll-out will be made in 2011, following evaluation of the two pilot projects. Progress is being

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made in this area. The two pilot projects are in operation. Preliminary reports have been received in each case. The reports will be examined by the new oversight group the HSE has established. The next step will be the roll-out of a national service, having learnt lessons from the two pilot projects.

Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin: Will the Minister outline her expectations with regard to moving from the two pilot projects to the State-wide roll-out? Does she envisage it will happen in the short term? How quickly does she expect such a situation will be arrived at? What has she deduced from the information that has been received to date? Has anything been recommended in the preliminary reports? If so, could any of the recommendations be adopted now? Is the Minister proposing to wait until the process has been completed and all the information is to hand? Can anything be learned from what has already been reported? If so, can it be addressed or implemented in the short term in a manner that would make the required difference? As the Minister has said, the pilot out of hours social work service is being tested in two locations. Is she considering extending the pilot project to other testing locations within the jurisdiction on an interim basis in advance of the State-wide roll-out?

Deputy Frances Fitzgerald: This has been spoken about for a long time, as the Deputy knows. We have received some elementary information from the two pilot projects. We have the beginning of an assessment of how they are operating. I need to wait until I hear back from the HSE oversight group on the recommendations before I decide how quickly we can move to a national roll-out. Obviously, there will be resource implications. One of the key lessons we have learned from the pilot projects that are taking place is that there needs to be a greater engagement between gardaí and HSE social workers. Gardaí need to be aware of the services in these areas and need to be able to use them. When I met representatives of the Association of Garda Sergeants and Inspectors to discuss some of these issues earlier in the year, they were keen for this service to be rolled out. It is not satisfactory that the Garda has to respond out of hours in order to look after these children. The kind of ideas that are coming forward relate, for example, to the development of a roster of on-call managers who would make themselves available to the Garda for consultation. More of them should be available to gardaí when they are doing this work. I take the Deputy's point that we could begin to implement the lessons that are being learned from the pilot projects. I will ask the HSE to consider ensuring the implementation is not left until after the nationwide roll-out of the whole system. If lessons can be learned from the two pilot projects and incorporated very quickly, I will try to ensure that happens.

Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin: The Minister indicated in her initial reply that the accessing of the out of hours service in the two pilot project areas has not been extensive. Is that the case? I ask the Minister not to allow the early indications that the take-up is not significant to dissuade her from her commitment to ensuring this is rolled out across the board. Regardless of the statistics, the crucial point is that the service is in place. When an out of hours emergency presents itself, people should know that the service is available and can be accessed. Have we examined international best practice to inform our own intent in terms of this roll-out?

Deputy Frances Fitzgerald: While I do not have detailed figures, I am advised that activity has not been significant to date. I accept the Deputy's point that we should not over-rely on the take-up to date as one would expect it to be low given that it will take some time for the relevant or appropriate information to file down to those who need it and for the Garda to become more aware of the service. The fact that social work personnel can be available by telephone for consultation and advice and to share information has been well received by

senior Garda who regard it as a positive and beneficial development. We will learn from the two pilot schemes and I will heed the Deputy's warning that we should not assume there is a lack of demand. We have figures showing how many children nationally present out of hours to the authorities.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: I commend the Health Service Executive on its work on the pilot scheme in County Donegal. Feedback from staff indicates it has been a positive experience. Given her background, the Minister will be aware that emergency cases do not always occur during office hours. It is critical, therefore, that we have an out-of-hours service. Will the Minister make available to Opposition spokespersons the preliminary reports from the two pilot schemes?

Deputy Frances Fitzgerald: The reports outline the latest position and plans for the future. I would be pleased to correspond with both Deputies on the information available to me and plans for the future in counties Donegal and Cork.

Missing Children Hotline

7. **Deputy Seamus Kirk** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs the discussions she has had with other Government Departments regarding the establishment of the missing children's hotline; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [32480/11]

34. **Deputy Gerry Adams** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs if she has established the project group on the missing children hotline yet; the position regarding their work; and the date on which they will conclude their work. [32505/11]

Deputy Frances Fitzgerald: I propose to take Questions Nos. 7 and 34 together.

Under EU telecoms rules agreed in 2009, the 116000 number is reserved in all EU member states for a missing children hotline. In a debate on this issue in Seanad Éireann on 12 October last I gave a commitment to work with relevant Departments and agencies to establish the hotline in Ireland in 2012. I also announced my intention to establish a cross-sectoral project team to include representatives of my Department, the Department of Justice and Equality, ComReg and the Garda Síochána. The final nominee to the project team is expected shortly and the team will then be in a position to commence its work.

This team will examine how best to operate the hotline in the context of the demand for the service and establish the extent to which services, including Garda and victim support services, which are in existence and receive Government funding, can be mobilised to meet Ireland's commitments regarding the hotline. In seeking to make progress on this issue, my Department has had discussions with the Departments of Justice and Equality and Communications, Marine and Natural Resources, as well as ComReg. Further discussions will be held in the context of the meetings of the project team.

I emphasise that the investigation of a child's disappearance is the responsibility of the Garda. Its structures in this regard include not only the local gardaí, who will have primary responsibility for the investigation, but also the missing persons bureau. It is of paramount importance that any arrangements which are put in place to establish the 116000 hotline do not compromise the requirement that the first and most important contact to be made is to notify the Garda of the fact that a child is missing in order that an investigation can commence without delay. The implementation of a dedicated missing children hotline is intended to provide a further level of support in such circumstances.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: The missing children hotline is operational in 15 European Union member states and the European Commission is considering the possibility of introducing sanctions against member states which have not yet introduced the service. In Belgium the system was first run by a local group, Child Focus, which received 50% state funding and 50% private funding as well as further Government assistance towards establishing the service. Part of the problem with the ComReg advertisements is that no one has been in a position to come forward and operate the hotline here. What plans does the Minister have to provide assistance, if required, to get the hotline operational? Is it her intention to take primary responsibility for ensuring it becomes operational?

Deputy Frances Fitzgerald: I have done so already by establishing the project team. I want the missing children hotline to be progressed. I am pleased to note that the incidence of children who go missing in Ireland is low and has fallen significantly in recent years. Statistics provided by the Garda Síochána indicate there are five open cases of children who went missing in this country in 2010. While even one missing child is one too many, some achievements have been made in this area and there is certainly much better co-ordination between the Garda and Health Service Executive. All instances of missing children should be reported immediately to the Garda Síochána, which has primary responsibility in this area.

On the issue of resources, these are challenging times financially. Various costings have been done on providing a hotline service, including some calculations made by non-governmental organisations. The figures vary significantly and one of the first tasks I will assign the project group is to investigate the precise potential costs and how they could be met. A variety of sources could be investigated. While the Department will clearly try to provide some support for the establishment of the hotline, we must examine the most economically efficient way to provide the service. We also need to consider what current services, including services provided by the Garda, could accommodate the hotline service. All these matters will be examined.

As I noted, the project team will meet shortly and we have assembled the relevant people with an interest in this area who will be able to make a contribution to establishing the hotline. I want to see progress made on the matter in the coming year.

Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin: Will the Minister indicate how soon she expects the project group to have its inaugural meeting? Is she in a position to advise the House of the make-up of the group? Is it cross-departmental in nature and does it include representatives of external non-governmental organisations which have an interest in this area? Given the wide range of best practice and information internationally from which we can draw, I appeal to the Minister to ensure this does not become a foot-dragging exercise. It is crucial that the 116000 number is established in this country. Will the Minister provide a timeframe or deadline within which the project group will complete its work in order that the outcome of its deliberations is available, hopefully in the coming year?

Deputy Frances Fitzgerald: I understand we were waiting for the last person to be appointed to the project group and an appointment was made in recent days. The work will be short-term in nature. I do not envisage it will continue for a long period and expect the project team will pull the relevant information together and make a recommendation within a couple of months. It is then a question of examining costing and ensuring the costs can be met. The group is primarily cross-departmental but also has representatives of ComReg and the Garda. It will consult other organisations.

Child Abuse

8. **Deputy John Browne** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs the details of

any analysis she has carried out in relation to the resource implications of the introduction of a mandatory reporting policy for the reporting of child abuse; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [32471/11]

11. **Deputy Michael Moynihan** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs the organisations with whom she has held discussions since taking office on the subject of introducing mandatory reporting of suspected child abuse; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [32488/11]

14. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs when the children first guidelines will be put on a statutory footing; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [32528/11]

Deputy Frances Fitzgerald: I propose to take Questions Nos. 8, 11 and 14 together.

In July 2011, I launched the revised Children First: National Guidance for the Protection and Welfare of Children. The guidance deals with the recognition, reporting and management of child safety concerns. It emphasises the need to safeguard and protect children and stresses that the safety and welfare of children is everyone's responsibility and children will have safer lives where everyone is attentive to their well being. People who work with children across a range of areas must be clear in understanding their responsibility for safe practice and the reporting of concerns. The guidance sets out specific protocols for HSE social workers, gardaí and other front line staff in dealing with suspected abuse. The scope of Children First extends beyond the reporting of suspected abuse. It emphasises the importance of multidisciplinary, inter-agency working in the management of such concerns. Key to this is the sharing of information between agencies and disciplines in the best interests of children and the need for full co-operation to ensure better outcomes.

There is an acknowledged need for greater consistency in the implementation of the Children First guidance across all sectors and organisations working with children. This was highlighted by the Ryan commission which recommended that Children First should be uniformly and consistently implemented throughout the State.

In recognition of this and following publication of the guidelines, an interdepartmental committee was established to oversee the implementation of Children First across all sectors. The committee is chaired by my Department and a meeting I attended recently included representatives from the various Departments involved in the provision of services to children.

It is important we have this cross-departmental group working so that those involved can ensure in each of their areas of responsibility that the agencies under their remit are carrying out the work envisaged in the child protection handbook and in Children First. For example, the Department with responsibility for sport can work with the Sports Council and with the various clubs, such as the GAA and others, who are doing an excellent job with regard to the implementation of Children First. Arrangements are also in place between the HSE and the Garda Síochána to monitor the implementation of Children First across the two statutory agencies which have specific responsibilities to assess and investigate child protection and welfare concerns.

We have also committed, as a priority, to the introduction of legislation to underpin Children First. I am in the process of developing detailed policy proposals in this regard which I will bring to Government. I expect to do this in the coming months. Consideration will be also given, in conjunction with the Oireachtas Committee on Health and Children, to having the heads of the Bill considered at that committee. I look forward to the committee's response to that. It is my intention that the legislation will reflect a broad based approach to compliance,

[Deputy Frances Fitzgerald.]

with obligations extending beyond reporting to one of safeguarding children at risk. The objective will be to ensure the greater protection of children by strengthening the existing system for reporting and responding to suspected child abuse.

It must be emphasised in this context that Children First is already well established among those delivering services to children and there are already in place very significant resources to support the implementation of Children First, which was first introduced in 1999. In the case of the HSE and An Garda Síochána, the two statutory agencies with particular responsibilities for the assessment and investigation of child welfare and protection concerns, Children First forms an integral part of their existing operations and practices. I have been very impressed by the training being done by the Garda and within the HSE with regard to the roll-out of Children First. The new child welfare and protection practice handbook has been given to all staff and training has begun. I attended four regional meetings around the country where representatives of An Garda Síochána and the HSE participated and discussed the ongoing implementation of Children First.

We have already discussed here the additional resources being provided to the HSE, including an increase of 200 last year in the number of social workers in the child welfare and protection area. I already mentioned today the additional 60 social workers who will be in place by the end of this year. The recruitment of these additional social workers was included in the Ryan report implementation plan, as was the commitment to place the Children First guidelines on a statutory basis. This additional resource will be of particular assistance to the HSE in driving forward the implementation of Children First.

Since taking up office, I have had discussions right across the country with organisations and staff working in the child protection area and I have signalled the Government's intentions with regard to the safeguarding of children, including the introduction of legislation to underpin Children First. I visited each of the four HSE regions and met with frontline staff, the gardaí and representatives from other sectors and had the opportunity to hear at first hand the views of the key stakeholders. The response with regard to the Government's intentions was very positive and informative. I will continue to consult widely. We will have the opportunity to discuss the legislation in committee and I will work with the other Departments, the relevant professional regulatory bodies and other relevant agencies as the legislation is developed. The legislation will reflect what has been in the guidance over the past ten years. It is not simply about reporting, as happened in other countries, but it is also about working together, sharing information and inter-agency co-operation. This is essential if we intend to support and protect children and families.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: Fianna Fáil fully supports the Minister's efforts with regard to putting Children First on a statutory footing and ensuring that through mandatory reporting everything is reported so that child protection is our first priority and at the top of the agenda. Question No. 8 asked about the analysis done with regard to resource implications of the introduction of mandatory reporting. The Minister said the taskforce that has been established has been asked to assess how resources will be assigned. Was an advance assessment carried out by the Department with regard to the implications of a mandatory reporting system that would have penalties in place for not reporting? International experience has shown this increases the strain on the system. We know there is already massive strain on the system and this would lead to a real danger of problems falling through the cracks and children being endangered.

Comments made by Gordon Jeyes, the director of child and family services, and by Geoffrey Shannon following the Minister's announcement refer to the need to take this process step by

step and suggest the Minister should not introduce policies that do not have the resource base to ensure reports we receive are acted upon and the resources are there to deal with them. When will the heads of the Bill come before the committee? The Minister indicated it would be in the spring. Is that when she expects it?

Deputy Frances Fitzgerald: Detailed work is being done on the heads of the Bill currently and it is a priority for me to have the legislation as soon as possible. I expect it will go to the committee in the next session and I hope to be in a position to bring a memo to Government before December on the legislation. It is a priority for my Department. The legislation is complex. I have met with many groups to discuss it and have had contact with or will meet the various organisations involved, such as the Teaching Council, the Medical Council, the Health and Social Care Professionals Council and others. I already have been in contact with them and asked them for their views.

On the question of an analysis of resources, as Gordon Jeyes has often said, Children First is effectively mandatory at this time. While it is not underpinned by legislation, it is mandatory. If professionals working with children think a child is being abused or have reason to be concerned, in good faith they must report that. The best analysis in terms of resources is what we are doing currently. We are examining the current state of child protection in the country. I asked for an audit in August when there were reports of various social work teams under pressure and I am very concerned by some of the information I have received from that audit. I have gone back and asked for further analysis to be done by the HSE because what has emerged — I have mentioned this on a number of occasions — is that the quality of the data is extremely problematic. It does not allow for analysis or comparison between areas and different meanings are being taken by different social work teams with regard to a number of cases awaiting allocation or allocated.

I am surprised this work has not been done in the past and it is essential it is done now. This came up already in my discussion with Deputy Ó Caoláin with regard to after care services and statistics. The information I am getting with regard to child and family services in the HSE illustrates in many ways the problems of this service being part of a big organisation like the HSE as opposed to being part of dedicated agency where the issues would be dealt with and where there would be proper management, governance and budgeting. These are serious issues. The best I can do for children is to ensure that when we have this legislation on a statutory basis, social workers will be able to meet the needs that come to their teams. I can best do this by analysing the current situation, ensuring there is an appropriate budget and being clear on what we are talking about when talking about child protection across the country.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: The Children First guidelines were first published in 1999, 12 years ago, yet they are still not on a statutory footing. That understandably leads people to be anxious about the commitment of the Government to put them on a statutory footing. Notwithstanding the commitments the Minister is making about them being effectively implemented in many areas, the whole point of putting them on a statutory footing is that the State and its agencies are held legally accountable for ensuring that children are put first. In that context, the delay is worrying.

The State has failed abused children. We have a very high level of child poverty, as recent figures have indicated. Faced with an austerity budget in December which may impact on precisely the resources and supports that exist for children, is the delay in introducing the Children First guidelines after the budget due to the Government's intention to make cuts which will impact on our ability to put children first? Is the Minister going to be child proofing the budget? Will this be part of the budgetary process? The implementation of the Children First guidelines will be a key criterion and parameter over which the Government's budgetary

[Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett.]

constraints and need for austerity will not be allowed to pass. Will this be a red line? Will any cuts that impact negatively on children be offside?

Deputy Frances Fitzgerald: I note the Deputy's commitment in this area. People have talked for years about putting this legislation on a statutory basis. The Ryan implementation report, which was published in 2009, called for it. I brought a memo to the Government and got agreement that this legislation would be on a statutory basis. I am the first Minister who has done that. I have started working on the legislation. The work is advancing but it is complex.

I got agreement from the Government so that Children First would be put on a statutory basis. It is on the A list for legislation this term. I intend to have the heads of the Bill before the end of the year and to send it to committee in January. It is not being delayed for any other reason. The work is progressing and this legislation is being developed.

Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin: The Minister will have noted the commentary in a number of publications by people who are not opposed to the idea of putting Children First on a statutory footing and introducing mandatory reporting. Nevertheless, they are profits of doom and gloom about this in respect of resourcing and the competency of the system to cope in a new situation. Is the Minister using the little time left to exercise herself on the Department's interest and the importance of highlighting to her Cabinet colleagues the critical funding that will be necessary to support the resourcing of the implementation of these measures? We need to give an answer to some of those voices. Some of the commentary is very foreboding and is unhelpful to the Minister's intent, which we support.

Deputy Frances Fitzgerald: All I can say is that there is an extraordinarily difficult financial situation, which impacts on all Departments. People working with children and family support services are clearly aware of this, as is the director working with the front-line social workers. A serious analysis on the pressures of the system is being carried out at the moment. Work is being done to ensure we understand the system comprehensively across the country. It is not helped by the fact that the budget last year was left €16 million short, if not a lot more. One area alone in the HSE had a €27 million overrun last year in respect of children's services, which was effectively absorbed in the HSE overall budget. Separating the child and family services budget from the HSE budget for next year is a very challenging task, and we must ensure that we have the type of budget that can meet the demands.

There is no doubt that prioritisation will be necessary, because the demand on the services is such that it will be necessary for social work teams to prioritise the kind of work they are doing and the work they cannot cope with. They will have to assess risk and in most cases where they cannot provide a service that is deemed less a priority, they will have to ensure that other services are brought in to work with those families. That work is underway.

Health Service Staff

9. **Deputy Billy Kelleher** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs her views on the social workers recruitment embargo and the impact it may have on the implementation of the recommendations in the Ryan Report; and if she will make a statement on the matter.

[26267/11]

Deputy Frances Fitzgerald: The Implementation Plan published on foot of the Ryan report committed to the recruitment of an additional 270 social workers. The first 200 of these posts were filled last year. The HSE national service plan includes financial provision of €3.8 million

for the recruitment of a further 60 social workers this year. I have been assured by the HSE that it plans to have the 60 additional staff in place by the end of December.

This question is effectively a repeat of a priority question tabled earlier by Deputy McConalogue.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Paudie Coffey): Has the Deputy a supplementary question?

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: It will allow me more time to deal with the issue, because we were short the last time.

In her earlier response, the Minister mentioned that as of 31 December 2011, there were 2,429 social workers employed in the HSE, and that four of the additional 60 to be recruited this year have been recruited so far. I put down a question the last day which specifically asked for the number of social workers in the HSE at 1 January 2011. She indicated to me before that 200 additional social workers had been employed last years and positions back filled. Can she provide the number of social workers employed on 1 January 2011?

Deputy Frances Fitzgerald: I will supply that figure to the Deputy. I have with me the figure for 31 September 2011, which was 2,429. Certain social work teams are under pressure. Every effort is being made to keep the compliment of social workers as high as possible. The 200 social workers promised in the Ryan report have been recruited. I have been assured that a further 60 will be recruited by the end of the year, and I will have funding for a further ten, which brings the number of social workers recruited to 270.

I think the point the Deputy is making is that the social work system is under pressure in various HSE areas. I have to agree with him. Over 25,000 cases have been referred this year, and that number is likely to go up. There are pressures on the system due to younger children coming into care where drugs and alcohol are an issue. There are 6,000 children in care. Clearly there are teams coping with a lot of pressures, and that is why I have spoken about the need for management and prioritisation of the cases that are being referred.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: The figure for 1 January is critical if we are to assess where we are at the moment. There is no doubt that social workers are the bedrock of our child protection systems and our child services. They are under pressure because only four extra social workers have been recruited up to this point. Staff on maternity leave and temporary posts are not being refilled, which is putting massive pressure on the system. That is what is happening at the moment. What is the current set-up for maternity posts in social work teams and the replacement of temporary posts?

Deputy Frances Fitzgerald: As the Deputy knows, there has been a recruitment pause in the HSE and maternity posts are not being filled, which is having an impact. In that context, the recruitment of 270 social workers who have been exempted from the moratorium is important for child protection work, as recommended by the Ryan report. It is quite an achievement on the part of the HSE to have delivered 200 social workers, with 60 to be in place by the end of December and a further ten in January.

There is undoubtedly pressure in the system. I do not think a proper analysis has been done in the past of the number of cases and the required number of social workers; neither has proper management taken place with regard to data collection, as I have made clear this afternoon.

Adoption Services

10. **Deputy David Stanton** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs the require-

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ments which agencies must meet to become accredited as adoption agencies; the number of applications from such agencies currently awaiting accreditation; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [32469/11]

Deputy Frances Fitzgerald: Following the commencement of the Adoption Act 2010 on 1 November 2010, adoption in Ireland is now regulated by the Adoption Authority of Ireland, which is an independent quasi-judicial statutory body appointed by the Government. The functions of the authority, which are set out in section 96 of the Adoption Act, include functions of an operational, judicial and quasi-judicial nature with regard to the adoption process itself as provided for under the Act and relating to the authority's designation as the central authority for the Hague Convention on Protection of Children and Co-operation in Respect of Inter-country Adoption.

Additional information not given on the floor of the House

Under the Adoption Act 2010, the accreditation of agencies providing adoption services is a matter for the Adoption Authority. Its functions include registration, regulatory and standard setting functions in respect of all agencies providing adoption services in accordance with Part 13 of the Act and the relevant regulations. The authority is obliged to fully satisfy itself of the fitness of any persons or body of persons to provide and undertake adoption services.

SI 524 of 2010, Adoption Act 2010 (Accredited Bodies) Regulations 2010, outlines the requirements for the registration of accredited agencies, including structure, reporting requirements and the role of the Adoption Authority. I am advised by the Adoption Authority that to date the authority has registered 12 organisations and a further six organisations are awaiting a decision on accreditation. The authority posts notifications of the accreditation of agencies on its website, www.aai.gov.ie, once the entry in the register of accredited bodies has taken place.

Deputy David Stanton: The Helping Hands agency in Cork has been seeking accreditation for more than a year now and is making no progress. Will the Minister look into the matter and see what can be done to assist? If there is a problem there, could she ensure the problem is sorted and the relevant information is given to the agency so it can be accredited? There is also an issue with funding for the agency. It is not receiving funding at present, and this is probably linked to the fact that it is not accredited. There is a blockage there, on which I would like the Minister's assistance.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Paudie Coffey): We are running out of time, but I will allow the Minister to respond briefly. If she would like to give a more detailed response she may do so at another time.

Deputy Frances Fitzgerald: Stringent requirements must be met for the accreditation of adoption agencies. This protects children in this country and other countries, which is extremely important. To date, the authority has registered 12 organisations and a further six are awaiting a decision on accreditation. I note the points made by the Deputy with regard to Helping Hands. Like many agencies, it was asked to provide information and I understand this has been provided. I understand also that this information has now gone to the HSE and the Adoption Authority is awaiting a response on its analysis of that information. Once that information comes back from the HSE, a decision can be made on Helping Hands.

Written Answers follow Adjournment.

The Dáil adjourned at 3.15 p.m. until 2 p.m. on Tuesday, 8 November 2011.

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 10, inclusive, answered orally.

Question No. 11 answered with Question No. 8.

Family Support Services

12. **Deputy Sean Fleming** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs the timeline for the establishment of the children and family services agency; if she will outline the proposed division of her responsibilities between her and the agency; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [32479/11]

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Frances Fitzgerald): I established the Task Force on the Child and Family Support Agency in September 2011 under the chairmanship of Ms Maureen Lynott.

The Task Force will advise my Department in regard to the necessary transition programme to establish a Child and Family Support Agency, and will base its work on best practice in child welfare, family support and public administration; consistent with the Government's public sector reform agenda.

In relation to the Agency it has been asked to:

- Propose a vision and the principles to guide operations;
- Advise on the appropriate service responsibilities, and the delivery of same;
- Review existing financial, staffing and corporate resources; and propose a methodology for resource allocation;
- Propose an organisational design and operating child welfare and protection service model;
- Prepare a detailed implementation plan;
- Identify the main priorities and core relationships required;
- Oversee the implementation and monitor progress, pending establishment of the Agency.

[Deputy Frances Fitzgerald.]

As I already outlined, the Task Force will advise on the appropriate service responsibilities for the Agency during the course of its work from amongst those within the HSE that relate to children and family services or from within the relevant operational responsibilities of my Department or its agencies. In this regard I have also asked the Task Force to consider which services should transfer from the outset and which might be subject to a longer timetable. In addition, it has been asked to consider which services should be directly provided by the Agency and which should be commissioned.

The Task Force met for the fifth time today. I look forward to receiving the report of its work, which will inform preparations for the new Agency, including the drafting of legislation. It is my intention, working with my colleague the Minister for Health, to establish a dedicated Child and Family Programme within the HSE in 2012. This will provide for a dedicated management structure and budget for children and family services. Management of these services will be led by the National Director (Mr Gordon Jeyes) who already has a very close working relationship with me and my Department. A considerable change programme is already being implemented by the National Director within HSE Child and Family Services aimed at strengthening organisation capacity, business processes and systems. These developments are an integral part of preparations for the new stand alone Agency. I am anxious to advance the full establishment of the Agency at as early a date as possible, subject to the work of the Task Force and necessary legislature provision. I would envisage tabling legislation before the House next year to provide for the Agency's establishment in 2013.

Eating Disorders

13. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs if she has made a submission to the Broadcasting Authority of Ireland on TV advertising and its impact on children; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [32496/11]

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Frances Fitzgerald): In August 2011, the Broadcasting Authority of Ireland issued a consultation document entitled Children's Commercial Communications Code and launched a related public consultation process regarding same on how food and drink should be commercially promoted to children in broadcast media.

My Department ensures the establishment of effective strategies for participation by children in decision making. In this regard, my Department has facilitated a reply by Dáil na nÓg, the national parliament for young people aged 12-18, to the Broadcasting Authority of Ireland in relation to the Authority's consultation document on the Children's Commercial Communications Code.

200 delegates aged 12-18 attended the ninth annual Dáil na nÓg which took place on 5 March 2010 in Croke Park, Dublin and discussed the issues of mental health and access to education. Dáil na nÓg found there to be no comprehensive studies on how body image affects Irish teenagers today. They have created their own survey, with the help of researchers from University College Cork to gather this critical information first hand. The researchers from UCC were commissioned by my Department to work with Dáil na nÓg. The survey is currently being filled out by young people in all 34 Comhairle na nÓg throughout the country during October and early November. The results will then be analysed by the researchers of University College Cork. I expect the survey to provide direct feedback on the impact of advertising and media coverage of children, particularly in relation to their views on body image. The findings will be compiled into a report by early January and sent to the Broadcasting Authority of Ireland.

Question No. 14 answered with Question No. 8.

Early Childhood Education

15. **Deputy Brian Stanley** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs the research and development activities she is undertaking in order to inform progression of the objectives of the literacy and numeracy strategies in childhood settings. [32519/11]

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Frances Fitzgerald): The Literacy and Numeracy Strategy was published by my colleague the Minister for Education and Skills in July following extensive consultation. The Strategy sets out the Government's plans to improve literacy and numeracy and has a range of recommendations across Government, including by my Department.

Quality early childhood settings are important in giving young children the skills that will be key to the development of literacy and numeracy. 94% of children take part in the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) free pre-school year, giving the ideal opportunity to develop these skills. The focus of my Department over the next few years will, therefore, be on continuing to work to improve quality in the sector. Specific actions include a workforce development plan under which all pre-school leaders will have at least a level 5 qualification by July 2012 and under which we will continue to subvent training; adherence to Siolta and moving to implement Aistear, both of which support literacy and numeracy; and introducing joint HSE/Department of Education and Skills inspections.

In all of these developments my Department works very closely with the Early Education Policy Unit of the Department of Education and Skills, which is co-located within my Department. The next phase of collaborative work will be the development of tools for assessment under the Strategy.

From projects supported to date by Government, there is a body of research available or well under way to inform progression of the literacy and numeracy strategy. I would point to the following as being particularly relevant projects in this regard:

- The Glen Early Language and Learning Project (Cork City Partnership)
- The Write-Minded Programme (Young Ballymun Prevention and Early Intervention Programme)
- The Travelling Library (Department of Foreign Affairs' Reconciliation Fund)

The evaluation of and evidence emerging from these projects will inform the implementation of the Literacy and Numeracy Strategy.

Within my Department, the National Strategy for Research and Data on Children's Lives is currently being prepared for publication. As a priority for further development, it has identified improved information on literacy and numeracy at key stages of children's lives and by key characteristics. A principal focus of the strategy is the improved use of existing information sources to inform policy and service development and the development of capacity among researchers and policy makers to make maximal use of such information. A series of summer schools supported by the Department in 2011, to address this need included one school focussed on educational data sources with a particular emphasis on analysis of data from the National Assessments of mathematics and English reading literacy. Other statutory bodies including the Department of Education and Skills and the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment have committed to actions in relation to improved understandings of literacy and numeracy development in the action plan of the strategy.

[Deputy Frances Fitzgerald.]

One of the key commitments given in the Literacy and Numeracy Strategy is for my Department to document the broad range of initiatives and projects that support families in various ways, to identify the approaches that have the most beneficial effects on the lives of families, children and young people, and to seek to coordinate and improve the services that are provided. There is a substantial amount of work already being done in the area of early literacy. What we have to do is to ensure that the interventions we prioritise make a real, measurable and positive difference to the lives and learning successes of children and young people.

Youth Homelessness

16. **Deputy Brian Stanley** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs if she has completed the review of 2001 youth homeless strategy; and the position regarding the development of an implementation framework to address youth homelessness over the next five years. [32518/11]

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Frances Fitzgerald): It is appropriate that, some ten years after the National Strategy for Youth Homelessness was developed in 2001, we review progress and set new targets. A review of progress in 2008 by the HSE in conjunction with other agencies found that significant progress had been made, especially in the areas of interagency co-operation, early prevention and an ‘out of hours’ service.

My Department met with service providers engaged in addressing the problem of youth homelessness in recent months. The purpose was to assess and review the current demand for services, the progress made to date under the Youth Homelessness Strategy 2001 and the need to address any outstanding service deficits. This workshop was very beneficial in getting the views of stakeholders and arising out of the priorities identified on the day, work will commence shortly on developing a high level review of the 2001 strategy. Discussions are ongoing in the Department regarding the most effective model for review and it is hoped to progress this shortly. It is intended that this review will form the basis for the development of an implementation framework to address youth homelessness over the next 5 years.

Children in Care

17. **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs the number of children over 18 years who are in receipt of aftercare services after leaving care. [32513/11]

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Frances Fitzgerald): Section 45 of the Childcare Act 1991 places a statutory duty on the HSE to form a view in relation to each person leaving care as to whether there is a “need for assistance” and, if it forms such a view, to provide services in accordance with the legislation and subject to resources. All young people who have had a care history with the HSE, be it foster care, residential care or high support, are entitled to an Aftercare Service based on their assessed needs. The core eligible age range for aftercare is 18 years and up to 21 years. This can be extended until the completion of a course of education in which he/she is engaged up to the age of 23 years of age.

The HSE commissioned Mark Brierly Consulting to undertake a review of the capacity for alternative care services, including aftercare services. The audit date for the data was 13 March 2011 and based on this audit the HSE has informed me that a total of 1,051 young people were in receipt of aftercare nationally at March 2011. The breakdown between male and female was 46% and 54% respectively.

Aftercare provision incorporates advice, guidance and practical support. An individual holistic needs assessment identifies a young person's need for accommodation, financial support, social network support and training and education. One of the key features of Aftercare support is to advocate on behalf of young people to promote their development as a fulfilled adult in their community. The most important requirements for young people leaving care are for secure, suitable accommodation as well as further education, employment or training.

The HSE National Aftercare Service is underpinned by a National Policy and Procedures Document which has been developed in co-operation with the key stakeholders including the voluntary sector agencies involved in Aftercare provision and my Department. The policy commits to promoting and achieving the best outcomes for young people leaving care and in ensuring consistency of support to these young people.

The HSE National Policy on Aftercare is being rolled out nationally under the watch of the HSE's Aftercare Implementation Group, which includes representation from the HSE, mental health, family service and disability service, as well as representation from the voluntary sector and a young person's representative from Empowering People in Care (EPIC).

I am very much aware of the challenges facing the aftercare service, the need for information required to plan the services; the need for consistency across all areas; the need to follow up with young people who may at first reject its services and the need to link in with adult services as necessary. To accommodate such challenges funding was provided in 2011 to support the recruitment of ten additional aftercare workers. Additionally funding was provided to EPIC to develop a national advocacy and support service for young people in care, leaving care and aftercare.

Departmental Funding

18. **Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs the voluntary organisations to which she will provide funding over the next 12 months; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [32502/11]

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Frances Fitzgerald): The Department of Children and Youth Affairs currently provides funding directly to a wide range of voluntary organisations engaged in the provision of services to children and young people. The most significant share of the funding is targeted at implementing three major child care programmes that include the Community Childcare Subvention (CCS) programme, the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) programme, and the Community Education and Training (CETS) programme.

Under the CCS programme, funding is provided to community/not-for-profit child care facilities to enable them to charge reduced child care fees to eligible parents. Under the programme, funding is paid directly to the service, based on weekly subvention rates of either €50 or €100 per full-time place, depending on the eligibility of the parent. The programme is targeted towards disadvantaged and low-income working parents. There are almost 1,000 community child care providers participating in the CCS programme, which is expected to cost in the region of €43 million in 2011.

The ECCE programme is open to both community-based and private child care providers, and provides an annual programme of early learning to children before they start primary school. Under the programme, capitation fees of €2,450 per annum are paid directly to the service in respect of each eligible child enrolled in the service. A higher rate of capitation (€2,850 per annum) is payable to sessional playschool services with highly qualified staff.

[Deputy Frances Fitzgerald.]

Approximately 4,500 child care providers are participating in the programme, which is expected to cost in the region of €166 million in 2011.

The CETS programme, introduced in September 2010, replaced previous child care support schemes implemented by FÁS and the VECs under which students and trainees were directly allocated child care payments to support the costs of their child care. Under the CETS programme, participating child care services are paid a weekly capitation fee (€170 per full-time place) in respect of each CETS child care place contracted with their service. In return, the service is required to provide a child care place, free of charge, to the qualifying student or trainee. 800 community and commercial child care services participated in the programme in the September 2010/August 2011 year, and more than 1,400 are expected to participate from September 2011. The CETS programme is expected to cost in the region of €21 million in 2011.

My Department also provides funds to support voluntary organisations through a number of other programmes that include the following—

- Funding for the support of voluntary youth work is made available on an annual basis to 31 national and major regional voluntary youth organisations through the Youth Service Grant Scheme which is intended to ensure the emergence, promotion, growth and development of youth organisations with distinctive philosophies and programmes aimed at the social education of young people. Just over €11 million has been made available this year to support the organisations.
- Support for three organisations — Barnardos, the National Children’s Nurseries Association and the Irish Pre-School Play Association who act in the role of authorised signatory in accordance with the Child Care (Pre-School Services) (No. 2) Regulations for the vetting of child care providers. The Department of Children and Youth Affairs has facilitated these organisations in this regard through the provision of funding, which amounts to €232,000 in 2011, to cover the cost of providing this service. The agreement in place with Barnardos was expanded to provide access to vetting for a range of other child care services such as after-school clubs, creches and staff of county child care committees.
- As part of the commitment to ensure that seldom-heard children and young people are included in participation structures and projects, funding of €120,000 is provided this year to the National Youth Council of Ireland to provide a service to support the delivery of *Dáil na nÓg* and *Dáil na nÓg* Council. In addition to this, funding of €105,000 is being allocated to *Foroige* and €70,000 to Youth Work Ireland for the provision of services by Participation Officers to support the operation of *Comhairle na nÓg* and other children and young people’s initiatives.
- Grants are also made available to individuals, groups and organisations involved in the provision of services to children and young people through the provision of €500,000 from the National Lottery Funding Scheme. Organisations who have been awarded funds of €334,000 from this scheme earlier in the year include Castletinn Youth Club, ARC Adoption Limited, Erris “No Name” Club and La Go Bhri Community Childcare Services.

The Deputy might note that the allocation of resources in 2012 from the various funding schemes administered by my Department will be considered in the context of the finalisation of the 2012 estimates process.

Youth Homelessness

19. **Deputy Derek Keating** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs the number of children who are registered as homeless for more than three months; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [32334/11]

37. **Deputy Derek Keating** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs the number of children under the age of 16 years who are registered as homeless for more than seven days; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [32333/11]

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Frances Fitzgerald): I propose to take Questions Nos. 19 and 37 together.

It is appropriate that, some ten years after the National Strategy for Youth Homelessness was developed in 2001, we review progress and set new targets. A review of progress in 2008 by the HSE in conjunction with other agencies found that significant progress had been made, especially in the areas of interagency co-operation, early prevention and an ‘out of hours’ service.

My Department met with service providers engaged in addressing the problem of youth homelessness in recent months. The purpose was to assess and review the current demand for services, the progress made to date under the Youth Homelessness Strategy 2001 and the need to address any outstanding service deficits. This workshop was very beneficial in getting the views of stakeholders and arising out of the priorities identified on the day, work will commence shortly on developing a high level review of the 2001 strategy. Discussions are ongoing in the Department regarding the most effective model for review and it is hoped to progress this shortly. It is intended that this review will form the basis for the development of an implementation framework to address youth homelessness over the next 5 years.

I have asked the HSE for the information in relation to the number of children registered as homeless to me and I will forward it to the Deputy when it is available.

Asylum Applications

20. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs the progress made to date on addressing concerns relating to the care of unaccompanied minors claiming asylum; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [32332/11]

41. **Deputy Seán Crowe** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs the number of unaccompanied minors currently residing in hostel accommodation; and her plans to end this practice. [32521/11]

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Frances Fitzgerald): I propose to take Questions Nos. 20 and 41 together.

Unaccompanied minors seeking asylum are deemed to be in need of care and protection under the Child Care Act, 1991 and are entitled to the same treatment and rights as indigenous young people. The immediate and ongoing needs of separated children seeking asylum (SCSA) as well as their application for refugee status are the responsibility of the Health Service Executive (HSE) in accordance with the Refugee Act, 1996 (as amended) and the Child Care Act, 1991. Where children are identified by An Garda Síochána, at the point of entry, the circumstances are investigated and if there are any concerns about the welfare of the child, they are placed into the care of the HSE.

The Implementation Plan on the Report of the Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse, 2009, contained a commitment that the HSE would end the use of separately run hostels for

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separated children seeking asylum and accommodate children in mainstream care, on a par with other children in the care system. In accordance with this commitment, the HSE phased out hostel type care for separated children seeking asylum and since January 2011, hostels have not been used to accommodate unaccompanied minors. Instead each child is cared for in a registered care placement or equivalent.

The HSE has developed a national policy on the standards and services to be provided to separated children seeking asylum. The policy seeks to achieve equity and equality of services to separated children seeking asylum vis a vis indigenous or resident children and to ensure that there is no differentiation of care provision, care practices, care priorities, standards or protocols.

Constitutional Amendment on Children

21. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs the date on which the referendum Bill on the constitutional amendment on children will be published. [32514/11]

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Frances Fitzgerald): The Programme for Government 2011 states that the Referendum on Children's Rights is a priority, and that the wording of the proposed referendum will be along the lines of that proposed by the All Party Joint Committee on the Constitutional Amendment on Children.

Since taking office, both myself and officials of the Department of Children and Youth Affairs have had a number of meetings with the Attorney General and her officials to progress this commitment. Work on the wording of the referendum is ongoing, focusing on ensuring that the proposed Referendum reflects the deliberations and conclusions of the Joint Committee and the commitment in the Programme for Government. It is my intention to seek approval from Government for the proposed wording, with a view to holding the referendum next year.

In accordance with electoral law polling day must take place between 30 and 90 days after the passing of the Bill.

Foreign Adoptions

22. **Deputy Clare Daly** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs the reason neither the chairman nor the executive of the Adoption Authority has answered two letters from an organisation (details supplied) despite repeated reminders; and when the organisation can expect a response. [32417/11]

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Frances Fitzgerald): Following the commencement of the Adoption Act, 2010, which took place on 1 November 2010, adoption in Ireland is now regulated by the Adoption Authority of Ireland (AAI) which is an independent quasi-judicial statutory body appointed by Government. The functions of the Authority are set out in Section 96 of the Adoption Act, 2010. These include functions of an operational, judicial and quasi-judicial nature in relation to the adoption process itself, as provided for under the Act and relating to the Authority's designation as the Central Authority for the Hague Convention on the Protection of Children and Co-operation in Respect of Intercountry Adoption.

While the issue raised by the Deputy is the administrative responsibility of the AAI I asked the AAI for an update on the case involved. I have been informed that the correspondence relates to an individual case which has been the subject of extensive correspondence between the Authority and the relevant parties.

Vocational Education Committees

23. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs the number of vacant youth officer posts in vocational education committees; and when she expects these to be filled. [32506/11]

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Frances Fitzgerald): The following table shows the number of Youth Officers employed in VECs and details of where vacancies exist. Under the current restrictions on recruitment in the public service, agencies do not have the discretion to fill vacant posts by recruitment or promotion. In line with the Croke Park Agreement, this often necessitates the prioritisation of work amongst existing staff and examination of the scope for reassignment or redeployment.

VEC Youth Officer Posts

VEC Area	Post — WTE
Co Carlow	1
Co Cavan	1
Co Clare	1
City of Cork	1
Co Cork	1
Co Donegal	1
Co Dublin	1
Dun Laoghaire	1
City of Galway	1
Co Galway	1
Co Kerry	1
Co Kildare	Vacancy
Co Kilkenny	1
Co Laois	0.75
Co Sligo/Co Leitrim	0.6/0.04
City of Limerick	1
Co Limerick	1
Co Longford	Vacancy
Co Louth	1
Co Mayo	1
Co Meath	1
Co Monaghan	Vacancy
Co Offaly	0.75
Co Roscommon	0.5
Tipperary NR	0.75
Tipperary SR	1
City of Waterford	1
Co Waterford	0.5
Co Westmeath	0.75
Co Wexford	Vacancy
Co Wicklow	1
Total	25

Children in Care

24. **Deputy Gerry Adams** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs the number of children in the care of the State for each of the past five years; and a breakdown in tabular form of the reasons that they were placed in the care of the State. [32504/11]

153. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs the total number of children in care in each of the past five years to date in 2011; the number that were deemed vulnerable; the action taken to protect them; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [32653/11]

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Frances Fitzgerald): I propose to take Questions Nos. 24 and 153 together.

The HSE compiles monthly performance reports which provide an overall analysis of key performance data from finance, HR, hospital and primary and community services. These reports include statistics in relation to children received into the care of the State when they are deemed to be in need of care and protection in accordance with the Child Care Act 1991.

The total number of children brought in to the care of the State in each of the past five years is as follows:—

Year	No. of Children
December 2007	5,307
December 2008	5,357
December 2009	5,689
December 2010	5,964
To August 2011	6,215

I have asked the HSE to provide a further breakdown of this data to the deputies.

Proposed Legislation

25. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs the date on which she will publish legislation to underpin the Children First guidelines. [32515/11]

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Frances Fitzgerald): The preparation of legislation to put *Children First: National Guidance for the Protection and Welfare of Children*, as far as practicable, on a statutory basis, is under way following the approval of the Government to the preparation of the Heads of Bill and General Scheme on 12 July 2011. The Government has committed in the Programme for Government to this legislation and is attaching a high priority to its preparation. It is my intention that the legislation will reflect a broad based approach to compliance with obligations extending beyond reporting to the safeguarding of children at risk. The objective will be to ensure the greater protection of children by strengthening the existing system for reporting and responding to suspected child abuse. While considerable progress has been made in developing detailed legislative proposals, I am not in a position to give a specific date for the publication of the Bill at this time.

Youth Homelessness

26. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs in view of the announcement that funding to homeless services is being cut by up to 10%, the measures

she is putting in place to protect the welfare of homeless children and young persons. [32529/11]

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Frances Fitzgerald): As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond directly to the Deputy with the most up-to-date information.

National Children's Strategy

27. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs the extent to which she has identified the life skill support requirements for young persons with particular reference to the need to ensure that adequate provision is made at all levels including access to education, sport and recreational activities, health issues and social services; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [32527/11]

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Frances Fitzgerald): The National Children's Strategy (2000) identified the needs of children under a number of different objectives. Effective and responsive policy making and service provision for children and young people relies on good data and research. The Strategy is currently being reviewed and updated and this will be informed by the best available evidence. I look forward to working with my colleagues to progress the agenda across Government to equip children and young people with the necessary skills to support them through life.

At a national level, my Department has been leading out a National Children's Research Programme to advance Goal 2 of the Children's Strategy, which states that '*children's lives will be better understood*'. Over this period a solid evidence base has accumulated.

The National Children's Research Programme includes:

- Growing Up in Ireland: The National Longitudinal Study of Children;
- Other funded research projects, which were commissioned to answer specific policy questions; and
- The biennial State of the Nations Children Report.

A National Data and Research Strategy on Children's Lives has also been prepared by my Department for publication in 2011 and this identifies a number of data and research priorities in respect of children's lives, particularly in the area of health, education, participation, safety and economic security.

At a local level Children's Services Committees have been established to promote inter-agency working and plan for the integrated delivery of services in their area. There are 10 local children's services committees in place with an additional 5 at the preparatory stage. It is planned to have 20 committees in place by the end of 2012. The CSCs are chaired by the HSE and have representatives from agencies such as the local authority, Garda Síochána, Education Sector, the Probation Service and social inclusion partners and other providers of services to children who work together to promote integrated delivery of services in their respective areas. The Children Services Committee's are encouraged to:

- prepare a socio-demographic profile of children and families in their local area, and
- undertake an audit of services in their local area to inform their local plans for the coordinated and integrated delivery of services and improved outcomes for children and young people.

Children in Care

28. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs the number of children in the care of the State who have not seen their social worker for more than ten months. [32509/11]

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Frances Fitzgerald): As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond directly to the Deputy on this matter with the most up-to-date information.

29. **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs her plans to implement the recommendations of the independent review group on child deaths. [32512/11]

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Frances Fitzgerald): The report of the Independent Review Group on Child Deaths is at an advanced stage of preparation. I expect to receive the report in the coming weeks. The Report will be presented to Government, following which it is my intention to lay it before the Houses of the Oireachtas and publish. Without pre-empting the work of the group, I am anticipating that the change programme already underway in HSE Child and Family Services will be an important part of the response to the recommendations of the Group. Of course, I will need to consider the content of the report in full prior to commenting on recommendations contained therein.

Child Care Services

30. **Deputy Michael Colreavy** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs if she plans to expand the number of places in the child care education and training support programme. [32525/11]

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Frances Fitzgerald): The Childcare Education and Training Support (CETS) programme was introduced in September last year and is implemented by my Department, on behalf of FÁS and the Vocational Educational Committees (VECs).

The CETS programme replaces the previous childcare support programmes implemented by FÁS and the VECs under which qualifying students and trainees were paid a weekly Childcare Allowance of up to €63.50 per child as a contribution towards their childcare costs. Under the new programme, funding is provided by my Department to participating services in return for the provision of free childcare places to qualifying students and trainees. Students and trainees can avail of free childcare places for the duration of their course.

A capitation fee is paid for each childcare place contracted, at a weekly rate of €170 per full-time place, €95 per half day care place and €50 per after-school place. After-school places with a “pick-up” facility attract €95 capitation. The eligibility criteria under which students and trainees qualify under the programme continue to be determined by the FÁS and the VECs. Some 2,800 full-time equivalent childcare places are currently provided for under the programme and demand has increased very significantly from earlier this year, with the number of places funded exceeding 3,000 during the Summer. As the number of places fluctuate during the year, the programme has not exceeded the total funding for the year. However, it will require close management to ensure it remains within budget. It is not, therefore, proposed to increase the number of places in the programme at this time.

31. **Deputy Martin Ferris** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs her plans to enhance communication between child and family services and community groups to ensure children and young persons do not fall through the cracks in service provision. [32523/11]

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Frances Fitzgerald): As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond directly to the Deputy with the most up-to-date information.

Youth Policy

32. **Deputy David Stanton** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs her plans to review the operation of the Youth Work Act and the national youth work development plan; the progress being made by her in the development of a new youth policy framework; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [32468/11]

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Frances Fitzgerald): A priority for my Department is to ensure the enhanced integration and coordination of constituent units responsible for youth work and youth related policies with a view to developing a new strategic framework for youth related services under my remit.

As Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, I am committed to the development of a new youth policy framework which my Department is currently progressing. Through this work a clear policy framework will emerge that will aim to enhance the development, participation and support of young people.

I intend that the policy framework will also facilitate and promote co-ordination and coherence across departments and services and will set out the priorities, rationale and criteria for future funding programmes. It will also accommodate issues relevant to young people within the 10-24 age range in informal or out-of-school settings that fall within the remit of my Department. The Youth Work Act, 2001 and the National Youth Work Development Plan 2003-2007 will be considered in this context. The overall aim will be to clarify and enhance coherence, connectivity, coordination and delivery in youth services and related out-of-schools services for young people. Ensuring quality service delivery is an ongoing priority for me. My Department is at present progressing two quality standards initiatives in the youth area that will help ensure an improvement in good practice, that services are outcomes focussed and that the young people involved are deriving the maximum benefit from being involved.

One of my key aims for youth policy development will be to ensure optimum use of all the financial and human resources available. Accordingly, the development of my Department's policy in relation to young people will focus specifically on ensuring greater coherence, coordination and impact in youth policy and provision so as to ensure quality outcomes for all.

Proposed Legislation

33. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs the extent to which she has set out her legislative agenda over the next five years; the extent to which she has identified inadequacies in the law to protect children and vulnerable adults; if she expects to put in place all necessary legislation identified as being required following various developments over the past number of years; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [32526/11]

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Frances Fitzgerald): I have an extensive legislative programme in the coming years to address a number of issues which fall within my remit as Minister for Children and Youth Affairs.

[Deputy Frances Fitzgerald.]

The preparation of legislation to put *Children First: National Guidance for the Protection and Welfare of Children*, as far as practicable, on a statutory basis, is underway following the approval of the Government to the preparation of the Heads of Bill and General Scheme on 12 July 2011.

The Child and Family Support Agency Bill is also a priority and a range of matters relating to the new agency, including consideration of the various functions to be discharged and associated governance arrangements, will be addressed in advance of the preparation of the Heads of Bill and General Scheme.

The drafting of a Children's Referendum Bill will follow the consideration by Government of a revised draft wording amending the Constitution to acknowledge and affirm the rights of children. This wording is currently being drafted by the Attorney General's Office in association with my Department and will be brought to Government as soon as this work is completed. Depending on the wording and the outcome of the Referendum, legislation may be necessary to give effect to the Constitutional amendment in relation to some matters.

The preparation of the Heads and General Scheme of the Adoption (Information and Tracing) Bill are at an advanced stage. This Bill will include the provision of information in relation to adoptions to applicants and also for a tracing service to be provided, as appropriate.

My Department undertakes an ongoing watching brief in relation to matters which are under my remit as Minister for Children and Youth Affairs and where issues arise and it is considered appropriate they be dealt with by way of legislation I will bring forward the necessary Bills for consideration by the Oireachtas.

I wish to advise the Deputy that my Department does not have responsibility for vulnerable adults.

Question No. 34 answered with Question No. 7.

Child and Family Supports

35. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs the mechanisms she will use to enhance the role of early intervention in child poverty and support programmes for vulnerable children in the context of the new child and family support services agency. [32507/11]

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Frances Fitzgerald): I established the Task Force on the Child and Family Support Agency in September 2011 under the chairmanship of Ms Maureen Lynott.

The Task Force will advise my Department in regard to the necessary transition programme to establish a Child and Family Support Agency, and will base its work on best practice in child welfare, family support and public administration; consistent with the Government's public sector reform agenda.

In terms of enhancing child and family services, the Task Force has been asked to propose an organisational design and operating child welfare and protection service model for the new Agency, which is integrated, provides the most appropriate structure, systems and people to meet the vision and operating principles within the resources available. The Terms of Reference of the Task Force are sufficiently broad to allow them to consider the full range of possibilities in their advice to my Department on the appropriate service responsibilities for the new Agency across all services under my remit.

Health Service Staff

36. **Deputy Sandra McLellan** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs the number of vacant social worker posts; the location of same; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [32510/11]

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Frances Fitzgerald): As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond directly to the Deputy on this matter with the most up-to-date information.

Question No. 37 answered with Question No. 19.

Children in Care

38. **Deputy Michael Colreavy** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs her plans to expand the resources available to the national review panel of deaths of children in care. [32524/11]

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Frances Fitzgerald): In January 2010 HIQA published *Guidance for the Health Service Executive for the Review of Serious Incidents including Deaths of Children in Care*. The Guidance became operational from March 2010. The Guidance required the HSE to establish a panel of appropriately skilled professionals, both internal and external to the HSE, to review cases under specified criteria. According to the HIQA guidance the panel should have an independent chair and deputy chair and professionals from a range of disciplines appointed for their professional expertise. The subsequent establishment of this panel and its resources is a matter for the HSE.

In accordance with the HIQA Guidance the HSE last year established the National Review Panel for the purpose of undertaking these reviews. Dr. Helen Buckley, Senior Lecturer and Research Fellow at the School of Social Work and Social Policy, Trinity College Dublin was appointed as Chair. Dr. Bill Lockhart, retired CEO, Youth Justice Agency, Northern Ireland, was appointed as deputy Chair. There are twenty ordinary members on the panel, eighteen of whom are external to the HSE. In addition, a senior professional manager and a senior administrative manager were assigned to support the work of the Panel. While the National Review Panel has been established under the auspices of the HSE, it remains functionally independent, making findings of fact and producing reports that are objective and independent of the HSE.

The National Review Panel recently published its Annual Report for 2010. The report covers the period from March to December 2010. During this period 22 cases of death were notified and 8 serious incidents. Of the 22 deaths reported 6 of these were due to natural causes, 4 were drugs overdoses, 4 were as the result of suicide, 4 were due to road traffic accidents, 2 were homicide and 2 were as a result of accidents other than road traffic accidents.

Given the fact that this is a new process, it is unsurprising that the Review Panel have remarked on the nature of the process itself and challenges in operationalising the HIQA guidance. HIQA have already agreed to review the guidance and are engaging actively with the National Review Panel and the HSE Children and Family Services in this regard. These are matters which will be considered by HIQA in the first instance and by my officials in the context of related policy and legislative developments already in train.

The first Annual Report of the NRP is the subject of consideration by the HSE and I would expect that any measures falling directly to the HSE which are necessary to strengthen the effectiveness of the review process will be implemented.

39. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs the progress made to date on implementing the recommendations in the report on the Roscommon child care case; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [32331/11]

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Frances Fitzgerald): The Report into the Roscommon case was published by the HSE on 27th October 2010. Since its publication the HSE has given assurances that practice in assessing and responding to child welfare and protection concerns is being applied to the necessary standard across all regions. The HSE has already stated that it is committed to learning from this and other reports to ensure that services are strengthened to help protect children to the greatest extent possible.

In relation to the specific family case the management of the case was transferred to Mayo ISA in January 2011 and the monitoring and oversight role is undertaken by the HSE Regional Lead for Childcare. Child in Care Reviews on all the children have been undertaken and chaired by the Regional Lead.

The local Management Team in Roscommon is leading out on implementation of recommendations and monitoring and supporting the process. An external consultant has provided training across disciplines on working with neglect, gender issues attachment and supervision.

Nationally Workshops were convened to share the learning from the Roscommon Inquiry with specific focus on the Recommendations of that Enquiry. The Workshops had a multi-disciplinary focus and a Practice Guidance Document, 'Back to Basics' as disseminated which documented key messages with accompanying guidance.

One of the Recommendations from the Inquiry was for a National Audit of Neglect Cases to be completed, commencing with Roscommon. An external consultant has completed a Review of Practice and Audit of the Management of Cases of Neglect in Roscommon, and has highlighted both strengths and challenges. It is envisaged that an executive summary will be published in the near future. Positive outcomes included:

- Well established multidisciplinary arrangements and organisational structures which facilitated teamwork and communication
- Initial assessments routinely completed
- An emphasis on direct work with children and young persons and commitment to listening to children and ensuring their voices were heard

The Review found that in a majority of the cases, staff and managers displayed a commitment to early assessment of need and provided a range of supports to assist children and families, resulting in improved parenting capacity and better outcomes for children. The Review concluded that the challenges involved are similar throughout Ireland and the United Kingdom including the need for more authoritative social work, senior managers reviewing and auditing files, national supervision policy implementation and establishing thresholds for legal intervention in cases.

A Review of Progress following Audit was undertaken after three months and again this had many positive outcomes.

Achievements included:

- The recommendations of the Inquiry Report and the Review of Practice and Management of Neglect are being implemented via an Interdisciplinary Child Care Steering group.

- A monthly child care meeting chaired by the General Manager considers specific developments within the Child Care Service, including budgetary and resourcing issues, waiting lists and individual cases which require to be notified to senior management.
- Family Support Services have been streamlined to include a single point of entry and is being realigned with new social work boundaries.

Revised management structures have been put in place in Child Care Services in Roscommon and 5 additional social work posts were allocated to Roscommon in 2010. A further 3 additional posts have been allocated in Roscommon and will be appointed as soon as the recruitment pause is lifted. This is envisaged to be late 2011. The recent advertisement of the Children and Family Integrated Service Areas Managers who will soon be appointed will also further strengthen the management structure in the region.

40. **Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs the facilities outside of this State to which children in care with specific behaviour difficulties are sent; and if she has considered developing a facility within this State. [32503/11]

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Frances Fitzgerald): Under the Child Care Act, 1991, the Health Service Executive has a duty to promote the welfare of children who are not receiving adequate care or protection. In discharging this function the HSE has in place a network of special care and high support facilities for children with specialised care needs. Beyond that, the HSE is on occasion, required to make arrangements for the placement of children in care facilities outside of the State to allow for access to therapeutic services not available in this country. This is done on as infrequent a basis as possible and only where such placement is considered to be in the best interest of the child. These children most commonly have severe behaviour difficulties, in some cases as a result of injury or accident or in others due to their childhood experiences.

Where children are placed abroad they remain in the care of the State and they have an allocated social worker who visits them in their placement. They also have a Care Plan and this is reviewed within the statutory framework. All units in which children are placed are subject to the regulatory and inspection framework of that jurisdiction and the HSE makes itself aware of any reports prior to placing a child abroad.

I am advised by the HSE that there were 15 children in placements outside the jurisdiction in 2010. The following facilities for overseas placements have been used by the HSE — Friends Therapeutic Community Trust, Fresh Start, Eden Priory Grove, Southlands, Coxlease, St Lukes Hospital Group, Alderwasley Hall School, Keys Childcare Led, Five Rivers, Quay Foyer, Redbank Treatment Centre, Watling House, Kibble and Jennifer House in the UK; Betterkeys, Camphill Community and Care in Northern Ireland and Boystown, Nebraska, USA.

I should emphasise that the referral of persons abroad for specialised therapeutic interventions is an established feature within our health and social care system and decisions in each case are made in the best interests of the individual. Some children have specialised needs, many of these are met by directly provided services or services commissioned by the HSE within Ireland. For a small number of children their needs are best met in specialised care settings abroad, primarily in the UK, which can provide an individually tailored mix of care and therapeutic interventions. The level of requirement for these services is closely monitored by the National Director and my officials. The establishment of the new Child and Family Support Agency will provide a further opportunity to review the development and configuration of the range of specialised residential provision in Ireland.

Question No. 41 answered with Question No. 20.

42. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs her plans to address the high numbers of children who are placed in the care of the State due to financial difficulties of their families rather than risk. [32508/11]

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Frances Fitzgerald): Under the Child Care Act 1991 children should, in the first instance, be supported to remain with their families. Children should only be taken into care where the HSE has identified abuse or the risk of abuse, including neglect than cannot be prevented or resolved without the child being received into care.

My officials had a recent meeting with the Department of Social Protection at which this matter was discussed. It was agreed that there should not be any cases in which children enter the care system due to financial need rather than cases of abuse or the risk of abuse. If any such cases are identified by the HSE, my officials will work with the Department of Social Protection and the HSE to ensure that children are only received into care on the basis of risk to their safety and welfare that cannot be alleviated by financial support alone.

Child Abuse

43. **Deputy Martin Ferris** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs her plans to address the numerous breaches of Children First regarding the Health Service Executive and Garda liaison in domestic violence situations as set out in the Baby G report. [32522/11]

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Frances Fitzgerald): The Review undertaken in respect of the death of a child known to the child protection system as Baby G was finalised on the 13th May, 2011 and concluded that, while there was no connection between any actions or inaction on the part of the HSE with baby G's death, compliance with *Children First National Guidelines for the Protection and Welfare of Children 1999* was patchy and that the protocol on joint working between the HSE and An Garda Síochána does not appear to have been followed.

This conclusion is in line with reviews in relation to *Children First National Guidelines for the Protection and Welfare of Children 1999* conducted by the former OMCYA and the Office of the Ombudsman for Children. Both these reviews found that while the Guidelines themselves were fundamentally sound, a number of implementation difficulties with the Guidelines, including in the area of inter-agency working.

In July, 2011, I launched the revised *Children First National Guidance* for the protection and welfare of children. The Guidance deals with the recognition, reporting and management of child safety concerns. It emphasises the need to safeguard and protect children, that the safety and welfare of children is everyone's responsibility and that children will have safer lives where everyone is attentive to their well being. People who work with children across a range of areas must be clear in understanding their responsibility for safe practice and the reporting of concerns.

There is an acknowledged need for greater consistency in the implementation of the Children First Guidance across all sectors and organisations working with children. This was highlighted by the Ryan Commission which recommended that Children First should be uniformly and consistently implemented throughout the State. In recognition of this the Government has committed, as a priority, to the introduction of legislation to underpin Children First. It is my intention that the legislation will reflect a broad based approach to compliance with obligations extending beyond reporting to one of safeguarding children at risk. The objective will be to

ensure the greater protection of children by strengthening the existing system for reporting and responding to suspected child abuse.

I also recently launched the HSE's accompanying 'Child Welfare and Protection Practice Handbook' for use by all social workers and other relevant practitioners. The Handbook complements the *Children First* Guidance and sets specific protocols for HSE social workers, Gardaí and other front line staff in dealing with suspected abuse and neglect. The objective is to ensure that safe and effective child protection practices are operated across all organisations and sectors that work with children.

Children First will also be supported by an assurance framework which will include strong emphasis on inspection and the need to provide demonstrable evidence of implementation. In the case of the health sector, the remit of the Health Information and Quality Authority (HIQA) is being expanded to include oversight of the HSE's Child Protection services, including the operation of *Children First*. HIQA is currently developing standards to allow for inspection of the HSE's child protection services. In addition my Department is chairing an inter-departmental group aimed at promoting consistent implementation of the Guidance across sectors. The importance of effective inter-agency working is relevant in this regard. My Department is also convening a regular forum with representation from the HSE and An Garda Síochána, as the two bodies with particular statutory responsibilities in this area, to consider implementation issues, particularly inter-agency working between the two organisations.

Children in Care

44. **Deputy Sandra McLellan** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs her plans to expand the *guardian ad litem* scheme; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [32511/11]

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Frances Fitzgerald): Under the Child Care Act 1991, a Guardian Ad Litem (GAL) provides a service to the Courts. This happens where a judge requests that a Guardian Ad Litem be appointed to a child to represent the interests of a child who is the subject of care proceedings. They are always appointed where a child is subject to Special Care proceedings. The service is funded by the Health Service Executive (HSE).

I consider there is considerable scope to improve the organisation of the current service which has evolved in an ad hoc manner over a number of years. My Department is currently reviewing provision of GAL services having regard to previous reports and current data on demand. Officials are working closely with the HSE in this regard with a view to establishing the most appropriate arrangements for the future organisation and delivery of this service. Preliminary discussions have also taken place with the Department of Justice, Equality and Defence in relation to this matter.

Child Care Services

45. **Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs when the Health Information and Quality Authority will begin their public consultation on standards for oversight of the Health Service Executive child protection services; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [32516/11]

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Frances Fitzgerald): The Health Information and Quality Authority (HIQA) has convened a Standards Advisory Group to advise on the development of National Standards for the Protection and Welfare of Children. The Advisory Group, which comprises a wide representation of people from the health and social

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care sector has met several times and continues to advise HIQA on the draft standards, prior to a wider public consultation. The Authority anticipates that it will be in a position to commence the public consultation by the end of the year. The draft standards will then be amended based on feedback received from the consultation process and the final draft standards will be forwarded to me for approval.

Proposed Legislation

46. **Deputy Seán Crowe** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs if she has met with the Department of Justice and Equality on legislation for the vetting of employees and sharing of soft information; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [32520/11]

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Frances Fitzgerald): Draft Heads of Bill for a National Vetting Bureau were developed by my Department and following consultation with my colleague the Minister for Justice and Equality we agreed that this legislation will be brought forward by Minister Shatter.

A working group to progress this legislation has been established on which my Department is represented. In addition there continues to be regular and ongoing contact at official and Ministerial level in relation to this very important piece of legislation.

Child Care Services

47. **Deputy Mick Wallace** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs if she will outline the cutbacks to the community child-care subvention programme; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [30306/11]

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Frances Fitzgerald): The Community Child-care Subvention Scheme (CCSS) was introduced in January 2008 under the National Childcare Investment Programme (NCIP) to enable community not-for-profit childcare service to provide childcare at reduced rates to disadvantaged and low income families. Under the CCSS, community services were required to make an annual return to the Childcare Directorate which recorded the actual level of disadvantage among parents using their service and the level of service being used.

In Budget 2010, the Minister for Finance announced that the CCSS would be succeeded by a follow-on programme, the Community Childcare Subvention (CCS) programme, with effect from September 2010 along with a new Childcare Education and Training (CETS) programme. The new CCS programme continues to provide support funding to community childcare services based on the level of service reported by them and maintains and improves the provision for disadvantaged and low income families. The CCS has a stronger focus on low income working parents and also continues the policy of tapered withdrawal of the subvention to assist parents moving from unemployment back into the workforce. The programme is demand led, and there has been no decrease in the rates of funding in the programme since its introduction last year.

Some 900 community services throughout the State are participating in the CCS programme. Services recently made their 2011/12 return, and the entitlements of individual parents are currently being assessed by the Department of Social Protection. The number of parents claiming support in this return indicates that the level of subvention under the programme is likely to rise in the 2011/2012 year.

Departmental Expenditure

48. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade the cost of issuing hard copy payslips to all employees paid by him; the number of staff issued with such payslips; the steps being taken to only issue payslips by electronic means; the timetable involved; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32683/11]

49. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade the cost of issuing hard copy payslips to all employees of agencies accountable to him; the number of staff issued with such payslips; the steps being taken to only issue payslips by electronic means; the timetable involved; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32698/11]

Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Eamon Gilmore): I propose to take Questions Nos. 48 and 49 together.

My Department implemented an electronic payslip system in January 2008 as part of the “Transforming Public Service” programme of civil service modernisation. All of the Department’s staff are now paid by electronic funds transfer.

The vast majority of the Department’s headquarters staff avail of an e-payslips system via the Department’s intranet. However, it remains necessary to issue hard copy payslips to staff who do not have access to the Department’s intranet either because of the nature of their work or due to temporary absences on secondment, maternity leave or other reasons. The numbers change from week to week but are in the range of 100-120 which represents about 9% of the total payroll.

The cost of issuing hard copy payslips is estimated to be of the order of €3,000 per annum and my Department is continuing to look at ways of reducing payroll administration costs even further.

There are no agencies accountable to me.

Tax Code

50. **Deputy Dominic Hannigan** asked the Minister for Finance his plans to reduce the VAT charged on school ebooks; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32637/11]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Michael Noonan): I am advised by the Revenue Commissioners that the VAT rating of goods and services is subject to the requirements of EU VAT law with which Irish VAT law must comply. The general position is that school books are zero-rated. The zero rate applies to printed books, including atlases, children’s picture, drawing and colouring books and books of music. All digitised publications, regardless of their rate when printed (for example, a book liable at zero rate), are treated as the supply of a service liable at the standard rate of VAT, currently 21%. E-books, online newspaper subscriptions and online information services purchased via download over the Internet are also considered the supply of services liable for VAT at the standard rate. The EU position is that digital information services are not the direct equivalent of traditional printed products, including books. Even where the content is similar, the additional functionality (e.g. search facilities, hyperlinks, archives, etc) associated with electronic content produces a fundamentally different product.

Banking Sector

51. **Deputy Robert Dowds** asked the Minister for Finance the situation regarding distressed mortgages which are held by a lender other than the two pillar banks; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32599/11]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Michael Noonan): The measures that are in place to assist people who are having genuine difficulties in meeting their mortgage repayments cover both the “pillar banks” and the non pillar banks. The Central Bank’s revised Code of Conduct on Mortgage Arrears (the Code) applies to mortgage lending activities with borrowers in respect of their principal private residence in the State. Compliance with the Code is mandatory on all mortgage lenders registered with the Central Bank. The Code came into effect on 1 January 2011. With effect from 30 June 2011, lenders must have in place the required systems and trained staff necessary to support the implementation of the Code. The Code sets out the framework that lenders must use when dealing with borrowers who are in arrears or are in pre-arrears. For the purposes of the Code a “pre-arrears” case arises when the borrower contacts the lender stating that he or she is in danger of getting into financial difficulties and/or is concerned about getting into mortgage arrears. The Code can be accessed at www.centralbank.ie. The Central Bank has produced, with input from the National Consumer Agency, a consumer guide to assist consumers in understanding the new process under the revised Code.

Financial assistance is available to eligible claimants under the Department of Social Protection’s Mortgage Interest Supplement Scheme.

People in debt or in danger of getting into debt can avail of the services of the Money Advice and Budgeting Service. This is a national, free, confidential, and independent service.

Prior to the Summer recess the Economic Management Council asked an Inter-Departmental Group to consider further necessary actions to alleviate the increasing problem of mortgage over-indebtedness. The Group’s report was published on 12 October 2011 and is available on my Department’s website. The report was discussed in the Dail last month during which all members were given an opportunity to put forward their views. When these views have been collated I will put forward proposals to the Government on next steps including an implementation mechanism.

In the meantime work is already underway to implement some of the key recommendations of the report:-

- The Minister of State at the Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government with special responsibility for Housing and Planning will launch two mortgage-to-rent schemes in line with the report’s recommendations. These will operate on a pilot basis initially subject to prompt review ahead of wider roll-out. Under each scheme households in extreme mortgage distress who are eligible for social housing will be able to remain in their homes as social housing tenants with either their lending institution or a housing association taking ownership of the property.
- The Minister for Justice and Equality has already undertaken extensive work on the Heads of a Personal Insolvency Bill as set out in the report and these will be published shortly.
- I have instructed the Banking Division of my Department to begin discussions with the banks to ensure speedy implementation of the measures set out in the report.

Fiscal Policy

52. **Deputy Kevin Humphreys** asked the Minister for Finance if he will provide the primary Exchequer deficit, excluding interest payments on debt, and payments for bank recapitalisation and bond redemption on an annual basis from 2007 to 2010 in tabular form, and projections for 2011, 2012 and 2013 that is the annual difference between revenue and current and capital expenditure; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32604/11]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Michael Noonan): The information requested by the Deputy concerning the Exchequer primary deficit — that is the Exchequer deficit excluding debt interest expenditure — bank recapitalisation payments and bond redemptions for each of the years 2007-2010 is set out in the table. The Deputy should be aware that in 2007, the Exchequer was in primary balance. The Exchequer primary balances are calculated using figures from the annual Finance Accounts.

	€billions			
	2007	2008	2009	2010
Exchequer Primary Balance	0.0	-11.2	-22.1	-15.3
Exchequer Bank Recapitalisation Payments			4.0	0.7
Bond Redemptions	6.0	0.03	5.1	0.8

In 2009 the Exchequer funded a €4 billion capital injection into Anglo Irish Bank. In 2010, the Exchequer provided €625 million to Educational Building Society (EBS) and €100 million to Irish Nationwide Building Society (INBS) by way of special investment shares. This method of investment gave the State extensive powers and full economic ownership of the two building societies. These payments are reflected in the table above as they were sourced from the Exchequer.

Other banking related payments were funded from the National Pensions Reserve Fund (NPRF). Following the frontloading of the 2009 and 2010 Exchequer contributions, the NPRF invested, in 2009, €3.5 billion in each of Bank of Ireland and Allied Irish Banks. In 2010, the NPRF injected a further net €3.7 billion in capital into Allied Irish Banks.

In 2010, €30.85 billion was committed to Anglo Irish Bank, INBS and EBS by way of Promissory Notes. There was no Exchequer expenditure associated with these Notes in 2010. The first Exchequer payments in relation to these Notes took place in 2011.

The most recently published Department of Finance economic and budgetary forecasts are contained in April's Stability Programme Update (SPU). Updated economic and budgetary projections for the period 2011-2015 will be contained in the Medium-Term Fiscal Statement, which will be published tomorrow, Friday, 4th November.

Departmental Expenditure

53. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Finance the cost of issuing hard copy payslips to all employees paid by him; the number of staff issued with such payslips; the steps being taken to only issue payslips by electronic means; the timetable involved; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32682/11]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Michael Noonan): All employees in my Department are on electronic payslips and hard copy payslips are only provided to employees who are on extended absence, for example, maternity leave. The details sought by the Deputy are as follows:

- Number of staff issued with payslips, 19.
- Annual cost, €183

54. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Finance the cost of issuing hard copy payslips to all employees of agencies accountable to him; the number of staff issued with such payslips; the steps being taken to only issue payslips by electronic means; the timetable involved; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32697/11]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Michael Noonan): My Department is a shared services payroll provider and, in addition to paying Department of Finance staff, provides a service for a number of other Government Departments/Offices. Hard copy payslips are only provided to Departments/Offices who specifically request them.

The details sought by the Deputy are as follows:

- Number of staff issued with payslips, 272.
- Annual cost, €1,914.

The figures quoted represent total numbers and costs for payslips for the shared payroll services for the following Departments/Offices: Department of Finance, Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, Office of the Chief State Solicitor, Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions, Office of the Attorney General, Office of the Ombudsman, Commission for Public Service Appointments, Public Appointments Service, State Laboratory, President's Establishment, Judicial salaries and salary for the President and the Comptroller and Auditor General.

The Office of the Paymaster General in my Department is responsible for the issue of pension payments to 22,000 retired Civil and Public Servants and their surviving spouses across a range of Government Departments and Offices. The figures provided exclude numbers and costs associated with pension payments.

The Revenue Commissioners, the Appeals Commissioners, the Office of the Comptroller and Auditor General and NAMA, which are under the aegis of my Department, are not part of my Department's shared services payroll. The numbers and costs associated with these bodies are as follows:

Revenue Commissioners and Appeals Commissioners

- no costs as they do not issue hard copy payslips to their employees:

Comptroller and Auditor General:

- Number of staff issued with payslips, 154.
- Annual cost, €830.

NTMA

There are currently 423 employees in the NTMA. Processing of the NTMA payroll is outsourced to PwC. Payslips are currently issued in hardcopy on a monthly basis. The NTMA are considering a move to electronic payslips. There would be a saving of five cent in the cost of processing each payslip from such a move as well as savings in postage and courier charges. It is estimated that the annual savings from such a move would be €415.

Departmental Funding

55. **Deputy Olivia Mitchell** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if his attention has been drawn to the concerns amongst Protestant faith schools of the impact on their future sustainability of a further cut in funding in view of the removal in 2009 of the funding which traditionally safeguarded the viability of Protestant schools; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32558/11]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Ruairí Quinn): I assume the Deputy is referring to the withdrawal of certain funding from minority faith schools with effect from 1 January 2009, which realised an annual saving of €2.8 million to the Exchequer. These grants were

withdrawn due to real concerns about the constitutionality of making grants available to fee-charging schools of one ethos and not to those of another.

As these schools no longer receive funding, the question of a further cut does not arise. The Deputy will appreciate that in advance of any decisions by the Government in the context of the upcoming budget, I am not at liberty to speculate on measures that may be announced.

There are 26 distinctively Protestant schools and one Jewish school. Of these schools, the Jewish school and 20 of the Protestant schools charge fees. Many of the schools have a boarding facility, reflecting the dispersed nature of the communities across the country. The six Protestant schools within the free education scheme receive the same funding as all other schools within the free education system.

This Government recognises the importance of ensuring that students from a Protestant or reformed church background can attend a school that reflects their denominational ethos while at the same time ensuring that funding arrangements are in accordance with the provisions of the Constitution. I remind the Deputy that the Constitution specifically states that the State shall not discriminate against one religion in favour of another.

With regard to the fee-charging Protestant schools, an arrangement exists whereby funding is paid to the Secondary Education Committee, an organisation run by the churches involved in managing the schools. The Secondary Education Committee then disburses funds to the Protestant fee-charging schools on behalf of pupils who would otherwise have difficulty with the cost of boarding fees and who, in the absence of such financial support, would be unable to attend a second level school of a reformed church or Protestant ethos. Funding amounts to €6.5 million annually. There are no changes proposed in respect of the Protestant block grant.

Teachers in all fee-charging schools are paid by the State. This arrangement pre-dated the introduction of free education arrangements and has existed since the foundation of the State and predates the foundation of the State. The estimated cost of these posts in 2011 is of the order of €100 million. I am already on record as saying that this is not a simple matter as these arrangements, which are historic and of long standing, impact upon a substantial number of schools which cater for religious minorities.

Schools Building Projects

56. **Deputy Thomas Pringle** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the position regarding autistic children in a school (details supplied) in County Donegal; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32563/11]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Ruairí Quinn): My Department approved funding to the school referred to by the Deputy for a building project consisting of a Special Needs Unit together with a secure hard/soft play area and parking provision. A once-off set up grant for the Unit was also approved.

My Department understands that works have now commenced on site and that the school authority has made temporary arrangements for a designated play area for those pupils in the special needs unit and in two other mainstream classes.

Departmental Funding

57. **Deputy Thomas Pringle** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if the minor works scheme grants for primary schools are to be paid this year; when the payments will start; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32564/11]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Ruairí Quinn): Schools have been informed that they are not to enter into commitments in expectation of the issuing of the primary school

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minor works grant in the current school year (2011/12). The decision regarding the payment of the grant is likely to be taken in the near future.

Special Educational Needs

58. **Deputy Thomas Pringle** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if he will ensure that the special needs assistant is approved in respect of a school (details supplied) in County Donegal. [32565/11]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Ruairí Quinn): The Deputy will be aware that the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) is responsible, through its network of local Special Educational Needs Organisers (SENOs) for allocating resource teachers and Special Needs Assistants (SNAs) to schools to support children with special educational needs. The NCSE operates within my Department's criteria in allocating such support. This now includes a requirement for the NCSE to have regard to an overall cap on the number of SNA posts.

I wish to clarify for the Deputy the distinction between the role of the SNA and that of the teacher. SNAs and teachers have separate yet complementary roles. The class teacher is responsible for educating all pupils in his/her class, including any pupil with a special educational need. In this task, the teacher may be supported by a learning support teacher and/or resource teacher. SNAs are allocated to schools to enable them to support pupils with disabilities who also have significant care needs.

The NCSE has now advised all mainstream schools of their SNA allocation for the current school year, taking into account the care needs of qualifying pupils attending the school and has published statistical information in relation to the allocation of SNA posts and resource teaching hours to Primary, Special and Post Primary Schools. The information is provided on a county by county and school by school basis on its website at www.ncse.ie.

The school referred to by the Deputy has an allocation of 4 SNA posts.

The NCSE has a retained capacity to respond to emergency cases, or where additional care needs arise for schools as a result of new school enrolments, injuries or diagnoses, during the school year, in the context of existing SNA provision in the school.

The NCSE will advise schools in the near future of a process to review allocation decisions to ensure that correct procedures were followed and that they comply with my Department's policy. The merits of individual allocation decisions will not be open to appeal under this mechanism.

School Staffing

59. **Deputy Thomas Pringle** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the number of special needs assistants posts that were held back for the start of the new school year that have now been filled; the number of applications on hand and when schools that have applied can expect to hear about their application. [32567/11]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Ruairí Quinn): The Deputy will be aware that the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) is responsible, through its network of local Special Educational Needs Organisers (SENOs) for allocating resource teachers and Special Needs Assistants (SNAs) to schools to support children with special educational needs. The NCSE operates within my Department's criteria in allocating such support. This now includes a requirement for the NCSE to have regard to an overall cap on the number of SNA posts. This number is 10,575 whole time equivalent (WTE) posts.

The NCSE has advised all mainstream schools of their SNA allocations for the 2011/12 school year and has recently published statistical information in relation to the allocation of SNA posts and resource teaching hours to Primary Special and Post Primary Schools. The information is provided on a county by county and school by school basis on its website at *www.ncse.ie*. In total, approximately 10,100 WTE SNA posts have been allocated to date for the current school year.

The NCSE retained 475 SNA posts in order to allocate them over the current school year in cases such as emergency, appeals, acquired injuries or new school entrants with care needs. The allocation of the 475 SNA posts is underway. It is expected that the bulk of the posts will be distributed to schools by the end of November with recruitment being undertaken by individual schools as soon as they are notified of any additional allocation. A number of schools have already started the recruitment process to fill posts allocated to them recently and others will start recruiting once they receive their notification.

The NCSE will advise schools in the near future of a process to review allocation decisions to ensure that correct procedures were followed and that they comply with my Department's policy. The merits of individual allocation decisions will not be open to appeal under this mechanism. I have arranged for the Deputy's query regarding the number of applications on hand to be forwarded to the NCSE for their attention and direct reply.

Redundancy Payments

60. **Deputy Michael Lowry** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the reason redundancy payment was not paid in respect of a person (details supplied) in County Tipperary; if the person may now apply for redundancy in view of the extraordinary circumstances in this case; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32575/11]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Ruairí Quinn): The redundancy arrangements for Special Needs Assistants were agreed at a national level under the auspices of the Labour Relations Commission. These arrangements are outlined in my Department's Circular 58/2006 (Redundancy Arrangements for Special Needs Assistants). Under the terms of the Circular, the time limit for submitting an application for payment of redundancy is 52 weeks after the date of termination of the contract of employment. The person referred to by the Deputy is not entitled to payment as the time limit for submitting an application has expired.

Circular 0058/2006 was posted to all schools in 2006 for the attention of Boards of Management, Principal Teachers and Special Needs Assistants. This Circular has also been on my Department's website since that time. As the SNA's employer, the Board of Management is responsible for following correct procedures in recruitment and any other matters regarding that person's employment contract.

School Staffing

61. **Deputy Charlie McConalogue** asked the Minister for Education and Skills his plans to deal with the teaching vacancies in both post primary and primary schools that will arise from the February 2012 retirement deadline Croke Park agreement; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32594/11]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Ruairí Quinn): I am conscious of the potential impact of teachers retiring on State examination classes in post-primary schools. My Department has had discussions with second-level management bodies on this matter and intends to issue information to schools on re-employing such teachers for the remainder of the school year where this is considered necessary to reduce that impact.

[Deputy Ruairí Quinn.]

Any measures will be confined to teachers teaching State examination classes in post-primary schools. Vacancies in primary schools may be filled in a temporary capacity for the remainder of the school year in accordance with agreed procedures.

School Accommodation

62. **Deputy Charlie McConalogue** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the position regarding a school building (details supplied) in County Donegal; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32596/11]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Ruairí Quinn): The new school referred to by the Deputy is one of eight schools which were approved for inclusion in the 3rd Bundle of schools to be procured via Public Private Partnership. This Bundle was handed over to the National Development Finance Agency (NDFA) in July 2010 to commence the tender procurement process. I am pleased to inform the Deputy that tenders were received on 5th July 2011 and following evaluation, the BAM PPP consortium was appointed Preferred Tenderer on 30th September 2011. BAM has recently submitted applications for full planning permission to the relevant local authorities and subject to the successful outcomes to these applications and the completion of the procurement process, it is anticipated that construction of the schools in the Bundle will commence in the first quarter of 2012. The accommodation is expected to be ready for occupation in September 2013.

Psychological Service

63. **Deputy Robert Dowds** asked the Minister for Education and Skills his plans on the appointment of school psychologists; and the progress that has been made in providing psychologists in schools. [32600/11]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Ruairí Quinn): I can inform the Deputy that all primary and post-primary schools have access to psychological assessments either directly through the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) or through the Scheme for Commissioning Psychological Assessments (SCPA) whereby the school can have an assessment carried out by a member of the panel of private psychologists approved by NEPS, and NEPS will pay the psychologist the fees for this assessment directly. NEPS currently directly employs some 174 psychologists sited in 22 local and Regional offices countrywide and assigned to schools in their respective catchment areas. Recruitment of additional psychologist staff has been ongoing and in the past year some 23 have been employed within the service (most recently 3 in September 2011) offset somewhat by the loss of 5 staff due to resignation or retirement. At present some 93% of primary and post-primary pupils are in schools with a NEPS psychologist assigned an increase from 86% for the same period last year. In regard to commitments within the Programme for Government to further expand NEPS staffing psychologist staffing levels I will be consulting with colleagues within Government in relation to this and other such commitments with a view to the timing of the implementation thereof at which stage I will make public my Department's intentions in this regard.

Special Educational Needs

64. **Deputy Robert Dowds** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the extent to which the 10% of special needs assistant posts that were held in reserve have been allocated; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32601/11]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Ruairí Quinn): The Deputy will be aware that the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) is responsible, through its network of local

Special Educational Needs Organisers (SENOs) for allocating resource teachers and Special Needs Assistants (SNAs) to schools to support children with special educational needs. The NCSE operates within my Department's criteria in allocating such support. This now includes a requirement for the NCSE to have regard to an overall cap on the number of SNA posts. This number is 10,575 whole time equivalent (WTE) posts.

The NCSE advised all mainstream schools of their SNA allocations for the 2011/12 school year and published statistical information in relation to the allocation of SNA posts and resource teaching hours to Primary Special and Post Primary Schools. The information is provided on a county by county and school by school basis on its website at www.ncse.ie.

The NCSE retained 475 SNA posts in order to allocate them over the current school year in cases such as emergency, appeals, acquired injuries or new school entrants with care needs. The allocation of the 475 SNA posts is underway. It is expected that the bulk of the posts will be distributed to schools by the end of November with recruitment being undertaken by individual schools as soon as they are notified of any additional allocation. A number of schools have already started the recruitment process to fill posts allocated to them recently and others will start recruiting once they receive their notification.

The NCSE will advise schools in the near future of a process to review allocation decisions to ensure that correct procedures were followed and that they comply with my Department's policy. The merits of individual allocation decisions will not be open to appeal under this mechanism.

School Staffing

65. **Deputy Robert Dowds** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the extent to which the 10% of resource teacher posts that were held in reserve have been allocated; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32602/11]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Ruairí Quinn): I wish to advise the Deputy that approximately 9,950 Whole Time Equivalent (WTE) learning support/resource teacher posts, including those provided under the General Allocation Model, are being provided in primary & post primary schools in the 2011/12 school year in order to provide additional teaching support to pupils with special educational needs. This represents an increase of approximately 350 whole time equivalent posts over last year's allocation. Of the 9,950 posts being provided for Learning Support/Resource Teaching, 9,430 WTE posts were sanctioned in schools (including 4450 posts provided under the General Allocation Model) in advance of the 2011/12 school year. The Deputy will be aware that the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) is responsible, through its network of local Special Educational Needs Organisers (SENOs) for allocating resource teachers and Special Needs Assistants (SNAs) to schools to support children with special educational needs. The NCSE operates within my Department's criteria in allocating such support. Circular 37/2011 provides information to schools regarding the arrangements which are being put in place for the 2011/12 school year for the allocation of Resource Teaching hours for children with assessed special educational needs.

In relation to the allocation of individual Resource Teaching hours, the position is that for the 2011/12 school year an initial allocation of 90% of valid identified resource teaching allocations was made by the NCSE to schools. This allocation, in the first instance, provided schools with the majority of their allocation, yet preserved enough capacity to deal with late applications and ensure that my Department can remain within Employment Control Framework obligations. Schools had been requested to forward any outstanding applications, or additional outstanding materials to support incomplete applications to the NCSE for consideration before 16th September 2011. These applications have been considered and my Department has approved the allocation of further Resource Teaching supports in schools by the NCSE, as well

[Deputy Ruairí Quinn.]

as allowing for limited capacity for further allocations by the NCSE as and when valid applications arise throughout the remainder of the school year. The NCSE will be in contact with schools in the near future to inform them of their individual allocations. The NCSE has recently published statistical information in relation to the allocation of SNA posts and resource teaching hours to Primary, Special and Post Primary Schools. The information is provided on a county by county and school by school basis on its website at www.ncse.ie.

Higher Education Grants

66. **Deputy Sean Fleming** asked the Minister for Education and Skills when the third level grant will be paid to a person (details supplied) in Dublin 15; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32629/11]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Ruairí Quinn): The processing of student grants is carried out by local grant awarding authorities — VECs and local authorities. In the circumstances, it will be necessary for the student in question to contact his grant awarding authority to ascertain the position regarding his grant application.

Education Schemes

67. **Deputy Patrick O'Donovan** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if, in view of medical circumstances a person (details supplied) in County Limerick will be considered for one further year of home tuition; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32642/11]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Ruairí Quinn): The Deputy will be aware that my Department's home tuition scheme provides funding to parents to provide education at home for children who, for a number of reasons such as chronic illness, are unable to attend school. The scheme was extended in recent years to facilitate tuition for children awaiting a suitable educational placement and also to provide early educational intervention for pre-school children with autism. Children with a significant medical condition which is likely to cause major disruption to their attendance at school on a continuing basis are eligible for home tuition under the scheme. Eligibility in this regard is assessed with reference to a completed medical report and attendance records supplied by the school in which the pupil is enrolled. In the case referred to by the Deputy the child has not yet enrolled in school and does not meet the eligibility criteria for Home Tuition.

School Staffing

68. **Deputy Dara Calleary** asked the Minister for Education and Skills when a response will issue from him in relation to an issue (details supplied). [32645/11]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Ruairí Quinn): I am pleased to advise the Deputy that a response issued last week from my Department to the school on the issues to which he refers. I have previously advised the Deputy the position in relation to the provision of an administrative principal posts in special schools. The Report of the Special Education Review Committee outlines that an administrative principal post should be appointed in a special school at the point at which the six teacher (5th assistant) is about to be appointed to a school. My officials have previously outlined this position directly to the school in question which has an authorised staffing of 1 Principal and 3 full-time teachers.

Similarly my Department's ancillary services grant is based on the number of authorised full-time teaching staff approved for the school. The special school referred to by the Deputy receives an ancillary services grant of €24,050.00, based on its authorised staffing level. Circular Letter 25/02 outlines the number of days that teaching principals may take as release time in a

school year. The On Line Claims System, through which schools record absences for teachers, allows Principal Release Time to be recorded only in accordance with Circular Letter 25/02 based on the mainstream class teachers in the school.

Residential Institutions Redress Scheme

69. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if further consideration will be given to the concerns outlined by a group (details supplied) in the preparation of the legislation to establish the statutory fund in view of the fact that those concerns were outlined at a meeting in his Department on 22 July 2011; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32658/11]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Ruairí Quinn): I had a very constructive meeting with groups representing survivors of residential institutional abuse on 22nd July last, when we discussed the Government's approach to the proposed Statutory Fund to support the needs of victims of residential institutional abuse. A number of the groups represented at that meeting, including that referred to by the Deputy, raised a number of issues regarding aspects of the proposed approach as set out in the General Scheme of the Residential Institutions Statutory Fund Bill. I should point out also that since that meeting I have received a number of submissions from groups and individuals in relation to the proposed legislation. Work on the drafting of the Residential Institutions Statutory Fund Bill is at an advanced stage and the various views expressed are being considered as the drafting process continues.

Schools Building Projects

70. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Education and Skills when the proposed building project for a school (details supplied) in County Cavan will proceed to the next stage; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32659/11]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Ruairí Quinn): The Major Building Project referred to by the Deputy is currently at an early stage of Architectural Planning. The Design Team are currently working on finalising the Stage 1 submission (Preliminary Sketch Design) which is expected to be submitted to my Department shortly. When this submission is received, it will be reviewed by my Department and my officials will then be in contact with the Board of Management of the school with regard to the further progression of the project.

71. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Education and Skills when the proposed building project for a school (details supplied) will proceed to the next stage; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32660/11]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Ruairí Quinn): The Major Building Project referred to by the Deputy is currently at an early stage of Architectural Planning. The Design Team are currently working on finalising the Stage 1 submission (Preliminary Sketch Design) which is expected to be submitted to my Department shortly. When this submission is received, it will be reviewed by my Department and my officials will then be in contact with the Board of Management of the school with regard to the further progression of the project.

Departmental Expenditure

72. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the cost of issuing hard copy payslips to all employees paid by him; the number of staff issued with such payslips; the steps being taken to only issue payslips by electronic means; the timetable involved; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32680/11]

73. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the cost of issuing hard copy payslips to all employees of agencies accountable to him; the number of staff issued with such payslips; the steps being taken to only issue payslips by electronic means; the timetable involved; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32695/11]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Ruairí Quinn): I propose to take Questions Nos. 72 and 73 together.

The annualised cost of issuing hardcopy payslips to the approximate 94,000 school employees and pensioners, and staff employed by my Department and some bodies under its aegis, is €1.48 million.

Consideration was given by officials in my Department in 2010, to making payslips available electronically to serving and retired school employees on the Department's payrolls using esinet (which is a portal for the delivery of online applications to schools and school staff). Following consideration of the issue, it was decided that it was not practical to proceed with the initiative at this stage, due to a number of practical and logistical issues including the initial set-up cost. However, my Department will keep this issue under review.

My Department is currently testing an online payslips facility which is intended to be made available to staff in my Department from early 2012. My Department is also exploring with potential providers the movement of the staff payroll and associated services to a shared services platform as part of the Public Service Reform Agenda. The provision of online payslips would form an element of such a service. The information in relation to agencies accountable to me is not readily available and would involve an inordinate amount of administrative time to compile. However, if the Deputy has any particular agency in mind I would be happy to have my officials obtain the relevant details and communicate them to the Deputy.

Proposed Legislation

74. **Deputy Dominic Hannigan** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform if a date has been set to introduce the Construction Contracts Bills in Dáil Éireann this term; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32550/11]

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Brendan Howlin): The Programme for Government contains a commitment to introduce new legislation to protect small building subcontractors that have been denied payments from bigger companies. In addition, you may be aware that the Construction Contracts Bill 2010 was introduced by Senator Feargal Quinn and passed Committee and remaining stages in the Seanad on 8 March 2011. It is now before the Dáil. My colleague Minister of State Mr Brian Hayes has been working with Senator Quinn to develop the Bill into a robust piece of legislation. In this regard, Minister Hayes and Senator Quinn met relevant stakeholders and opposition spokespersons on 28 June 2011. This consultation highlighted a number of matters relating to the Bill that required further consideration. These have been taken into account now in the Regulatory Impact Assessment (RIA) on the Bill which was published on 27 September. The Report is available on my Department's website: www.per.gov.ie/reports. I understand that a note on this issue has been circulated to all Oireachtas members.

Minister Hayes will reflect on the findings of the RIA and incorporate them into the legislative proposals which will be brought to Government shortly for approval. It is essential that the solution to this issue needs to be balanced so as to avoid imposing regulatory or cost burdens on parties in dispute, the State or others.

Departmental Expenditure

75. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the cost

of issuing hard copy payslips to all employees paid by him; the number of staff issued with such payslips; the steps being taken to only issue payslips by electronic means; the timetable involved; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32687/11]

76. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the cost of issuing hard copy payslips to all employees of agencies accountable to him; the number of staff issued with such payslips; the steps being taken to only issue payslips by electronic means; the timetable involved; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32702/11]

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Brendan Howlin): I propose to take Questions Nos. 75 and 76 together.

My Department payroll and that of a number of Offices under the aegis of my Department is administered by the Department of Finance shared services payroll and the details sought by the Deputy are included in the figures returned by that Department. The Department of Finance is a Payroll Agent for the following Departments/Offices under my remit: Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, Commission for Public Service Appointments, Public Appointments Service, State Laboratory, Office of the Ombudsman, Presidents Establishment and the Office of the Paymaster General.

The Commissioners of Public Works and the Valuation Office, which is also under the aegis of my Department, is not part of the Department of Finance shared services payroll and the numbers and costs associated with both these bodies are as follows:

The Valuation Office does not issue any hard copy payslips to staff. All staff members are paid by EFT.

In the case of the Office of Public Works (OPW), the average number of staff issued with payslips is 1,450 at an annual cost of €11,260.

The OPW has confirmed that all staff on the established side have access to online payslips through work. A handful of staff (on average 18 per week) on the established side are issued with payslips. These are staff who are off long term on, for example, sick leave, maternity leave, etc. Payroll Section receives an instruction from Personnel to issue such payslips. The vast majority of the payslips are issued on the Industrial side as most of these staff do not have access to computers in work. The OPW is currently examining different ways of transferring these staff to online payslips.

Job Protection

77. **Deputy Frank Feighan** asked the Minister for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation the position regarding a company (details supplied) in County Leitrim regarding the retention of jobs; the status of inquiries to purchase the company and the likely timeframe of developments. [32562/11]

Minister for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Richard Bruton): My priority is that any decision taken by Bank of America (BOA) will have minimal impact on employees at the Carrick on Shannon operation and ensure that jobs are maintained at the facility. I emphasised this when I travelled to the USA recently and held discussions with BOA CEO and senior management. While the company has not made any final sale decisions, I am satisfied as to its current level of engagement with IDA Ireland.

IDA Ireland has had regular contact with local management since the announcement by Bank of America to monitor the evolving situation and has engaged its international network of overseas offices to identify groups with a potential interest in the Carrick operation.

[Deputy Richard Bruton.]

It is still very early in the process of attempting to maximise future activity and employment at the Carrick facility. There has been positive preliminary interest. However it would clearly take some time for any definitive proposal to emerge and be selected. Fortunately, Bank of America has not set down any rigid timelines so there is an opportunity for both it and the IDA to evaluate opportunities.

Departmental Expenditure

78. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation the cost of issuing hard copy payslips to all employees paid by him; the number of staff issued with such payslips; the steps being taken to only issue payslips by electronic means; the timetable involved; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32685/11]

Minister for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Richard Bruton): My Department has recently commenced issuing payslips electronically. All staff in my Department and its Offices can now view their payslips and other related payroll documents by logging on to a secure computer application. The new facility replaces the traditional method of providing each staff member with a hard copy payslip and it provides quick and secure access to both current and historical payslip and other payroll information online. This initiative will have both positive environmental and cost impacts by reducing the amount of paper produced by the Department.

Departmental Expenditure

79. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation the cost of issuing hard copy payslips to all employees of agencies accountable to him; the number of staff issued with such payslips; the steps being taken to only issue payslips by electronic means; the timetable involved; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32700/11]

Minister for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Richard Bruton): As this is a day to day matter for the respective agencies, I have referred the question to them for attention and direct reply to the Deputy.

Redundancy Payments

80. **Deputy Willie O’Dea** asked the Minister for Social Protection when a person (details supplied) in County Limerick will receive their redundancy payments; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [32593/11]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Joan Burton): Under the Redundancy Payments Scheme all eligible employees are entitled to a statutory redundancy lump sum payment on being made redundant. In this case no claim appears to have been submitted for the individual concerned.

Mortgage Interest Supplement

81. **Deputy Paul J. Connaughton** asked the Minister for Social Protection the average waiting time for mortgage interest relief applications to be processed; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [32630/11]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Joan Burton): The community welfare service (CWS) and the community welfare officers providing it transferred formally to the Department of Social Protection (DSP) from 1 October 2011. The service and the staff are now part of the DSP.

The timescale for determining applications for mortgage interest supplement (MIS) is dependent, among other things, on the availability of the required information, such as details of the applicant's income, bank statements etc. In addition, some aspects of the application are inevitably time consuming and delays can occur where investigations such as home visits or third party evidence are required. Delays can also arise if the applicant is slow to respond to requests for additional information.

Statistics are not available on the average length of time taken to assess mortgage interest supplement applications.

The provision of a prompt service is a major objective for the Department's staff dealing with MIS applications. However, this is tempered by the necessity to ensure that every case is fully investigated and that all cases are dealt with in a consistent and fair manner. While certain applications may take more time to process than others, I am satisfied that the Department's staff dealing with these applications make every effort to ensure mortgage interest supplement claims are processed efficiently and that the appropriate levels of oversight and controls are in place.

Question No. 82 withdrawn.

Child Poverty

83. **Deputy Joan Collins** asked the Minister for Social Protection if will release a child poverty impact analysis in relation to budget 2012 and future budgets; her views on the need and usefulness of such an analysis; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [32628/11]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Joan Burton): As part of the deliberative process for Budget 2012, my Department will analyse, in so far as possible, the distributive and poverty impact, including the impact on children, of possible welfare changes prior to the finalisation of the Budget.

My department undertook an analysis of the distributive and poverty impacts on families of the Budget 2011 tax and welfare package, in conjunction with the Department of Finance. I arranged for this to be published on the department's website in March 2011. It is my intention that a similar analysis of Budget 2012 will be published early next year.

Medical Reports

84. **Deputy Patrick O'Donovan** asked the Minister for Social Protection the way a medical adviser from her Department came to a conclusion that contradicts that of several medical experts. [32552/11]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Joan Burton): An application for invalidity pension, on behalf of the person concerned, has been assessed by three separate departmental medical assessors, including the Chief Medical Advisor. A medical report from only one consultant cardiologist is on file. This report states that the applicant is not capable of returning to his former employment. To qualify for invalidity pension a person must have been incapable of work for at least 12 months and be likely to be incapable of work for at least another 12 months or be permanently incapable of work. Whilst acknowledging that the cardiologist is of the opinion that the applicant is not capable of returning to his former employment, the departmental medical assessors are of the opinion that he does not satisfy the medical requirements of the invalidity pension scheme, where all categories of work are taken into consideration.

Social Welfare Benefits

85. **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** asked the Minister for Social Protection if free travel for

[Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh.]

older persons and those with disabilities is being cut to off peak only times; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [32555/11]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Joan Burton): At the outset, let me say that I am very conscious of the needs of people on Social Welfare and fully understand that a wide range of groups depend on the welfare budget for vital support. In the context of a very tough budgetary environment, I will do my utmost to protect the most vulnerable people in Irish society, including people with disabilities and older people in receipt of the free travel scheme.

My Department will spend over €77 million in 2011 on the free travel scheme which will benefit over 700,000 people, some 520,000 of whom are aged over 66.

Sustainable public finances are a prerequisite for maintaining an adequate system of social protection as well as for achieving future economic stability and growth. For these reasons, the State must pursue a determined deficit reduction strategy. Accordingly, there will be an on-going requirement to curtail expenditure and prioritise resources in my Department and in all other Departments, in 2012 and in later years.

In this regard, my Department has completed a Comprehensive Review of Expenditure. The purpose of the review is to assess the effectiveness and value for money of spending programmes across all Departments and agencies. All spending lines are being examined without exception and possible ways of reducing spending are being considered in every area of expenditure. The fact that measures have been identified in which spending could potentially be reduced does not mean that all of these approaches will be implemented.

The intention behind the methodology being followed is to provide the Government with a set of decision options to enable it to meet three objectives. These objectives are firstly to achieve overall fiscal consolidation outcomes, both as regards spending and numbers reduction targets, secondly to re-align spending with the programme for Government priorities and thirdly, to consider new ways of implementing Government policy in the context of public sector reform.

In my discussions with my colleagues in Government I will have regard to any views expressed by welfare representative organisations. In this regard, I held a Pre-Budget Forum on 16th September last. This was attended by 34 organisations and my officials and I had the opportunity to listen carefully to their proposals relating to the next Budget.

I would like to stress that no decisions have been made to date in relation to welfare expenditure next year. These decisions will be made in due course after full consideration by the Government and will be announced on Budget day.

86. **Deputy Pat Deering** asked the Minister for Social Protection when a person (details supplied) in County Carlow will receive a decision on their application for disability; and if she will expedite a response. [32561/11]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Joan Burton): I confirm that the Department is in receipt of an application for disability allowance from the above named person. On completion of the necessary investigations on all aspects of the claim a decision will be made and the person concerned will be notified directly of the outcome. The average time taken to process a claim to completion, including assessment of the claimant's means, medical condition and habitual residence status is approximately 17 weeks.

Job Initiative

87. **Deputy Joanna Tuffy** asked the Minister for Social Protection the current situation regarding JobBridge internships in the area of direct work with children and young persons; if

her attention has been drawn to the fact that several of these internships have been disallowed and that many voluntary and community organisations who wish to offer opportunities in this area cannot do so; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [32569/11]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Joan Burton): When JobBridge was originally launched restrictions were put in place in relation to care related internships, including working with children. However, these restrictions were removed on 7 October and applications for care related internships have been accepted since this date.

It should be noted that all applications for internships must meet the JobBridge eligibility criteria in order to be approved and posted on the JobBridge website. Host organisations that do not meet these criteria will not have their applications approved. One such criterion is that a Host Organisation must have at least one full time employee in order to qualify to participate in JobBridge. A small number of community and voluntary organisations do.

Social Welfare Code

88. **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** asked the Minister for Social Protection further to Parliamentary Question No. 15 of 13 October 2011 if, considering specific provision is made to ensure that time spent on maternity leave does not compromise compliance with the employment condition of entitlement to carer's benefit, she will introduce similar provision and allow credited contributions accrued on maternity leave to count towards the PRSI contribution condition for carer's benefit. [32581/11]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Joan Burton): The current conditions are designed to ensure that those qualifying for carer's benefit have had an adequate and sustained commitment to the social insurance system, thereby upholding the contributory principle that underpins the qualifying conditions for all social insurance payments.

The social insurance system is based on two fundamental principles — the contributory principle whereby there is a direct link between contributions paid and entitlement to a varying range of benefits and pensions that are payable as a right — if and when particular contingencies arise, and the solidarity principle whereby contributions paid by insured persons are not actuarially linked to benefits but are instead redistributed to support contributors who are more vulnerable. It is an expression of solidarity between both earning groups and generations.

I have no plans to amend the PRSI contributions requirement for carer's benefit.

An applicant who does not qualify for carer's benefit may qualify for carer's allowance. The means test for carer's allowance has been significantly eased over the years, and is now one of the most generous means tests in the social welfare system, most notably with regard to spouse's earnings. Since April 2008, the income disregard has been €332.50 per week for a single person and €665 per week for a couple. This means that a couple with two children can earn in the region of €35,400 and qualify for the maximum rate of carer's allowance as well as the associated free travel and household benefits. A couple with an income in the region of €59,300 can still qualify for a minimum payment, as well as the associated free travel, household benefits package.

Flood Relief

89. **Deputy Billy Timmins** asked the Minister for Social Protection the position regarding the flood relief scheme for persons who need financial assistance due to the damage caused during the recent flooding; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [32597/11]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Joan Burton): The Government is critically aware of the devastation suffered by people in many areas of the country as a result of the recent floods. My Department is playing a key part in the Government's response to these events.

[Deputy Joan Burton.]

Under the supplementary welfare allowance (SWA) scheme, my Department makes exceptional needs payments (ENP) to help meet essential, once-off, exceptional expenditure, which cannot be met out of people's weekly income. In addition to the payment of ENPs, my Department also makes urgent needs payments, which can be made to persons who would not normally be entitled to SWA. The aftermath of flooding is one situation where urgent needs payments can be made.

Since the floods earlier this week, my Departmental Officials (former Community Welfare Officers) are providing individuals with emergency payments to offset their immediate needs such as the purchase of food, clothing, fuel and household goods. My officials have made house to house calls to individuals they have identified as being vulnerable at this difficult time. In addition special clinics have been established to offer help to affected households.

Any person experiencing hardship as a result of the recent flooding should contact the local Department of Social Protection representative administering the SWA scheme who may be able to offer assistance.

Social Welfare Benefits

90. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Social Protection if she will respond to the call from an organisation (details supplied) to reverse the fuel allowance cuts as we do not want elderly and disadvantaged persons going cold this winter; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [32611/11]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Joan Burton): My Department will spend over €530 million in 2011 on the fuel scheme and the telephone, gas and electricity elements of the household benefits package which will benefit some 390,000 people on household benefits and 375,000 on the fuel allowance. In 2005 there were 325,000 people on household benefits and 265,000 on the fuel allowance at a cost of €280 million. The costs have almost doubled in six years while the number of customers has risen by more than 20%.

The fuel allowance is paid for thirty-two weeks, beginning on 26 September. All customers will receive the standard rate of €20 per week, the rate previously received by the majority of customers, with no additional allowance for living in a smokeless area. The allowance represents a contribution towards a person's normal heating expenses. It is not intended to meet those costs in full.

Difficult decisions had to be made in light of the existing economic situation and commitments made by the previous government. However, I should emphasise that my Department will cover the cost of the price increases in electricity which came into effect from 1 October and maintain the value of these allowances at 1,800 units. In other words, the price increases will not have an impact on the customers who benefit from this support. The electricity allowance, which was €35.80 per month, will increase to €39.40. The price increases will cost the Department over €4 million in 2011 and €17.3 million in a full year.

I accept that the recent reduction in the household benefits package may be difficult for some people. I hope the fact that these new price increases will be covered by my Department will give reassurance to those who are supported by the household benefits package.

We should also bear in mind that data show that households comprising predominantly older people have lower consistent poverty rates than other age categories. In 2009 single adults aged over 65 with no children had a consistent poverty rate of 0.6% while people in households with two adults, at least one of whom was aged 65 or over, with no children had a consistent poverty rate of 1.0%. In the general population, 5.5% of people were in consistent poverty. The Survey on Income and Living Conditions (2009) also showed that the elderly were less likely than

other groups to have gone without heating in the previous year. The most cost-effective means of protecting households from energy poverty is to reduce consumption of energy through improving the home's thermal efficiency. Sustainable Energy Ireland has administered the Warmer Homes programme for privately owned low-income households since 2001, benefitting 65,000 households, with a further 15,000 to receive upgrades this year. A similar programme is in place for local authority houses.

Social Welfare Appeals

91. **Deputy Pat Breen** asked the Minister for Social Protection when a person (details supplied) in County Clare will be facilitated; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [32618/11]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Joan Burton): The Social Welfare Appeals Office has advised me that the appeal from the person concerned was referred to an Appeals Officer who proposes to hold an oral hearing in this case.

There has been a very significant increase in the number of appeals received by the Social Welfare Appeals Office since 2007 when the intake was 14,070 to 2010 when the intake rose to 32,432. This has significantly impacted on the processing time for appeals which require oral hearings and, in order to be fair to all appellants, they are dealt with in strict chronological order. In the context of dealing with the considerable number of appeals now on hand, the Department made 9 additional appointments to the office earlier this year.

While every effort is being made to deal with the large numbers awaiting oral hearing as quickly as possible, it is not possible to give a date when the person's oral hearing will be heard, but s/he will be informed when arrangements have been made.

The Social Welfare Appeals Office functions independently of the Minister for Social Protection and of the Department and is responsible for determining appeals against decisions on social welfare entitlements.

92. **Deputy Ciarán Lynch** asked the Minister for Social Protection when the date will be set for an oral hearing regarding an appeal for an invalidity pension by a person (details supplied) in County Cork; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [32643/11]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Joan Burton): The Social Welfare Appeals Office has advised me that an appeal, by the person concerned, was registered in that office on 25 August 2011. It is a statutory requirement of the appeals process that the relevant Departmental papers and comments by the Social Welfare Services on the grounds of appeal be sought. When received, the appeal in question will be referred to an Appeals Officer for consideration. As part of this consideration, the Appeals Officer will decide if an oral hearing is appropriate in this case.

The Social Welfare Appeals Office functions independently of the Minister for Social Protection and of the Department and is responsible for determining appeals against decisions on social welfare entitlements.

Question No. 93 withdrawn.

Departmental Expenditure

94. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Social Protection the cost of issuing hard copy payslips to all employees paid by her; the number of staff issued with such payslips; the steps being taken to only issue payslips by electronic means; the timetable involved; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [32688/11]

95. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Social Protection the cost of issuing hard copy payslips to all employees of agencies accountable to her; the number of staff issued with such payslips; the steps being taken to only issue payslips by electronic means; the timetable involved; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [32703/11]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Joan Burton): I propose to take Questions Nos. 94 and 95 together.

Under the Payment of Wages Act, 1991 an employee is entitled to a clear statement of the gross amount of the wages payable to the employee and the nature and amount of any deductions from that pay. The Department's staff have access to this statement electronically via an online system which is available to them through the Department's internal corporate intranet site.

Since July 2009 hard copy pay slips are not issued to the Department's staff except in a very limited number of situations where employees do not have access to the Department's internal corporate intranet site, for example if they are on extended leave such as long term sick leave or maternity leave. Over 97% of the Department's staff receive information on wages paid and associated deductions solely by electronic means.

Hard copy pay slips are issued to 176 members of staff at present. These represent less than 3% of a total of the Department's total of 6,557 staff. The estimated cost of issuing pay slips to these employees is approximately €5,400 per annum.

The three statutory bodies operating under the aegis of the Department are the Social Welfare Tribunal, the Citizens Information Board and the Pensions Board. In addition, the Office of the Pensions Ombudsman comes under the remit of the Department.

The Social Welfare Tribunal has no employees. Its administration support is provided as required by a designated member of the Department's staff who performs this role as part of their normal duties as an executive officer. That person's salary is paid electronically and they receive information on wages paid and associated deductions solely by electronic means.

The Pensions Board has for the past five years issued payslips to all employees by electronic means only. However, there are two retired members of staff who receive hard copy payslips as they do not have access to email. The annual cost is estimated to be €12.

In the Citizens Information Board (CIB), expenditure of some €1,000 is anticipated in 2011 to provide payslips to 122 current and retired members of staff. The CIB is currently investigating the option of providing payslips by electronic means. However, no decision has been made yet in this regard.

No employee in the Office of the Pensions Ombudsman is issued with a hard copy payslip.

Inland Waterways

96. **Deputy Catherine Byrne** asked the Minister for Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht further to Parliamentary Question Nos. 609 of 9 July 2009 and 123 of 5 November 2009, if funding will be made available to upgrade the canal walkway in an area of Dublin (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32590/11]

Minister for Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Jimmy Deenihan): I am informed by Waterways Ireland that the upgrading of the stretch of canal referred to by the Deputy was to be included as part of a significant redevelopment being considered in the area by Dublin City Council. However, this redevelopment has not proceeded. I am also advised by Waterways Ireland that funding has not been allocated to this project at present. Waterways Ireland will continue to maintain canal walkways in Dublin, within the resources available to it.

Proposed Legislation

97. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht his plans to amend the Wildlife Amendment Act 2010 to accommodate Ward Union Hunt as was committed prior to the general election 2011. [32619/11]

Minister for Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Jimmy Deenihan): The Wildlife (Amendment) Act 2010 made it an offence to hunt a deer with two or more dogs. This legislation had the purpose of banning stag hunting by riders and hounds.

I have a broad remit to protect Ireland's wildlife and natural heritage. One of my biggest challenges will be to work towards greater common understanding of the issues we face in protecting our natural heritage. My Department has significant challenges before it to ensure that Ireland is in full compliance with EU Directives on nature conservation, and that we ensure that the richness of Ireland's built and natural heritage contributes to national economic recovery. It is my view that the resources of my Department should be focused on those areas. I will continue to keep all provisions of the Wildlife Acts under review and introduce improvements to the law where appropriate.

Departmental Expenditure

98. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht the cost of issuing hard copy payslips to all employees paid by him; the number of staff issued with such payslips; the steps being taken to only issue payslips by electronic means; the timetable involved; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32676/11]

Minister for Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Jimmy Deenihan): As the Deputy will be aware, my Department was established on the 2nd of June 2011. Payroll services are provided to my Department by the Financial Shared Service (FSS) of the Department of Justice and Equality. Currently, 22 of 73 weekly-paid and 40 of 161 fortnightly-paid staff are in receipt of hard copy payslips on an ongoing basis. FSS estimates that the cost associated with issuing hard copy payslips to these employees, which is borne by FSS, for the year 2011 is €2,445.27.

For completeness, I would also advise the Deputy that payroll services for Heritage staff have only been transferred to the Financial Shared Service during the month of October. As a result, a number of staff who are normally in receipt of electronic payslips are currently being provided with hard copy payslips on a transitional basis. My Department and the Financial Shared Service are working together to restore electronic access to payslips for these staff by the end of this month.

All staff are encouraged to avail of electronic forms of payment and electronic payslips, where possible, and my Department reviews the operation of its payroll service on an ongoing basis to improve efficiency and minimise costs in this area.

99. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht the cost of issuing hard copy payslips to all employees of agencies accountable to him; the number of staff issued with such payslips; the steps being taken to only issue payslips by electronic means; the timetable involved; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32691/11]

Minister for Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Jimmy Deenihan): It is not possible to provide the information requested by the Deputy in the time-frame permitted for this Parliamentary Question. I will ensure that the information is sent directly to the Deputy as soon as possible.

Exploration Licences

100. **Deputy Thomas Pringle** asked the Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources the circumstances in which formal consultation is required in relation to licence applications for exploration or development in Northern Ireland that could have a transfrontier element. [32566/11]

Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources (Deputy Pat Rabbitte): Article 7 of the EIA directive (85/337/EEC) provides for a trans-boundary consultation regime where a project in one Member State is likely to have significant effect on the environment in another Member State. The directive also requires Member States to agree on a reasonable time frame for the duration of the consultation period.

I can inform the Deputy that details of the Petroleum Licence issued by the Northern Ireland authorities in the Lough Allen Basin are in the public domain and do not involve drilling in the first three years of the licence. The onshore petroleum authorisations granted on both sides of the border in the Lough Allen Basin are therefore at a very early stage. Informal contact with the Northern Ireland Authorities will continue in relation to these authorisations.

Departmental Expenditure

101. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources the cost of issuing hard copy payslips to all employees paid by him; the number of staff issued with such payslips; the steps being taken to only issue payslips by electronic means; the timetable involved; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32678/11]

Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources (Deputy Pat Rabbitte): The payroll function for my Department is carried out by the Department of Finance under a shared service agreement. Accordingly, there are no costs to my Department that relate to the issuing of hard copy payslips.

102. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources the cost of issuing hard copy payslips to all employees of agencies accountable to him; the number of staff issued with such payslips; the steps being taken to only issue payslips by electronic means; the timetable involved; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32693/11]

Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources (Deputy Pat Rabbitte): I wish to advise the Deputy that the day to day running of the payroll function in the State agencies under my aegis is a matter for each individual agency and you should contact them directly with regard to the information sought.

Farm Management

103. **Deputy Tom Fleming** asked the Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government if he will extend the 31 October deadline for the spreading of farm slurry, due to the continuation of extremely high rainfall, which prohibited slurry disposal on land from mid-October in many areas and especially in the south west. [32633/11]

Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government (Deputy Phil Hogan): I refer to the reply to Question No. 390 of 25 October 2011 which set out the position in this matter.

Local Government Charges

104. **Deputy Dominic Hannigan** asked the Minister for the Environment, Community and

Local Government if a person who resides in rented accommodation while owning a principal residence they no longer live in due to necessity of employment in a different part of the country, are liable under section 5(c) of the Local Government (Charges) Act 2009; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32548/11]

Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government (Deputy Phil Hogan): The €200 charge on non-principal private residences is payable by the owners of private rented accommodation, holiday homes and other non-principal residences. The most important exemption under the Local Government (Charges) Act 2009 is for a person's sole or main residence. However, any one individual can have only one such residence.

In a situation where a person owns a property in which he or she does not live and his or her sole or main residence is a rented property, there would be a liability for the charge in respect of the property owned by the person, unless it is otherwise exempted under section 4 of the Act.

Housing Aid for the Elderly

105. **Deputy Billy Timmins** asked the Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government the assistance available to an elderly person in receipt of an old age pension to replace windows and doors in view of the fact that the local authority are not accepting any applications due to lack of funding; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32554/11]

Minister of State at the Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government (Deputy Willie Penrose): Under the terms of my Department's Housing Aid for Older People Grant Scheme, which is administered by the local authorities, grants of up to €10,500 are available to assist older people living in poor housing conditions to have necessary repairs or improvements carried out. Grant eligible works are varied and may include repairs to or replacement of windows and doors, which in the opinion of the local authority are considered necessary to make the house habitable for the lifetime of the occupant. The maximum grant available is €10,500 which may cover up to 100% of the costs of works for applicants with gross annual household incomes of less than €30,000, tapering to 30% for those with incomes of €54,001 to €65,000.

In the case of County Wicklow, my Department notified Wicklow County Council on 17 February 2011 of an Exchequer allocation of €0.919 million for 2011 under the suite of grants for older people and people with a disability. To date some €0.686 million of this, amounting to 75% of the approved funding, has been drawn down by the Council.

My Department is aware that these schemes are very heavily subscribed and available funding has been committed in many areas. My Department is also aware of the financial constraints on local authority own resources funding at this time and, in order to relieve the pressure on revenue funding, agreed to allow authorities to use internal capital receipts to boost the revenue funding available for supporting the grant schemes in 2011.

To provide for continuity in the processing of applications and the payment of grants under the various grant measures, local authorities are advised by my Department that they can commit up to 50% of their current year allocation in respect of grant payments falling due in the following year.

Local Authority Charges

106. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government his views on a matter regarding the waiver of rates (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32560/11]

Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government (Deputy Phil Hogan): Local authorities are under a statutory obligation to levy rates on any property used for commercial purposes in accordance with the details entered in the valuation lists prepared by the independent Commissioner of Valuation under the Valuation Act 2001. The levying and collection of rates are matters for each individual local authority.

There is currently no legal provision to introduce a national waiver scheme for rates. Under the legislation the person liable for payment of rates is the person in occupation of a rateable property on the date of the making of the rate by the relevant local authority. The owner rather than the occupier may be liable for commercial rates if the property in question is unoccupied on the date of the making of the rate. Should a person's occupancy commence after the date of the making of the rate then that person is not primarily liable for rates for that year. However, as a subsequent occupier, that person can be held liable for up to two years arrears of rates if they cannot be recovered from the person with whom the primary liability lies.

I recognise that these are difficult economic times for many businesses and I am keeping all matters relating to rates under regular consideration in my Department.

Animal Welfare

107. **Deputy Catherine Byrne** asked the Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government when the Dog Breeding Establishment Act will be signed into law in order that the relevant authorities can work to prevent animal cruelty; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32568/11]

109. **Deputy Kevin Humphreys** asked the Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government further to Parliamentary Question No. 271 of 14 April 2011, when he intends to commence the Dog Breeding Establishments Bill 2009 in view of the fact that it is a matter of some urgency that regulation be applied to the dog breeding industry to ensure that cruel practises are stopped; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32576/11]

111. **Deputy Seán Kenny** asked the Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government when the Dog Breeding Establishments Act 2010 will be enacted. [32595/11]

Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government (Deputy Phil Hogan): I propose to take Questions Nos. 107, 109 and 111 together.

I refer to the reply to Questions Nos. 254 and 255 of 2 November 2011 which set out the position in this matter.

Building Control Act

108. **Deputy Nicky McFadden** asked the Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government the number of persons who have applied for technical assessment under the Building Control Act 2007 since its introduction; the number of applications in total that have been rejected from sitting the technical assessment after paying the initial fee; the number of applicants that have passed the technical assessment exam; the number of applicants who have failed the technical assessment exam; the date on which the 2010 annual report which is stipulated in section 73 of the Building Control Act 2007 will be published and be made available to the public taking into account that it is now November 2011. [32572/11]

Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government (Deputy Phil Hogan): Part 3 of the Building Control Act 2007 provides for the registration of persons permitted to use the title of Architect while Parts 4 and 5 of the Act similarly provide for the registration

of persons permitted to use the titles of Quantity Surveyor and Building Surveyor respectively. The Royal Institute of the Architects of Ireland (RIAI) has been designated as the registration body for the purposes of Part 3 of the Act while the Society of Chartered Surveyors, now known as the Society of Chartered Surveyors Ireland (SCSI) has been designated as the registration body for Parts 4 and 5.

Section 22 of the Act makes specific provision for a category of practically trained persons who had already been providing architectural services in Ireland commensurate with those understood as being provided by Architects for the purpose of the Building Control Act 2007 for a period of ten years at the time the Act became law. This provision is transitional in nature and enables this category of persons to become registered once they have been assessed as eligible for registration by the Technical Assessment Board in accordance with the practical experience assessment procedure — a process which assesses work submitted by the applicant and which does not involve any requirement to sit an examination.

The RIAI has advised my Department that eight applications for technical assessment have been received to date. Of these, seven applications have been fully considered by the Technical Assessment Board with five applicants being deemed eligible for registration and two applicants being deemed unsuccessful. A further application is currently being assessed.

The registers maintained by the SCSI were commenced in recent months and one application for technical assessment for inclusion on the register of building surveyors has been received to date and is currently being assessed.

My Department is currently discussing reporting arrangements with the registration bodies. Information regarding its activities under the Act was included in the RIAI's annual report for 2010.

Question No. 109 answered with Question No. 107.

Building Regulations

110. **Deputy Clare Daly** asked the Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government if he will immediately end the system of self-certification in the building regulations and return to a situation in which local authorities are responsible for certifying development, in tandem with the lifting of the public sector recruitment embargo, in order to ensure that they have the appropriate levels of staff to deal with the function. [32579/11]

Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government (Deputy Phil Hogan): In July 2011, I announced a number of measures to be advanced by my Department and local authorities with a view to improving compliance with, and oversight of, the requirements of the Building Regulations.

In broad terms the measures will involve:-

(a) the introduction of mandatory certificates of compliance by builders and designers of buildings confirming that the statutory requirements of the Building Regulations have been met;

(b) more efficient pooling of building control staff and resources across the local authority sector to ensure more effective and meaningful oversight of building activity;

(c) standardised approaches and common protocols to ensure nationwide consistency in the administration of building control functions;

(d) better support and further development of the building control function nationwide.

[Deputy Phil Hogan.]

Decisions in relation to the appropriate levels of staffing for building control purposes are a matter for each County and City Manager who, under section 159 of the Local Government Act 2001, is responsible for staffing and organisational arrangements necessary for carrying out the functions of the local authorities for which he or she is responsible. In this regard, it is a matter for each County and City Manager, in the first instance, to ensure that staffing levels and necessary reductions are managed so that the appropriate service level is maintained. Within this context, however, I believe that mandatory certification and improved inspection arrangements are key reforms which will have the capacity to improve the quality of buildings and will lead to further strengthening of the regulatory regime as early as possible in 2012.

Question No. 111 answered with Question No. 107.

Proposed Legislation

112. **Deputy Ciarán Lynch** asked the Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government his plans to bring forward legislative changes to the planning invalidations system; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32598/11]

Minister of State at the Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government (Deputy Willie Penrose): The Planning and Development Acts 2000-2010 and associated Regulations require planning applications to be checked for completeness prior to being considered. It is essential that the planning authority has all the information, documentation and maps which have been prescribed for the purpose of the planning application. It is also necessary that all public participation requirements of the Planning and Development Regulations 2001-2011, that is, in relation to site notices and newspaper notices, are met. Where the prescribed requirements are not complied with, a planning application is deemed invalid.

All aspects of the Planning Regulations, including the validation requirements, are kept under review in my Department in the light of feedback from planning authorities, and the views of planning agents and the general public. I have no plans currently to amend the validation requirements for planning applications.

Wildlife Control

113. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government if a national programme of neutering and spaying of wildcats could be introduced in view of the fact that this would have a direct effect on reducing the wild population of cats; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32615/11]

Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government (Deputy Phil Hogan): The matter referred to in the question is an animal welfare issue and is therefore for the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine. I have no function in relation to the matter raised.

Building Regulations

114. **Deputy Finian McGrath** asked the Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government his views on correspondence (details supplied) regarding building regulations. [32666/11]

Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government (Deputy Phil Hogan): A robust system of building control exists and this is demonstrated by the Priory Hall situation

where the local authority is successfully using its powers to make the appropriate party responsible.

I attach high priority to consumer protection in the area of quality construction of new dwellings. That is why, in July 2011, I announced a number of measures to be advanced by my Department and local authorities with a view to improving compliance with, and oversight of, the requirements of the Building Regulations. In broad terms the measures will involve:-

(a) the introduction of mandatory certificates of compliance by builders and designers of buildings confirming that the statutory requirements of the Building Regulations have been met;

(b) more efficient pooling of building control staff and resources across the local authority sector to ensure more effective and meaningful oversight of building activity;

(c) standardised approaches and common protocols to ensure nationwide consistency in the administration of building control functions; and

(d) better support and further development of the building control function nationwide.

The Building Regulations are prepared by my Department, which receives relevant advice and recommendations from the Building Regulations Advisory Body (BRAB), a statutory body established under the Building Control Act 1990. Membership of the BRAB is comprised of nominees from both the public and private sectors, several of whom are qualified engineers, and a member of which is nominated by the National Consumer Agency. Legislation referred to in the correspondence in question is in fact relevant to the sale of construction related products and services. The mandatory certification and improved inspection arrangements outlined above are key reforms which, I believe, will have the capacity to improve the quality of buildings and will lead to further strengthening of the regulatory regime as early as possible in 2012.

Departmental Expenditure

115. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government the cost of issuing hard-copy payslips to all employees paid by him; the number of staff issued with such payslips; the steps being taken to only issue payslips by electronic means; the timetable involved; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32681/11]

116. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government the cost of issuing hard-copy payslips to all employees of agencies accountable to him; the number of staff issued with such payslips; the steps being taken to only issue payslips by electronic means; the timetable involved; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32696/11]

Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government (Deputy Phil Hogan): I propose to take Questions Nos. 115 and 116 together.

At present, 328 staff in my Department are issued with hard copy payslips at an estimated annual cost of €7,800. Arrangements are underway to move 187 of these staff to electronic payslips over the coming weeks. Subject to IT security considerations, access to electronic payslips will be provided to as many as possible of the remaining staff and provision of hard copies will be ended over the next few months. Information in this regard in respect of bodies under the aegis of my Department is a matter for the body concerned.

Human Trafficking

117. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the extent to which he can put in place measures to prevent that trafficking of children or minors; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32655/11]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Alan Shatter): I refer the Deputy to my reply below to Parliamentary Question No. 386 of 20 September 2011. The position is unchanged since then apart from the following two initiatives:

A pack for the Civil, Social and Political Education curriculum in Secondary schools was developed and sent out to 750 schools in September 2011. Each pack contained leaflets, a poster, a booklet for teachers and information cards which will facilitate a group learning activity for students in the junior cycle on the issue of slavery. The Anti-Human Trafficking Unit in my Department is running an art competition for senior cycle Secondary School students (Transition Year, 5th and 6th years). Students have been asked to design a cover for a Guide for Service Providers who may encounter victims of child trafficking.

The purpose of these activities is to give effect to measures in various international instruments governing human trafficking, including Article 6(d) of *the Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings*, which calls on States to implement measures to discourage demand by means of educational programmes for boys and girls during their schooling.

Reply to Question No. 386 of 20/09/2011:

Over the past few years strong legislative, administrative and operational measures have been put in place to combat human trafficking, including child trafficking, for the purpose of labour or sexual exploitation or the removal of organs. These measures include:

- the Criminal Law (Human Trafficking) Act, 2008 with penalties of up to life imprisonment which builds on the Child Trafficking and Pornography Act, 1998.
- 4 dedicated Units in State Agencies dealing with this issue — a dedicated Unit in my Department, in An Garda Síochána, in the HSE and in the Legal Aid Board.
- Dedicated personnel have also been assigned to deal with the prosecution of cases in the Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions.
- A National Action Plan to Prevent and Combat the Trafficking of Human Beings in Ireland, 2009-2012 was published with 144 Actions of which 92 were completed or significantly progressed by the end of 2010 and a further 52 were ongoing. Part 4 of the Plan is dedicated to the issue of child trafficking.
- A Working Group on Child Trafficking — which is one of 5 Working Groups dealing with different aspects of human trafficking — meets regularly to progress the 26 Actions in the Plan related to child trafficking.
- A wide range of awareness raising and training initiatives have taken place focussing on all aspects of human trafficking including child trafficking.
- Periods of recovery and reflection and temporary residence are granted to victims of trafficking who do not have a permission to be in the State.

The care of children who are suspected victims of human trafficking is primarily the responsibility of the HSE. Services provided to child victims of human trafficking include counselling and debriefing, a multi-disciplinary assessment of need, the allocation of a Social Worker to oversee and implement an individual Care Plan, medical screening, access to primary and post-primary education and voluntary return is arranged, if this is deemed to be in the best interests

of the child. A protocol between An Garda Síochána and the HSE to maximise inter-agency cooperation and promote the safety and welfare of children has been in place since April, 2009.

In 2011 An Garda Síochána, in their Annual Policing Plan, identified trafficking in human beings as one of their priorities and have conducted a number of operations to combat human trafficking, including child trafficking, and will continue to do so in line with intelligence available to them.

Citizenship Applications

118. **Deputy Michelle Mulherin** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the position regarding an application for naturalisation in respect of a person (details supplied) in County Mayo; and if the application will be expedited. [32577/11]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Alan Shatter): I am advised by the Citizenship Division of the Irish Naturalisation and Immigration Service (INIS) that a valid application for a certificate of naturalisation was received from the person referred to by the Deputy in September 2010. The application is currently being processed with a view to establishing whether the applicant meets the statutory conditions for the granting of naturalisation and will be submitted to me for decision as expeditiously as possible.

The granting of Irish citizenship through naturalisation is a privilege and an honour which confers certain rights and entitlements not only within the State but also at European Union level and it is important that appropriate procedures are in place to preserve the integrity of the process.

119. **Deputy Michelle Mulherin** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the position regarding an application for naturalisation in respect of a person (details supplied) in County Mayo; if the application will be expedited; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32578/11]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Alan Shatter): I am advised by the Citizenship Division of the Irish Naturalisation and Immigration Service (INIS) that a valid application for a certificate of naturalisation was received from the person referred to by the Deputy in November 2010. The application is currently being processed with a view to establishing whether the applicant meets the statutory conditions for the granting of naturalisation and will be submitted to me for decision as expeditiously as possible.

The granting of Irish citizenship through naturalisation is a privilege and an honour which confers certain rights and entitlements not only within the State but also at European Union level and it is important that appropriate procedures are in place to preserve the integrity of the process.

Private Rented Accommodation

120. **Deputy Kevin Humphreys** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality if he will consider including those who are letting agents of residential property under those who must be licensed for provision of property services in the Property Services (Regulation) Bill 2009; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32606/11]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Alan Shatter): The position is that the licensing requirements of the Property Services (Regulation) Bill 2009 will, when enacted, apply to providers of property services, including the letting of land. As the Interpretation Act 2005 already contains a definition of “land”, which includes houses and buildings, there is no legal requirement to include a definition in this legislation. However, in order to avoid any future

[Deputy Alan Shatter.]

uncertainty regarding licensing requirements, I am considering the possibility of inserting a definition of “land” in the Bill on Report Stage.

Legal Services Regulation

121. **Deputy Kevin Humphreys** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality if the legal services regulatory authority will be funded through a levy on the Bar Council and Law Society to cover each professional body of barristers and solicitors respectively, or if there will be a specific levy on individual practitioners; if an individual levy were to apply, will there be any effort made in the legal services Bill to structure an individual levy in a tiered way to protect those who are just entering the profession and would not have the same financial ability to meet such a charge as more established practitioners; if, in the case of a levy on the professional body, such a directive will include any rules to protect newer entrants of the specific professions; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32607/11]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Alan Shatter): I would draw the attention of the Deputy to sections 69 and 70 in Part 6 of the Legal Services Regulation Bill 2011 which makes provision for the imposition of a levy on the Bar Council and Law Society to cover the expenses of the Legal Services Regulatory Authority and of the Legal Practitioners Disciplinary Tribunal.

As a general rule, the total amount of the levy payable in each financial year will be the sum of the approved expenses of the Authority and the expenses of the Disciplinary Tribunal in respect of the preceding financial year. The Minister will, in consultation with the Legal Services Regulatory Authority, determine the proportion of the approved expenses of the Authority attributable to its complaints functions and the proportion attributable to its other functions. Of the proportion that relates to the complaints functions of the Authority—

- 10 per cent will be payable by the Bar Council,
- 10 per cent will be payable by the Law Society, and
- the remaining 80 per cent will be payable *pro rata* by the Bar Council and the Law Society according to the proportion of the expenses that was incurred by the Authority in the consideration and investigation of complaints relating to barristers and complaints relating to solicitors.

The proportion of the approved expenses relating to the other functions of the Authority will be payable *pro rata* by the Bar Council and the Law Society according to the number of barristers on the roll of practising barristers and the number of solicitors on the roll of solicitors on the first day of the year to which those expenses relate.

In respect of the Legal Practitioners Disciplinary Tribunal, the Minister will, in consultation with the Disciplinary Tribunal, apportion the expenses of the Tribunal between complaints relating to barristers and complaints relating to solicitors. Of this amount—

- 10 per cent will be payable by the Bar Council,
- 10 per cent will be payable by the Law Society, and
- the remaining 80 per cent will be payable *pro rata* by the Bar Council and the Law Society according to the proportion of the expenses that was incurred by the Disciplinary Tribunal in the consideration and investigation of complaints relating to barristers and complaints relating to solicitors.

Under section 70, the Minister can make regulations to provide for all or any of the following matters:

- the date on which payment of the levy becomes payable;

- the keeping by the Authority and the Disciplinary Tribunal of specified records in respect of matters connected with the liability to pay the levy;
- the collection and recovery of the levy;
- the rate of interest on amounts not paid when due; and
- such other matters as are necessary for, or incidental to, the imposition, payment and collection of the levy.

Calculations of levies under the Bill are, among other matters, by reference to the numbers of practising barristers and solicitors who may be involved. No distinction is made on the basis of how long they are in practice. I look forward to engaging in debate on these and other aspects of the Bill as it progresses through the House.

Garda Stations

122. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the position regarding the proposed closure of Garda stations; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32616/11]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Alan Shatter): A final decision on whether station closures will take place will be taken in the coming weeks when the Commissioner's Policing Plan for 2012 is finalised. That policing plan will be laid before each House of the Oireachtas.

I must stress that as with every other public sector organisation, the Garda Síochána is going to have to manage with reduced resources. The Garda Commissioner is therefore quite properly reviewing all aspects of the Garda Síochána's policing model, including the deployment of personnel, the utilisation of modern technologies and the operation of Garda stations, both in terms of opening hours and possible closures. The purpose of the review is to ensure that Garda resources are managed and deployed in the most appropriate manner to meet existing and emerging policing requirements.

I will very carefully consider the outcome of this review and the Commissioner's policing plan for next year with the objective of ensuring that priority is given to the maintenance of frontline services.

Departmental Expenditure

123. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the cost of issuing hard-copy payslips to all employees paid by him; the number of staff issued with such payslips; the steps being taken to only issue payslips by electronic means; the timetable involved; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32686/11]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Alan Shatter): The estimated annual cost of issuing hard copy payslips to 754 employees in my Department and in its associated offices amounts to €8,655 in 2011. Options for the increased use of electronic payslips are currently under consideration and I would expect a significant reduction in these figures during 2012.

124. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the cost of issuing hard-copy payslips to all employees of agencies accountable to him; the number of staff issued with such payslips; the steps being taken to only issue payslips by electronic means; the timetable involved; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32701/11]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Alan Shatter): The estimated annual cost of issuing hard copy payslips to the 20,799 employees and 9,026 pensioners of the agencies accountable to me amounts to €510,641 in 2011. Options for the increased use of electronic payslips are currently under consideration but there are particular technical, logistical and cost challenges

[Deputy Alan Shatter.]

in providing electronic payslips for the majority of these people since they do not have ready access to office computers in their workplaces, e.g., members of An Garda Síochána, Garda Pensioners and Prison Officers.

125. **Deputy Finian McGrath** asked the Minister for Defence if he will confirm that grant-in-aid to the Irish Red Cross will not be used to pay for the information technology, IT, web design contract recently awarded by the Irish Red Cross to a United Kingdom company when there are multiple Irish IT companies equally well placed to do the work. [32665/11]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Alan Shatter): In accordance with relevant legislation, the Irish Red Cross Society is an independent charitable body corporate with full power to manage and administer its own affairs. My Department pays an annual grant to the Society of €951,000 which includes the Government's annual contribution (currently €130,000) to the International Committee of the Red Cross. The balance of the grant goes towards the salary and administration costs of running the headquarters of the Irish Society and will not be used for the purpose mentioned in the question.

Defence Forces Personnel

126. **Deputy Ciarán Lynch** asked the Minister for Defence the implications for personnel working in the naval base and dockyard of the intended expenditure on the clean-up of the former Irish steel plant; is it expected that relocation or other disruption will be involved; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32549/11]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Alan Shatter): In June last the Government decided that the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine would chair a Working Group to oversee the clean-up of the former Ispat site on Haulbowline Island. Cork County Council are acting as an agent of that Department on the technical aspects of an application to the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) for a landfill licence. The preparation of the application to the EPA and consideration of it by them is likely to take up to eighteen months. While close co-operation is being maintained with the EPA it is only when the licence is granted that the full details of the extent of the remedial works will become known. The Minister for Agriculture Food and the Marine has also convened a steering group to advise him on the project as it gets underway. The Naval Service is represented on this steering group.

As an immediate step to deal with sea water washing onto the East Tip of Haulbowline, Cork County Council will be undertaking work to repair about 30 metres of the sea wall on the Tip. This work, which will be completed in the coming weeks, has no implications for the staff of the Naval Service. Arrangements have been made for staff representatives in the Naval Service to be fully briefed in advance of these works commencing.

Departmental Expenditure

127. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Defence the cost of issuing hard-copy payslips to all employees paid by him; the number of staff issued with such payslips; the steps being taken to only issue payslips by electronic means; the timetable involved; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32679/11]

128. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Defence the cost of issuing hard-copy payslips to all employees of agencies accountable to him; the number of staff issued with such payslips; the steps being taken to only issue payslips by electronic means; the timetable involved; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32694/11]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Alan Shatter): I propose to take Questions Nos. 127 and 128 together.

The cost of issuing payslips to all employees and pensioners paid by me (including cheques/payslips) for 2010 was in the region of €137k. The number of employees who received hard copy payslips for the year 2010 is as follows:

- Defence Forces Personnel 9,746;
- Defence Forces Reserve 3,170 (occasional payments);
- Defence Forces Civilian Employees 736;
- Civil Servants 67;
- Pensioners 11,163.

The Department is currently investigating and testing a technical option for the provision of payroll information to Defence Forces personnel by electronic means that is cost effective and overcomes the fact that many Defence Forces personnel do not have access to electronic information in the normal course of their duties. The number of employees in agencies accountable to me is thirty two. Twenty two of these receive payroll information via the Department's intranet facility. Therefore, the cost of issuing hard copy payslips to the remaining ten employees is negligible.

Ambulance Service

129. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Defence the protocol involved for the deployment of Air Corps air ambulance; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32705/11]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Alan Shatter): The Department of Health is responsible for policy formation in respect of pre-hospital emergency care, and the Health Service Executive, (HSE) has statutory responsibility for the provision of ambulance services throughout the State. The role of the Air Corps as set out in the White Paper on Defence is to provide a range of military and non-military services in support of the State. These services include the provision of an air ambulance service on the basis of agreed arrangements with the Department of Health.

A Service Level Agreement between my Department and the Department of Health has been in place since 2005 which formalises the arrangements for the provision of an air ambulance service by the Air Corps. Under the terms of the Service Level Agreement, the Air Corps provide aircraft and flying crews. The provision of the Service is dependent on the availability of a suitable aircraft, the availability of flying crews, and the suitability of weather conditions. The Agreement details the range of services provided by the Air Corps, specifically emergency inter-hospital transfers for spinal and serious injuries and illnesses, air transport of neonates requiring immediate medical intervention within Ireland, air transport of patients requiring organ transplants in the UK, air transport of Organ Retrieval Teams within Ireland and air transport of patients from offshore islands to mainland hospitals where the Irish Coast Guard service is not available. My Department is currently finalising a revised Service Level Agreement for the provision of this Service.

Animal Welfare

130. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the position regarding the Animal Health and Welfare Act; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32612/11]

134. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the position regarding a timeframe for the Animal Health and Welfare Bill (details supplied) [32589/11]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Simon Coveney): I propose to take Questions Nos. 130 and 134 together.

The Programme for Government 2011 contains a commitment to amend and strengthen legislation on animal cruelty and animal welfare. The main vehicle to fulfil this commitment will be the Animal Health and Welfare Bill which is a comprehensive piece of legislation providing a broad basis for regulating the related but distinct areas of animal health and welfare and consolidating animal welfare legislation dating back more than 100 years into a single statute.

Drafting of the Bill is ongoing with the Office of the Parliamentary Counsel and it is my intention to publish the Bill at an early date.

Grant Payments

131. **Deputy Heather Humphreys** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the position regarding an appeal by a person (details supplied) in County Cavan in relation to the suckler welfare scheme 2010; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32553/11]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Simon Coveney): The person named registered eleven animals under the Suckler Welfare Scheme in 2010. In the case of herds with more than ten cows, the calves must be weaned in at least two separate groups with each group being weaned at a minimum interval of five days under the Terms and Conditions of the Scheme. Based on the information provided by the person named, all of the calves were weaned on the same day and, therefore, they were not eligible for payment. The applicant was informed of the non-compliance and has requested a review of the decision. The person named will be advised in writing of the outcome of the review shortly.

132. **Deputy Jim Daly** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the position regarding single farm payment in respect of a person (details supplied) in County Cork; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32556/11]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Simon Coveney): An application under the 2011 Single Payment Scheme was received from the person named on 3 May 2011, processing of which was recently completed, thereby allowing payment of the 50% advance of the Single Farm Payment to issue to the person named on 1 November. Balancing payments under this Scheme will commence to issue on 1 December 2011

133. **Deputy John Paul Phelan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the reason a person (details supplied) in County Kilkenny has not received their single farm payment and other payments; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32583/11]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Simon Coveney): An application under the 2011 Single Payment Scheme/Disadvantaged Areas Scheme was received from the person named on 12 May 2011, processing of which was recently completed, thereby allowing payment to issue to the person named on 25 October, in respect of the Single Payment Scheme and 1 November in respect of the Disadvantaged Areas Scheme.

Question No. 134 answered with Question No. 130.

Farm Retirement Scheme

135. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the steps he is taking to ensure that it will be attractive for young farmers to take over the family farms; the level of funding that will be made available for this purpose; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32614/11]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Simon Coveney): We are all aware that there is a need to improve the age structure of our agricultural work force, and to support well-educated young farmers who will be the platform for further innovation and growth in our agriculture industry. To achieve our Food Harvest 2020 targets, Ireland will need to respond to new market opportunities, and young people tend to be quicker to adapt when change is required. The number of farmers under 35 in Ireland is very low, just 7% of the total. A recent Commission study found that ‘younger managers tend to perform better than the EU average, with 46% more area and 57% more economic potential for 21% more labour force’ (^[1]Commission Staff Working Paper, Impact Assessment, CAP towards 2020, Annex 1: Situation and prospects for EU agriculture and rural areas, p. 25. Brussels, 12/10/2011.¹). There are several measures in the tax system that encourage the transfer of land to young farmers. For example, if a farmer increases the value of his stock over the course of his accounting year, he is entitled to deduct 25% of this increase against his trading profit for tax purposes. But young trained farmers can deduct 100% of any increase in stock valuation. This full relief is available to young trained farmers for four years.

Another measure is the relief from stamp duty for young trained farmers when they purchase land or have it transferred to them. This is designed to encourage the transfer of farms to young farmers. When it is combined with agricultural relief from Capital Acquisitions Tax it encourages inter-generational transfers. There are also reliefs from Capital Gains Tax to encourage farmers over the age of 55 to hand the farm on to the next generation. There is full relief from Capital Gains Tax if the farm changes hands within a family. (^[1]Commission Staff Working Paper, Impact Assessment, CAP towards 2020, Annex 1: Situation and prospects for EU agriculture and rural areas, p. 25. Brussels, 12/10/2011.)

We have also generally favoured young farmers in aid rates and/or selection criteria for on-farm investment support measures. However in my view, we should also consider further measures to assist young trained farmers, and I think that it is sensible to provide for such support in both Pillar 1 and Pillar 2 of the CAP. In this regard I have welcomed the measure in relation to Young Farmers in the recent CAP reform proposals from the Commission, which mandates Member States to use up to 2% of the national direct payment ceiling to make top-up payments to young farmers for a five year period. This is a proposal that Ireland was particularly active in pressing with the Commission in advance of the emergence of the legal proposals and one that we will continue to support in the negotiations.

Grant Payments

136. **Deputy Charlie McConalogue** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine when a single farm payment will issue to a person (details supplied) in County Donegal; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32634/11]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Simon Coveney): An application under the 2011 Single Payment Scheme was received from the person named on 25 April 2011, following processing of which over-claims were identified in respect of three land parcels declared by the person named. As this has recently been satisfactorily resolved, the 50% advance payment will issue shortly.

137. **Deputy Charlie McConalogue** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine when a REP scheme payment will issue to a person (details supplied) in County Donegal; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32635/11]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Simon Coveney): The person named was approved for participation in the Agri-Environment Options Scheme (AEOS) with effect from 1st November 2010.

Under the EU Regulations governing the Scheme and other area-based payment schemes, a comprehensive administrative check, including cross-checks with the Land Parcel Identification System, must be completed before any payment can issue. During these checks a query arose in relation to the digitisation of a Natura land parcel listed on the AEOS application of the person named. This particular problem is now being addressed with a view to rectifying the digitisation problem and issuing payment as quickly as possible.

138. **Deputy John Deasy** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the reason the single farm payment has not issued to a person (details supplied); and when payment will issue. [32638/11]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Simon Coveney): An application under the 2011 Single Payment Scheme was received from the person named on 11 May 2011, processing of which has recently been completed, thereby allowing payment to issue to the applicant shortly.

139. **Deputy Patrick O'Donovan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the position regarding an application for single farm payment in respect of a person (details supplied) in County Limerick; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32639/11]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Simon Coveney): The application under the 2011 Single Payment Scheme, received from the person named on 11 May 2011, was the subject of an eligibility inspection by way of Remote Sensing. As this inspection revealed discrepancies, it was necessary to conduct a ground inspection to clarify the position. The application will be further processed immediately the results of the inspection are known, with a view to the appropriate payment issuing shortly thereafter.

140. **Deputy Michael Moynihan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the number of maps submitted for digitisation with applications for payments to his Department in 2009, 2010 and to date in 2011. [32661/11]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Simon Coveney): The following table details the estimated numbers of maps submitted by farmers under the Single Payment Scheme, based on an average of two maps per farmer. Farmers submit maps to my Department to facilitate re-digitising, in order to have various ineligible features, such as buildings, roadways, farmyards, etc, properly recorded on my Department's Land Parcel Identification System (LPIS).

As any failings or shortcomings in LPIS would leave Ireland open to the very real risk of significant fines, it is crucial that amendments be made, on an ongoing basis, to accurately reflect the position on the ground. To avoid the possibility of EU fines due to shortcomings in the LPIS system, my Department is encouraging all scheme participants to continue to update their mapping data, as circumstances dictate.

Scheme Year	Estimated numbers of maps
2009	37,096

Scheme Year	Estimated numbers of maps
2010	84,610
2011	64,284

The changes made to LPIS on foot of the maps submitted by farmers is one of the three main methods used to update the spatial data, the other two being changes identified during ground and remote sensing inspections and changes identified during my Department's internal review of ortho-photography. In general, approximately 250,000 parcels annually require some amendment.

141. **Deputy Pat Breen** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the reason a person (details supplied) in County Clare has not received full payment; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32674/11]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Simon Coveney): The application under the 2010 Single Payment Scheme/Disadvantaged Areas Scheme, which gave rise to the overpayment in question, was received by my Department on 7 May 2010. The reason the person named did not receive full payment is that ineligible areas were identified among the areas declared. I can confirm that my Department has a robust system in place for considering all appeals; should the person named lodge an appeal, I can confirm that it will receive swift attention. The person named will be advised of the outcome of any such appeal, in writing, with the reasons for the decision being clearly outlined.

Departmental Expenditure

142. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the cost of issuing hard copy payslips to all employees paid by him; the number of staff issued with such payslips; the steps being taken to only issue payslips by electronic means; the timetable involved; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32675/11]

143. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the cost of issuing hard copy payslips to all employees of agencies accountable to him; the number of staff issued with such payslips; the steps being taken to only issue payslips by electronic means; the timetable involved; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32690/11]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Simon Coveney): I propose to take Questions Nos. 142 and 143 together.

Almost 3,200 staff in my Department access their payslips on-line on the Department's IT system and do not receive payslips. Hardcopy payslips continue issue to some 380 staff, at an annual cost of approximately €7,000, taking account of stationery and postage costs. It is planned that all staff will be paid by electronically by the end of this year and this will reduce the numbers of hardcopy payslips issued by one third. While the issuing of hard copy payslips is kept under review, there remains a number staff members who do not have access to the on-line system who will continue to require a hard copy.

The situation in relation to each of the non-commercial State bodies that come within the aegis of my Department is as follows:

Bord Bia: with effect from November 2011, all payslips will issue by e-mail.

An Bord Iascaigh Mhara: all staff payslips issue electronically. Hard copy payslips issue only to BIM pensioners and Ice Plant operators, a total of 115 people. The estimated cost is €100 per month.

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The Sea Fisheries Protection Authority: hardcopy payslips issue to 96 staff. The estimated cost involved is one half day of staff time per month and €50 per month for stationery costs. An electronic payment system is being developed and is expected to be implemented before the end of the year.

The Marine Institute: hardcopy payslips issue to 7 staff and 12 pensioners at a cost of €192.72 per annum. All other staff access their payslips through an online facility.

Teagasc: the estimated annual cost for producing hard copy payslips is €23,800 for 1,590 pensioners and 1,364 employees. Teagasc is in the process of making payslips available electronically for staff within the next six months, after which hard copies will be phased out. It will, however, continue to provide hard copies for pensioners at an approximate cost of €12,700 per annum.

The National Milk Agency: a staff complement of five are issued with hardcopy payslips.

Grant Payments

144. **Deputy Noel Harrington** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine when a person (details supplied) in County Cork will receive their farm grants; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32707/11]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Simon Coveney): An application under the 2011 Single Payment Scheme/Disadvantaged Areas Scheme was received from the person named on 12 May 2011, processing of which has recently been completed thereby allowing payments under both Schemes to issue in the coming days.

Departmental Agencies

145. **Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs if she will provide an update on the work of the task force on the Child and Family Support Agency to date; and the date on which she expects the Child Protection and Welfare Agency to be operational. [32625/11]

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Frances Fitzgerald): I established the Task Force on the Child and Family Support Agency in September 2011 under the chairmanship of Ms Maureen Lynott.

The Task Force will advise my Department in regard to the necessary transition programme to establish a Child and Family Support Agency, and will base its work on best practice in child welfare, family support and public administration; consistent with the Government's public sector reform agenda.

In relation to the Agency it has been asked to:

- Propose a vision and the principles to guide operations;
- Advise on the appropriate service responsibilities, and the delivery of same;
- Review existing financial, staffing and corporate resources; and propose a methodology for resource allocation;
- Propose an organisational design and operating child welfare and protection service model;
- Prepare a detailed implementation plan;
- Identify the main priorities and core relationships required;

- Oversee the implementation and monitor progress, pending establishment of the Agency.

As I already outlined, the Task Force will advise on the appropriate service responsibilities for the Agency during the course of its work from amongst those within the HSE that relate to children and family services or from within the relevant operational responsibilities of my Department or its agencies. In this regard I have also asked the Task Force to consider which services should transfer from the outset and which might be subject to a longer timetable. In addition, it has been asked to consider which services should be directly provided by the Agency and which should be commissioned.

The Task Force met for the fifth time today. I look forward to receiving the report of its work, which will inform preparations for the new Agency, including the drafting of legislation. It is my intention, working with my colleague the Minister for Health, to establish a dedicated Child and Family Programme within the HSE in 2012. This will provide for a dedicated management structure and budget for children and family services. Management of these services will be led by the National Director (Mr. Gordon Jeyes) who already has a very close working relationship with me and my Department. A considerable change programme is already being implemented by the National Director within HSE Child and Family Services aimed at strengthening organisation capacity, business processes and systems. These developments are an integral part of preparations for the new stand alone Agency. I am anxious to advance the full establishment of the Agency at as early a date as possible, subject to the work of the Task Force and necessary legislature provision. I would envisage tabling legislation before the House next year to provide for the Agency's establishment in 2013.

Children in Care

146. **Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs the number of children who have left the care of the State in each of the past five years; and the number of persons in receipt of aftercare services for each of the past five years. [32626/11]

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Frances Fitzgerald): The HSE compiles monthly performance reports which provide an overall analysis of key performance data from finance, HR, hospital and primary and community services. These reports include a range of statistics in relation to children in care. A new performance indicator was introduced in 2011 to collect information on the number of young adults aged 18-21 years in receipt of an aftercare service. Collection of this data commenced in the third quarter of 2011 and validated data should be available shortly. I wish to advise the Deputy that the HSE has not to date routinely collected national data in respect of children who leave the care of the state each year. The data currently available on a national basis sets out the number of children in care and their placement type. Children leave the care of the State on reaching their 18th birthday. However many remain in their foster care placement as an aftercare arrangement. Children may also leave care at an earlier age to return home or, in exceptional circumstances due to being adopted. Some children may be in care for a very short period.

I have however requested my Department to seek information from the HSE on children who have left care this year. I will provide the Deputy with further information as it becomes available.

Since taking office I have prioritised the need to improve access to timely and accurate data on our child and family services. The availability of reliable data is of critical importance to inform the management, resource allocation and further development of our child and family services.

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An important element of this is the establishment by the HSE of a National Child Care Information System (NCCIS), to operate as the central system to support Social Work services and will record and store the case history of every child in care. The procurement of this system is at the pre tender stage.

The National Child Care Information System will include for the regular collection of national data in respect of children who leave the care of the state each year.

The HSE commissioned an independent external consultant to undertake a review of the capacity for alternative care services, including aftercare services. The audit date for the data was 13 March 2011 and based on this audit the HSE has informed me that a total of 1,051 young people were in receipt of aftercare nationally at March 2011. The breakdown between male and female was 46% and 54% respectively. I am further advised by the HSE that the number of young people who began to receive aftercare in 2008 and 2009 was 979 and 847 respectively. Section 45 of the Child Care Act 1991 places a statutory duty on the HSE to form a view in relation to each person leaving care as to whether there is a “need for assistance” and, if it forms such a view, to provide services in accordance with the legislation and subject to resources. All young people who have had a care history with the HSE, be it foster care, residential care or high support, are entitled to an Aftercare Service based on their assessed needs. The core eligible age range for aftercare is 18 years and up to 21 years. This can be extended until the completion of a course of education in which he/she is engaged up to the age of 23 years of age.

Aftercare provision incorporates advice, guidance and practical support. An individual holistic needs assessment identifies a young persons need for accommodation, financial support, social network support and training and education. One of the key features of Aftercare support is to advocate on behalf of young people to promote their development as a fulfilled adult in their community. The most important requirements for young people leaving care are for secure, suitable accommodation as well as further education, employment or training.

The HSE National Aftercare Service is underpinned by a National Policy and Procedures Document which has been developed in cooperation with the key stakeholders including the voluntary sector agencies involved in Aftercare provision and my Department. The policy commits to promoting and achieving the best outcomes for young people leaving care and in ensuring consistency of support to these young people.

The HSE National Policy on Aftercare is being rolled out nationally under the watch of the HSE’s Aftercare Implementation Group, which includes representation from the HSE, mental health, family service and disability service, as well as representation from the voluntary sector and a young persons representative from Empowering People in Care (EPIC).

I am very much aware of the challenges facing the aftercare service, the need for information required to plan the services; the need for consistency across all areas; the need to follow up with young people who may at first reject its services and the need to link in with adult services as necessary. To accommodate such challenges funding was provided in 2011 to support the recruitment of ten additional aftercare workers. Additionally funding was provided to EPIC to develop a national advocacy and support service for young people in care, leaving care and aftercare.

Youth Services

147. **Deputy Paschal Donohoe** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs if State funding will be put in place next year in respect of a group (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [32570/11]

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Frances Fitzgerald): The 2011 budget allocation for the Youth Affairs Unit of my Department is €60.154m on current expenditure and €800,000 on capital expenditure. This funding supports the delivery of a range of youth work programmes and services for all young people, including those from disadvantaged communities through grants-in-aid.

Foróige is currently in receipt of €6.037m from Youth Affairs Unit for projects run under a number of schemes including the Youth Service Grant Scheme, Special Projects for Youth Scheme, four (4) Youth Information Centres and for a number of projects under the Young People's Facilities and Services Fund (Rounds 1 and 2).

The Youth Affairs Unit of my Department is aware of the Big Brother Big Sister Programme which is run by Foróige. However, having regard to the reductions in public expenditure that must be achieved by Government Departments and State Agencies and the limited funding available, it was not possible to consider funding for the programme in 2011. In light of expected budgetary constraints in 2012, it is unlikely that any new applications for funding will be considered next year.

148. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs the extent to which she has engaged with the various youth organisations throughout the country with a view to determination of youth policy in the future; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [32648/11]

149. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs the extent to which she has received submissions from various youth organisations or community groups involved with young persons; her proposals to address the most important issues raised; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [32649/11]

150. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs if she and her Department have identified particular weaknesses in the extent of youth support services and facilities throughout the country on a local, regional or national basis; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [32650/11]

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Frances Fitzgerald): I propose to take Questions Nos. 148 to 150, inclusive, together.

My Department provides a range of funding schemes, programmes and supports to the youth sector. These include the Youth Service Grant Scheme, the Special Projects for Youth Scheme, the Young Peoples Facilities and Services Fund and certain other provisions including the Local Youth Club Grant Scheme, Youth Information Centres, European Youth in Action Programme (administered by Léargas the Exchange Bureau) and Gaisce the President's Award.

Funding of €60.954m is available from my Department in 2011 to support the delivery of a range of youth work programmes and services for all young people, including those from disadvantaged communities, by the voluntary youth work sector. Youth work programmes and services are delivered to young participants in the various programmes by some 1,100 youth work staff and by a volunteer base of over 60,000. As Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, I am committed to the development of a new youth policy framework which my Department is currently progressing. Through this work a clear policy framework will emerge that will aim to enhance the development, participation and support of young people.

I intend that the policy framework will also facilitate and promote co-ordination and coherence across departments and services and will set out the priorities, rationale and criteria for future funding programmes. It will also accommodate issues relevant to young people within

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the 10-24 age range in informal or out-of-school settings that fall within the remit of my Department. The overall aim will be to clarify and enhance coherence, connectivity, co-ordination and delivery in youth services and related out-of-schools services for young people and to ensure such provision is both quality and outcomes based.

Ensuring quality service delivery is an ongoing priority for me. My Department is at present progressing two quality standards initiatives in the youth area that will help ensure an improvement in good practice, that services are outcomes focused and that the young people involved are deriving the maximum benefit from being involved.

One of my key aims for youth policy development will be to ensure optimum use of all the financial and human resources available. Accordingly, the development of my Department's policy in relation to young people will focus specifically on ensuring greater coherence, co-ordination and impact in youth policy and provision so as to ensure quality outcomes for all.

My Department is involved in ongoing and productive dialogue with the youth sector through the National Youth Work Advisory Committee (NYWAC). This committee comprises a chairperson and 32 members drawn equally from the voluntary and statutory sectors involved in the administration and provision of youth work programmes and services. Thirteen nominees from the National Youth Council of Ireland (NYCI) and four from the Irish Vocational Education Association (IVEA) are represented on the committee.

Any submissions received from youth organisations by my Department are given due consideration. Since my appointment as Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, I have met with a number of youth organisations and listened to their views and concerns.

Children in Care

151. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs if she is satisfied that adequate protection measures are in place or likely to be put in place to ensure to the greatest degree possible the protection of children and or vulnerable adults; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [32651/11]

152. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs the extent to which she hopes to ensure that children in care are provided with adequate protection, that careful assessment is done to identify particularly sensitive issues that might present any ongoing problems; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [32652/11]

154. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs the steps he intends to take to ensure that vulnerable children are given the degree and scale of protection required; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [32654/11]

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Frances Fitzgerald): I propose to take Questions Nos. 151, 152 and 154 together.

The Government is committed to a series of measures designed to significantly strengthen the existing legislative, policy and practice framework in the area of child protection. The intention is to ensure that child abuse in Ireland is strongly and decisively tackled and that children are properly safeguarded. A number of significant structural and legislative changes are being progressed in this context. These include the establishment of a new agency with dedicated responsibility for the delivery of child welfare and protection services, separate from the HSE and reporting directly to my Department. Work on the establishment of the agency is under way and includes the preparation of primary legislation to provide for its establishment.

In July 2011, I launched the revised Children First: National Guidance for the Protection and Welfare of Children. The Guidance deals with the recognition, reporting and management

of child safety concerns. It emphasises the need to safeguard and protect children, that the safety and welfare of children is everyone's responsibility and that children will have safer lives where everyone is attentive to their well-being. People who work with children across a range of areas must be clear in understanding their responsibility for safe practice and the reporting of concerns. The Guidance sets out specific protocols for HSE social workers, gardaí and other front line staff in dealing with suspected abuse. The scope of Children First extends beyond the reporting of suspected abuse. It emphasises the importance of multidisciplinary, inter-agency working in the management of such concerns. Key to this is the sharing of information between agencies and disciplines in the best interests of children and the need for full co-operation to ensure better outcomes.

The HSE recently published a Child Welfare and Protection Practice Handbook for all its staff in order to achieve consistency and Children First compliance across all its authorities. I attended the launch of the Handbook at four regional meetings where representatives of An Garda Síochána also participated. In addition to the existing structures in place to support Children First, significant additional resources have been provided to the HSE over the past two years to increase the number of social workers in the child welfare and protection area. The number of social workers increased in 2010 by 200 and the necessary funding has been provided to the HSE to complete the recruitment of an additional 60 social workers by year end. The recruitment of these additional social workers was included in the Ryan Report Implementation Plan, as was the commitment to place the Children First Guidelines on a statutory basis. This additional resource will be of particular assistance to the HSE in driving forward the process of implementation of Children First.

There is an acknowledged need for greater consistency in the implementation of the Children First Guidance across all sectors and organisations working with children. This was highlighted by the Ryan Commission which recommended that Children First should be uniformly and consistently implemented throughout the State. In recognition of this and following publication of the Guidance, an Inter Departmental Committee was established to oversee the implementation of Children First across all sectors. The Committee is chaired by my Department and includes representatives from the various Departments involved in the provision of services to children. Arrangements are also in place between the HSE and Garda Síochána to monitor the implementation of Children First across these two statutory agencies which have specific responsibilities to assess and investigate child protection and welfare concerns.

I have also received Government approval to put the *Children First* Guidance on a statutory basis and my Department is currently working with the Office of the Attorney General in developing the necessary legislative approach. *Children First* will also be supported by an assurance framework which will include strong emphasis on inspection and the need to provide demonstrable evidence of implementation. In the case of the health sector, the remit of the Health Information and Quality Authority (HIQA) is being expanded to include oversight of the HSE's Child Protection services, including the operation of *Children First*. HIQA is currently developing standards to allow for inspection of the HSE's child protection services.

I will continue to consult widely as the legislation is prepared. My Department will also be meeting with relevant Government Departments, the relevant professional regulatory bodies and other relevant agencies as the legislation is developed. I would hope that the legislative proposals which I will bring forward enjoy widespread support in the interests of protecting vulnerable children.

In addition to the measures I have outlined, my colleague the Minister for Justice, Equality and Defence is bringing forward legislation which will put the vetting of employees on a statutory footing and also allow for the sharing of soft information as part of the vetting process.

[Deputy Frances Fitzgerald.]

Minister Shatter is also introducing legislation on the withholding of information relating to crimes committed against children and vulnerable adults.

Question No. 153 answered with Question No. 24.

Question No. 154 answered with Question No. 151.

Departmental Expenditure

155. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs the cost of issuing hard copy payslips to all employees paid by her; the number of staff issued with such payslips; the steps being taken to only issue payslips by electronic means; the timetable involved; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [32677/11]

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Frances Fitzgerald): Employees of my Department have access to an electronic Employee Self Service (ESS) feature as part of the payroll system. A limited number of hard copy payslips are provided to employees in circumstances where an employee does not have access to ESS through illness, off-site assignment or not being connected to the intranet network. As part of a shared service arrangement, the Department of Health provides payroll services to my Department and I am advised that there are currently 13 staff of my Department receiving hard copy payslips. I understand that the Minister for Health is providing overall cost details for the production of hard copy payslips in his response to this question.

156. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs the cost of issuing hard copy payslips to all employees of agencies accountable to her; the number of staff issued with such payslips; the steps being taken to only issue payslips by electronic means; the timetable involved; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [32692/11]

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Frances Fitzgerald): I am advised that the majority of staff employed in agencies under the aegis of my Department utilise electronic payslip facilities. The majority of staff at the Adoption Authority of Ireland for example, are on secondment from other public service organisations and utilise the payslip facilities provided by their parent organisation.

The National Educational Welfare Board has advised me that all bar one person has opted for electronic payslips and they incur costs of €200 per annum in respect of producing one hard copy payslip as a result. The Office of the Children's Ombudsman has advised me that they still issue hard copy payslips to their staff but they cannot provide an actual cost on the issuing of payslips as it is built into their overall payroll package. They have further advised me that their payroll providers plan to put an electronic payroll system in place in early 2012.

Health Services

157. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Health if he is satisfied with frequency and extent of school examinations with a view to identifying at an early stage children's health problems; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32656/11]

Minister for Health (Deputy James Reilly): The policy on school health examinations forms part of the Best Health for Children guidelines, produced in 1999 and revised in 2006. These guidelines were produced after a rigorous evaluation of international literature, and a review of good practice in Ireland and abroad. A comprehensive training programme for staff working in this area was also developed. The policy is kept under review, and will be re-visited in 2012 as part of the HSE work plan.

New governance structures are also being put in place in relation to child health screening and surveillance in the HSE which will further improve the quality assurance of the process. The World Health Organisation in 2007, in a review of child health in Europe, commended the Best Health for Children approach adopted by Ireland as an example of good practice.

The Best Health for Children guidelines sets out a clear timetable for child health checks and details what is required at each stage. I have asked the HSE to prepare a report on the extent to which the guidelines are implemented. The guidelines are available on the HSE website.

Services for People with Disabilities

158. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Health the extent to which he hopes to put in place adequate diagnostic and support services for children with special needs; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32657/11]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Kathleen Lynch): Services have been developed by individual service providers or former Health Boards over time and reflect the individual experience and expertise of providers in meeting local needs. This has led to variations in the way services are configured and, in relation to the provision of supports for children with disabilities, the Health Service Executive (HSE) has recognised the need to enhance the level of consistency and standardisation in the way both early intervention services and services for school-aged children with disabilities are delivered. The reconfiguration of existing therapy resources to geographic based teams for children and young people has been identified as a priority and is a “Key Result Area” in the Executive’s National Service Plan 2011.

National, regional and local level structures are being put in place to progress this initiative, which will have a positive impact on the assessment process for children with disabilities and the provision of appropriate clinical services and supports to them.

Health Services

159. **Deputy Finian McGrath** asked the Minister for Health if a social worker will call to a person (details supplied) in Dublin 17. [32584/11]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Kathleen Lynch): As this is a service matter it has been referred to the Health Service Executive for direct reply.

Medical Cards

160. **Deputy Michael McCarthy** asked the Minister for Health if he will outline the options available to a person (details supplied) in County Cork in terms of an aspect of a medical card application; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32588/11]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Róisín Shortall): As this is a service matter it has been referred to the Health Service Executive for direct reply to the Deputy.

Health Services

161. **Deputy Robert Dowds** asked the Minister for Health the position regarding funding for community supports in respect of persons with multiple sclerosis, which in the past have facilitated hospital appointments, day trips and so on; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32603/11]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Kathleen Lynch): 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 to the Deputy.

Health Service Executive Regions

162. **Deputy Patrick O'Donovan** asked the Minister for Health further to Parliamentary Question No. 501 of 18 October 2011, if he will provide a breakdown of the size of the populations served by each one of the regions mentioned. [32605/11]

Minister for Health (Deputy James Reilly): The breakdown of population across the four HSE regions is shown in the following table. This is based on the latest official figures available, the 2006 Census. The figures for the 2011 Census have not yet been finalised by the Central Statistics Office. However, the preliminary CSO Census 2011 figures indicate that the total population has increased from 4,239,848 in 2006 to 4,581,269 in April 2011; an increase of 341,421 or 8.1%.

Population by HSE Region (source: Census 2006, CSO):

Region	Population Census 2006
Dublin North East	927,410
Dublin Mid-Leinster	1,216,848
South	1,081,968
West	1,013,622
Total	4,239,848

Health Services

163. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Health the provision being made for persons living in the Dingle area, County Kerry, who need to deal with emergency services and who need the provision of a service for the Irish speaking persons in the Gaeltacht, especially the elderly, who would have little English if an emergency situation was to arise; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32608/11]

Minister for Health (Deputy James Reilly): As this is a service matter, it has been referred to the Health Service Executive for direct reply.

164. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Health the position regarding the continuation of the provision of the dental services in Kenmare town, County Kerry; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32609/11]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Róisín Shortall): As this is a service matter it has been referred to the HSE for direct reply to the Deputy.

165. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Health the reason the dental health centre clinic was taken out of Dingle and centralised to Tralee, County Kerry; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32610/11]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Róisín Shortall): As this is a service matter it has been referred to the HSE for direct reply to the Deputy.

166. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Health the position regarding the opening of the cystic fibrosis unit in Cork University Hospital; and if he will let CF sufferers finally know whether or not they will be supported by him [32617/11]

Minister for Health (Deputy James Reilly): I have stated my Department's policy that there must be sufficient inpatient beds to treat all people with cystic fibrosis who require hospitalisation.

I am happy to say that construction of the new 100 bed unit at St. Vincent's hospital is well under way and is due to be completed next year. The new building, which has single en-suite rooms and isolation rooms, will play a vital role in the treatment of patients with cystic fibrosis and a range of other conditions.

Cork University Hospital has the second largest adult cystic fibrosis (CF) centre in Ireland. The CUH centre currently caters for the needs of 145 adult patients attending from the Munster region.

In September 2007, Dr. Barry Plant was appointed as the Director of the adult cystic fibrosis programme at CUH. Since his appointment, Dr. Plant has worked closely with various HSE services, philanthropic organisations such as Build4Life and CFAI, and scientific research agencies in advancing the needs of these patients. In June of 2008, Dr. Plant, in consultation with the CF Multi Disciplinary Team and the CF community locally, submitted a "Statement of Need" for CF services to the Executive Management Board of Cork University Hospital. This document, which was approved by the Board, outlined a strategic plan to develop CF services in the hospital, including the provision of day and inpatient facilities.

The CF Day Centre, which opened in CUH in May of this year, caters for most clinical needs of CF patients. It includes five isolation rooms, a dedicated CF gym, a multidisciplinary team room and consultant rooms. The capital costs for this development were provided through a partnership approach between HSE South and the Build4Life organisation.

Currently, Dr. Plant is working with the Executive Management Board of the CUH to develop a designated inpatient unit, with en-suite rooms for CF patients. A location has been identified for a combined designated adult inpatient facility and respiratory unit. This is in a vacated ward on the CUH campus. Provisional plans and costings have been made, with an estimated build cost of approximately €3m.

The hospital is working in partnership with Build4Life to co-fund this development. To date, Build4Life has raised over €2m to support CF capital developments at CUH. HSE South is examining ways to secure additional capital funding to complete the unit, in the context of decreasing capital budget allocations in the present stringent climate. The need to develop the adult in-patient facility remains a Board and HSE South priority and the HSE will continue to work with Build4Life to complete this project.

I recently met with the Cystic Fibrosis Association of Ireland and I am keenly aware of the needs of people who live with CF. I am actively considering a Lotto application from Build4Life and will make a decision shortly and will inform the Deputy and Build4Life when I have done so.

167. **Deputy Billy Kelleher** asked the Minister for Health the programme for the provision of services for spina bifida and hydrocephalus sufferers; the extent of the provision of multi-disciplinary treatment currently available along with future plans; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32636/11]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Kathleen Lynch): 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 to the Deputy.

168. **Deputy Billy Timmins** asked the Minister for Health the position regarding an appointment in respect of a person (details supplied) in County Wicklow; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32663/11]

Minister for Health (Deputy James Reilly): I am determined to address the issues which cause unacceptable delays in patients receiving treatment in our hospitals. In this regard I have established the Special Delivery Unit (SDU), which will work to unblock access to acute services by dramatically improving the flow of patients through the system, and by streamlining waiting lists, including referrals from GPs. The SDU is working closely with its partner agencies — mainly the HSE and the NTPF.

As a priority, public hospitals have been instructed to ensure that, by the end of 2011, they have no patients waiting more than 12 months for treatment. Where they fail to do so, the NTPF will source the necessary treatments elsewhere and an appropriate budgetary adjustment will be made.

As this is a service matter, it has been referred to the HSE for direct reply. Should the patient's general practitioner consider that the patient's condition warrants an earlier appointment, he/she would be in the best position to take the matter up with the consultant and facility involved.

Medical Cards

169. **Deputy John McGuinness** asked the Minister for Health if a medical card will be issued to a person (details supplied) in County Kilkenny. [32664/11]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Róisín Shortall): As this is a service matter it has been referred to the Health Service Executive for direct reply to the Deputy.

170. **Deputy Finian McGrath** asked the Minister for Health the position regarding a medical card in respect of a person (details supplied) [32667/11]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Róisín Shortall): As this is a service matter it has been referred to the Health Service Executive for direct reply to the Deputy.

Health Service Staff

171. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Health the number of doctors working in Gaeltacht areas who have good Irish and are competent in the language; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32670/11]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Róisín Shortall): The HSE has advised that 26 General Practitioners are working in Gaeltacht areas and that they possess a level of proficiency in the Irish language which allows them discharge their clinical and contractual duties and obligations on a day to day basis.

Health Services

172. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Health the reason the dental health centre clinic was taken out of Caherciveen and centralised to Tralee, County Kerry; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32671/11]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Róisín Shortall): As this is a service matter it has been referred to the HSE for direct reply to the Deputy.

Health Service Staff

173. **Deputy Patrick O'Donovan** asked the Minister for Health when the Health Service Executive mid-west region last benefited from an increase in the number of home helps working in the region; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32673/11]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Kathleen Lynch): As this is a service matter it has been referred to the Health Service Executive for direct reply.

Departmental Expenditure

174. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Health the cost of issuing hard copy payslips to all employees paid by him; the number of staff issued with such payslips; the steps being taken to only issue payslips by electronic means; the timetable involved; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32684/11]

Minister for Health (Deputy James Reilly): Department has been providing electronic payslips to its employees for a number of years as part of the Employee Self Service (ESS) feature which is enabled by the Payroll System and provided through the existing Departmental Intranet. A limited number of hardcopy payslips are provided to employees in circumstances where an employee does not have access to ESS through illness, off-site assignment or not being connected to the Intranet network. Currently that number is 39 for the combined staffs of the Department of Health and the Department of Children and Youth Affairs for whom my Department provides a financial shared service including payroll.

Estimated Cost	€
The estimated annual non-pay cost for hardcopy payslips issued to employees is	€150
The estimated annual pay cost for hardcopy payslips issued to employees is	€406
Total	€556

175. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Health the cost of issuing hard copy payslips to all employees of agencies accountable to him; the number of staff issued with such payslips; the steps being taken to only issue payslips by electronic means; the timetable involved; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32699/11]

Minister for Health (Deputy James Reilly): The information requested is not currently held by my Department. The agencies concerned have been asked to reply directly to the Deputy.

Hospital Services

176. **Deputy Finian McGrath** asked the Minister for Health his views regarding the hospital treatment in respect of a person (details supplied) in Dublin 5 [32706/11]

Minister for Health (Deputy James Reilly): My Department has sought a report from the HSE on the matter referred to by the Deputy.

Grant Payments

177. **Deputy Seamus Kirk** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if an application for grant aid will be forthcoming in respect of a premises (details supplied) in County Louth; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32587/11]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Leo Varadkar): The matter raised is an operational matter for Fáilte Ireland. I have referred the Deputy's Question to Fáilte Ireland for direct reply. Please advise my private office if you do not receive a reply within ten working days.

Departmental Expenditure

178. **Deputy Dara Calleary** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the moneys spent by him and by the National Roads Authority on a road project (details supplied) in County Mayo on an annual basis since the year 2000. [32644/11]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Leo Varadkar): As Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport, I have responsibility for overall policy and funding in relation to the national roads programme. The planning, design and implementation of individual road projects is a matter for the National Roads Authority (NRA) under the Roads Acts 1993 to 2007 in conjunction with the local authorities concerned.

Within is capital budget, the assessment and prioritisation of individual projects is a matter in the first instance for the NRA in accordance with Section 19 of the Roads Act.

Noting the above position, I have referred the Deputy's question to the NRA for direct reply. Please advise my private office if you do not receive a reply within 10 working days.

Departmental Expenditure

179. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the cost of issuing hard copy payslips to all employees paid by him; the number of staff issued with such payslips; the steps being taken to only issue payslips by electronic means; the timetable involved; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32689/11]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Leo Varadkar): Electronic payslips have been in operation for employees of my Department since September 2008.

180. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the cost of issuing hard copy payslips to all employees of agencies accountable to him; the number of staff issued with such payslips; the steps being taken to only issue payslips by electronic means; the timetable involved; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32704/11]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Leo Varadkar): The provision of the material requested is a matter for the agencies themselves. I have forwarded the Deputy's question to the agencies concerned for their direct response. If the Deputy does not receive a reply within ten working days, please advise my private office.