



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE  
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

**DÁIL ÉIREANN**

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

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# DÁIL ÉIREANN

*Dé Máirt, 22 Deireadh Fómhair 2013*

*Tuesday, 22 October 2013*

Chuaigh an Ceann Comhairle i gceannas ar 14.00 p.m.

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*Paidir.*  
*Prayer.*

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## Ceisteanna - Questions

### Priority Questions

### Departmental Funding

53. **Deputy Seán Ó Fearghail** asked the Minister for Arts; Heritage and the Gaeltacht the projects that will be deferred and the schemes that will be curtailed in his Department as a result of the reduction in his Department's revenue in Budget 2014; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [44628/13]

**Minister for Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Jimmy Deenihan):** The overall allocation for my Department's Vote group, including the Vote for the National Gallery of Ireland, in the recently published budget Estimate for 2014 amounts to €245.7 million. This is a reduction of just under €17 million on 2013 and includes a reduction of some €2.21 million in respect of the EU Presidency cultural programme, which is now completed, and internal departmental administrative efficiencies of some €1.752 million. The remaining reduction of €13 million will be applied across my Department's programmes in a manner that maximises the value for money in this area from what is still a very substantial level of funding. For example, funding of the arts will still exceed €2.3 million per week in 2014.

In addition, the published allocation will be supplemented in 2014 by a number of measures announced on budget day by the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform. These include €6 million for the Limerick National City of Culture 2014; €6 million to fund a number of 1916 commemoration projects; and €5 million for the traditional skills and buildings at risk jobs leverage scheme 2014. This will be directed at renovation projects for buildings which are protected. In that context, I am satisfied that the overall level of resources available to my Department next year will continue to allow it to support arts and culture, maintain our built and natural heritage, develop our language and Gaeltacht areas, and support island communities and

the North-South implementation bodies under its aegis.

The final allocation for my Department will be set out in the forthcoming revised Estimates volume, due to be published before the end of the year. I will make a judgment at that time on which programmes and projects will be prioritised, having regard to the additional funding announced on budget day, as well as the reductions that necessarily have to be made as part of my Department's contribution to the overall fiscal consolidation.

**Deputy Seán Ó Feargháil:** I compliment the Minister on securing funding from the sale of the national lottery in particular for the works planned for the national city of culture in Limerick and the projects commemorating the decade of centenaries. This is the sixth successive year of cuts in funding to the Arts Council. Everyone in this House is conscious of the vital contribution the arts make to the quality of Irish life and the importance of the arts at this time of economic difficulties when the morale of the nation is particularly low. How will the Arts Council operate with the reduction envisaged for this year?

There has been a decrease - albeit somewhat modest - in funding to the Irish Film Board. In the past the House has discussed the great success of the film board and the very worthwhile economic activity it generates. Is this cut not unworthy and likely to be counterproductive?

**Deputy Jimmy Deenihan:** The reduction in funding for the Arts Council is €3.967 million. For the past two years I did my best to cushion the reduction in the allocation for the Arts Council, keeping the reduction well below what it expected. I could not do that this year because there was major pressure from the national cultural institutions. At this stage we are trying to keep them open. For example, the National Museum is under considerable pressure as are the National Library and the other cultural institutions. It was with regret that I had to reduce funding to an extent that I did not have to do in the previous two years when I protected its funding as much as possible.

Artists will benefit and I thank the Deputy for acknowledging that I succeeded in getting €6 million for Limerick city of culture. A large number of artists who would normally get funding through the Arts Council will benefit from this. As there will be a large involvement from the arts community in Limerick city of culture, it will certainly help artists in various ways. I take the Deputy's point and from next year I hope we will be able to reduce the amount of reduction. In the meantime I hope the Arts Council will be able to fund its organisations. It was expecting a 6% reduction because that was in the framework, but I hope it will be able to make economies and live within the budget.

**Deputy Seán Ó Feargháil:** The National Campaign for the Arts has been a fairly stern critic of the Minister's in terms of how it envisages the cuts impacting. It believes that arts programmes will be impacted rather than the costs of administration. How does the Minister respond to that? Can he give the arts community an assurance that in 2015 it will not experience similar cuts impacting across the board? What arts projects and services are likely to be cut as a result of this year's reduction in funding?

**Deputy Jimmy Deenihan:** The Arts Council is free to make its particular cuts and I cannot influence those or direct it in any way. For the past two years the Arts Council has always acknowledged that its reduction was not commensurate with other reductions. This year, unfortunately, because of so much pressure on the small budget I have, I could not do that to the same extent. However, I have tried other measures to compensate for that in certain ways. Next

year, I will again do my best to reduce the impact as much as I can. Whereas I cannot directly direct the Arts Council I will be talking to those responsible about ways we can work together to ensure economies of scale can be secured and so forth.

I take the Deputy's point. Organisations throughout the country will be challenged because of this reduction. It is important that the Arts Council in its capacity and I as Minister try to ensure that none of these organisations or individuals go out of business because of these reductions. I will do my best to advise and support people as much as possible towards ensuring that end.

### **Architectural Heritage**

54. **Deputy Sandra McLellan** asked the Minister for Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht his views on current condition of Vernon Mount House in Cork city; the action that has been taken to ensure its protection as a building of significant heritage value; his plans to ensure that the house can be accessed by the public; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [44625/13]

**Deputy Jimmy Deenihan:** As the Deputy is aware Vernon Mount House is on the record of protected structures of Cork County Council. Under the Planning and Development Acts 2000-2012 it is the responsibility of the owners and occupiers of protected structures to ensure such structures do not become endangered. Responsibility for overseeing such compliance lies with the planning authority, in this case, Cork County Council.

In 2012 in recognition of the importance of Vernon Mount House and following an application from Cork County Council my Department allocated a grant of €35,000 for the house to the council under the then special projects fund. This allocation was towards works which the council carried out on the structure in accordance with sections 59 and 69(b) of the Planning and Development Acts to prevent further deterioration and endangerment. My understanding is that the structure is now stabilised. However, I refer the Deputy to the council for more detailed information on the current position. As the house is in private ownership, access is a matter for the owners.

**Deputy Sandra McLellan:** I thank the Minister for his answer. Vernon Mount House is something of a neglected treasure in terms of our history, in particular in terms of the Georgian period. The house was built in the late 18th century for a wealthy Corkonian during the period of Cork's history associated with the merchant princes. It is a remarkable piece of history in terms of its artistic and architectural values and is among the most significant surviving buildings from the period. It was a significant building of Cork's south side in its time and featured in a painting by the well-known artist of the time, Nathaniel Grogan, "Man Drinking from a Stream in the Grounds of Vernon Mount House". However, it is regrettably in a state of disrepair, as far as can be gathered, it looks poorly from the exterior and it is inaccessible to the public. It seems a shame that we might have such an architectural gem in Cork but little access to it. Does the Minister have any plans to ensure that the House could be renovated and opened to the public such that we could enjoy what the House has to offer and teach a new generation about the history of the time?

**Deputy Jimmy Deenihan:** I share Deputy McLellan's views on the importance of the house, especially the unique and remarkable painted interiors, with which I am familiar. With this in mind I allocated a substantial sum from the limited resources available last year. I re-

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mind Deputy McLellan - this is something she might bring to the attention of Cork County Council - that under the €5 million allocation for the traditional skills and buildings-at-risk jobs leverage scheme there may be an opportunity to seek further funding from Cork County Council. My advice to Deputy McLellan is to work through Cork County Council. Then, if a proposal can come forward for next year, I would be sympathetic about it if it were recommended by Cork County Council.

**Deputy Sandra McLellan:** I welcome that information and I will take the matter further. That aside, has the Minister had any discussions with the local authorities? Does the Minister have any intention, as the Minister with responsibility for heritage, of using his powers under the National Monuments Act to ensure that the building receives full protection?

**Deputy Jimmy Deenihan:** As I pointed out, it is in private ownership and so I have no direct involvement but Cork County Council has direct involvement. It has the statutory role and function to ensure that the house is kept in good repair. I suggest that Deputy McLellan should go back to Cork County Council and the responsible heritage officer and ask them to engage with the owners of this important and remarkable building. They should so do to come up with a scheme of work to stabilise the house, protect it and preserve it in so many ways. The scheme to which I referred may provide that window of opportunity. I thank the Deputy for raising this matter and she can bring it to my attention again, having consulted with Cork County Council.

### **Special Areas of Conservation Designation**

55. **Deputy Luke 'Ming' Flanagan** asked the Minister for Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht his views on whether the various restrictions now being placed on turf cutting here will lead to a situation where turf cutting will cease to exist. [44627/13]

**Deputy Jimmy Deenihan:** The Government does not believe that turf cutting should come to an end on all bogs and is not following a strategy that would result in this outcome. Peatlands make up more than 20% of the State's terrestrial area. They are of considerable economic, social and environmental value and therefore must be managed with care. Within weeks of coming into office, the Government decided to draw up a national strategy on peatlands conservation and management to deal with long-term issues such as land management, restoration, conservation, tourism potential, carbon, accounting and community participation in managing this resource.

This national peatlands strategy is currently being prepared with oversight by the Peatlands Council and with input from relevant Departments, agencies and semi-State companies. It is intended that a draft of the strategy will be published this year and comments of the public will be sought on its contents. The strategy will be broad-ranging. Among many other issues, it will address the regulation of turf extraction within and outside protected areas and should dispel unfounded fears that the Government wishes to end traditional turf cutting in Ireland, while also making clear that Ireland's peatlands must be managed in a balanced way. This balance involves conservation in certain areas, protecting traditional rights - and the owners of those rights - and having in place the appropriate systems that can respond to new challenges as they arise, whether they come from changing agricultural practices, pressure from development, water quality issues and so on.

In addition to the overarching national peatlands strategy, work is also progressing on the

preparation of a national raised bog special area of conservation, SAC, management plan to consider the management of Ireland's 53 raised bog special areas of conservation and the review of raised bog natural heritage areas, NHAs. I intend to publish these documents in draft form in conjunction with the national strategy.

These initiatives will provide an appropriate policy response to managing all of Ireland's peatlands for the future. They are being developed in a collaborative fashion with the assistance of the Peatlands Council and will be subject to further broad public consultation once drafts are published before the end of the year. I urge all those with an interest in the management of the peatlands to avail of the opportunities to participate in shaping that future.

**Deputy Luke 'Ming' Flanagan:** I can only conclude the Minister did not write that reply himself, because it does not tally with what turf cutters on Moanveanlagh bog in the Listowel area have told me he stated at a public meeting there on the future of turf cutting. According to five people who the Minister knows, who attended the meeting and to whom I have spoken, the Minister stated at that meeting that the State eventually would own all the bogs and turf cutting eventually would stop. The Turf Cutters and Contractors Association have been warning people for a long time that this issue does not simply concern 53 so-called special area of conservation, SAC, bogs but would eventually result in a further 75 being affected from the beginning of next year, as well as the hundreds that are proposed NHAs. Our conclusion was that it was the ambition of the present Administration eventually to wipe out all turf cutters. The Minister can imagine our alarm when we heard from a group of turf cutters - at least the Minister told them the truth - that he had informed them that all turf cutting eventually will stop. Did the people who attended the meeting hear the Minister correctly? Five minutes before entering the Chamber, I spoke to the person who chaired that meeting, just to verify this because it is rather hard to believe the Minister would say such a thing, and he verified it. I understand he is an acquaintance of the Minister.

**Deputy Jimmy Deenihan:** First, that is completely inaccurate. I acknowledge this is coming from a second source and not from Deputy Flanagan but it is absolutely and totally inaccurate. I was invited to a public meeting on Moanveanlagh bog, which up to 100 people may have attended and I was very upfront with them. I was very truthful to them just as I have been from the outset of this entire discussion. Some people do not seem to be able to understand the truth, what is accurate and so forth. I was very clear with them about the 53 raised bogs, that the consultants were anxious to come down and consult them - but they did not accept that proposal - that we were reviewing the natural heritage areas, NHAs, and that I was coming up with conclusions. I was very clear on this and that turf-cutting on all other bogs would continue.

Nobody ever at any stage said that this was the end of turf-cutting in this country. When Deputy Flanagan is addressing public meetings perhaps it is convenient for him to say that to stir up emotions and so forth but what I said was very clear. We are currently considering three strategies, as the Deputy demanded in a motion tabled in this House. I am doing exactly what he asked for, namely, we would draw up a strategy for the 53 raised bogs with a view to perhaps allowing cutting in a few of them and to allow for restoration as called for in the Deputy's motion. The programme for Government gave a commitment that we would review the NHAs and move towards preparing a management plan for those bogs and that review is coming to a conclusion. The Deputy's organisation is a member of the Peatlands Council and his organisation agreed and signed up to stop cutting turf in June 2011 but then it withdrew from that in September and it has not engaged since. I appeal to the Deputy as public relations officer of the TCCA to ask it re-engage in this process.

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**Deputy Luke ‘Ming’ Flanagan:** I found it interesting that the Minister when answering Deputy McLellan’s question referenced the fact that something was private property. I was delighted to hear him recognise that concept because the lands he is talking about are also private property. If he thinks that adopting an ostrich-style approach to this will solve it, it will not. Of the 9,000 turbary rights holders on the so-called 53 special areas of conservation, SACs, fewer than 1,000 have signed his final agreement, the one that finalises matters that the Minister said was not final. In terms of the 30,000 turbary rights holders and landowners on the NHAs, the Minister has not solved anything in that respect. Fewer than 1,000 of the 39,000 have been solved and the Minister thinks he can bulldoze ahead with this.

When the Minister was asked on our local radio station did he notify these people, and we should remember that he cares about private property, he said they were “probably notified”. I imagine that response would not be very strong in court. He also went on to blame the previous Government, and he can blame it for many things but he cannot blame it for signing in the regulations that his Government signed in. As for who do I believe, I believe the people in Moanveanlagh because all the way along the line they have told us the position as it is.

**Deputy Jimmy Deenihan:** First, we are not taking property from anybody, the people will retain their bogs in the 53 raised SACs.

**Deputy Luke ‘Ming’ Flanagan:** And the liability associated with them.

**Deputy Jimmy Deenihan:** As regards the court, there was a court decision recently that again supported the Department from the point of view of informing people-----

**Deputy Luke ‘Ming’ Flanagan:** The Minister should bring me to court then if he is so-----

**Deputy Jimmy Deenihan:** That is probably where the Deputy wants to go.

**Deputy Luke ‘Ming’ Flanagan:** Why not let us test the law?

**Deputy Jimmy Deenihan:** Obviously, he wants to get more publicity.

**Deputy Luke ‘Ming’ Flanagan:** Test the law.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Peter Mathews):** Only half a minute remains for this question.

**Deputy Luke ‘Ming’ Flanagan:** If the Minister was that sure about this he would have done that already.

**Deputy Jimmy Deenihan:** Deputy Flanagan does not seem to realise that breaking the law is unacceptable in this country.

**Deputy Luke ‘Ming’ Flanagan:** What law have I broken? Prosecute me if I have broken the law.

**Deputy Jimmy Deenihan:** There is European law and there is Irish law.

**Deputy Luke ‘Ming’ Flanagan:** The Minister should prosecute me if he thinks think I have broken the law.

**Deputy Jimmy Deenihan:** It is my responsibility here as a Minister to enforce the law.

**Deputy Luke ‘Ming’ Flanagan:** It is the Minister’s duty to prosecute me if he believes I

have broken the law.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Peter Mathews):** Deputy Flanagan, please.

**Deputy Jimmy Deenihan:** Obviously, that is what Deputy Flanagan wants. I repeat-----

**Deputy Luke 'Ming' Flanagan:** Clearly I have broken no law. That is the-----

**Deputy Jimmy Deenihan:** Is the Acting Chairman in control of this Chamber?

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Peter Mathews):** I am in charge.

**Deputy Jimmy Deenihan:** The Acting Chairman should not allow this. I did not-----

**Deputy Luke 'Ming' Flanagan:** -----only conclusion to which one can come.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Peter Mathews):** We are moving on to the next question.

**Deputy Luke 'Ming' Flanagan:** Prosecute, put up or shut up.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Peter Mathews):** Deputy Flanagan, please.

**Deputy Jimmy Deenihan:** In conclusion, this House makes law. As Minister, I have to ensure that the-----

**Deputy Luke 'Ming' Flanagan:** Where is the law that I am breaking?

**Deputy Jimmy Deenihan:** -----law is enforced.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Peter Mathews):** Deputy Flanagan, please.

**Deputy Jimmy Deenihan:** Deputy Flanagan is doing his best to encourage the-----

**Deputy Luke 'Ming' Flanagan:** The Minister keeps referring to my having broken a law, which law have I broken?

**Deputy Jimmy Deenihan:** -----non-compliance with that law. He just wants to be put out.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Peter Mathews):** I ask everybody to refrain from further discussion on Question No. 55. We are moving on to Question No. 56.

### **Straitéis don Ghaeilge**

56. D'fhiafraigh **Deputy Michael P. Kitt** den an Aire Ealaíon, Oidhreachta agus Gaeltachta cad é an dul chun cinn atá déanta maidir le húsáid na Gaeilge a spreagadh ar fud na tíre; cén cúnaimh atá á thabhairt ag Roinn na Gaeltachta agus ag Údarás na Gaeltachta le haghaidh imeachtaí Bhliain na Gaeilge 2013; agus an ndéanfaidh sé ráiteas ina thaobh. [44629/13]

**Minister of State at the Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Dinny McGinley) (Deputy Dinny McGinley):** Is sa straitéis 20 bliain don Ghaeilge 2010-2030 a leagtar amach polasaí an Rialtais maidir le cur chun cinn na Gaeilge. Cuireann an straitéis cur chuige iomlánaíoch, comhtháite i ndáil leis an nGaeilge chun cinn - cur chuige a luíonn le dea-chleachtas idirnáisiúnta. Aithnítear sa straitéis féin an gá atá le cur chuige céimnithe chun



na bearta éagsúla atá luaite inti a bhaint amach. I gcomhréir leis an cur chuige seo, tá obair leanúnach ar siúl chun raon leathan gníomhaíochtaí faoin straitéis a chur i bhfeidhm ar bhealach córasach taobh istigh de na hacmhainní atá ar fáil faoi láthair.

Ainneoin go bhfuil acmhainní an Stáit faoi bhrú mór i láthair na huaire agus go raibh cinntí crua le tógáil dá réir ag an Rialtas maidir le dáileadh na n-acmhainní sin sa cháinainéis a cuireadh i láthair na Dála an tseachtain seo caite, beidh beagnach €40 milliún le caitheamh ag mo Roinnse in 2014 ar ghnóthaí Gaeilge, Gaeltachta agus Oileán agus beidh os cionn €38 milliún le caitheamh ar ghnóthaí Thuaidh-Theas. Ní miste a rá gur figiúirí táscacha iad seo, faoi réir na Meastachán a bheith faofa amach anseo agus faoi réir chomhaontú na Comhairle Aireachta Thuaidh-Theas, i gcás na mbuiséad Thuaidh-Theas. Sa chomhthéacs seo, ní miste a rá go gcuirim fáilte ar leith roimh an €500,000 atá curtha ar fáil i cháinainéis 2014 mar allúntas ar leith don straitéis. Is léiriú follasach é seo ar chur i bhfeidhm an ghealltanais i gclár an Rialtais a deir go dtacóidh an Rialtas leis an straitéis agus go ndéanfar na spriocanna indéanta atá luaite inti a sheachadadh.

Cé go bhfuil cuspóirí uailmhianacha luaite sa straitéis chun úsáid na Gaeilge a mhéadú, ní miste a aithint go bhfuilimid ag dul sa treo ceart agus méadú tagtha ó 1.66 milliún duine go 1.77 milliún duine idir daonáireamh 2006 agus daonáireamh 2011 ar líon iomlán na ndaoine a dúirt go raibh siad ábalta Gaeilge a labhairt.

Mar is eol don Teachta, tá cur i bhfeidhm na straitéise agus cur chun cinn na Gaeilge fite fuaite trí ghníomhaíochtaí mo Roinne agus áisíneachtaí ábhartha mo Roinne, is iad sin Foras na Gaeilge agus Údarás na Gaeltachta. Maidir le Bliain na Gaeilge 2013, is tionscnamh é seo atá eagraithe ag Conradh na Gaeilge i mbliana mar chomóradh ar bhunú na heagraíochta sin 120 bliain ó shin. Tá deontas forbartha de €25,000 ceadaithe ag Foras na Gaeilge don tionscnamh agus tá urraíocht tugtha ag Údarás na Gaeltachta do chlár oibre an tionscnaimh sa Ghaeltacht. Tuigtear dom go bhfuil ag éirí go han-mhaith leis na himeachtaí éagsúla atá eagraithe faoi scáth an tionscnaimh.

**Deputy Michael P. Kitt:** D'árdaigh mé an cheist seo mar gheall ar chruinniú a bhí againn den coiste ealaíon, oidhreacht agus Gaeltachta ar an 3 Deireadh Fómhair trí sheachtain ó shin. Bhí díospóireacht againn faoi bratach Gaelach sna scoileanna. An cheist atá agam ná cén tacaíocht atá á thabhairt ag an Roinn don Ghaelbhratach agus do Bhliain na Gaeilge 2013? Cén fáth freisin ar thug an Aire Stáit €500,000 don straitéis 20 bliain ach go bhfuil gearradh siar de €1.3 milliún sa Roinn don Ghaeilge? Mar sin, tá níos mó airgid á tharraingt siar sa Roinn ná mar atá á chaiteamh. An bhfuil an Roinn ag tabhairt tacaíochta do bhliain na Gaeilge, don straitéis agus don Ghaelbhratach? Is scéim í an Gaelbhratach atá cosúil leis an mbrat glas atá ag feidhmiú sna bunscoileanna agus na meánscoileanna.

**Deputy Dinny McGinley:** Maidir le Bliain na Gaeilge agus an cuidiú atá á chur ar fáil ag an Roinn, déantar é trí Fhoras na Gaeilge agus trí Údarás na Gaeltachta. Mar adúirt mé, tá €25,000 curtha ar fáil ag Foras na Gaeilge do Bhliain na Gaeilge agus, ar ndóigh, tá an t-údarás páirteach, leis an conradh, maidir le comóradh na bliana sin sna ceantair Gaeltachta. Maidir le tacaíocht do na scoileanna, tá an Roinn an-ghníomhach ar fad ag cur tacaíochta ar fáil dóibh, go mórmhór na scoileanna sa Ghaeltacht. Déantar seo ar chúpla slí. Ceann de na slite a dhéantar é seo ná trí na cúntóirí teanga, atá á chur ar fáil i ngach scoil sa Ghaeltacht. Sílim gur scéim fhiúntach í seo agus tá ag éirí léi de réir na tuairiscí atá ag teacht ó thuismitheoirí agus ó mhúinteoirí atá páirteach sa scéim seo sna Gaeltachtaí. Tá áthas orm sa bhliain reatha go raibh ar ár gcumas méadú de €150,000 a chur leis an scéim sin. Is cinnte go bhfuil gearrthacha de breis

agus €1 milliún i ngach Roinn. Tá dúshlán ansin, ach táim iontach dóchasach gur féidir linn tabhairt faoi na dúshlán seo agus na deacrachtaí a réiteach san am amach romhainn.

**Deputy Michael P. Kitt:** Tá gearradh siar ar an méid airgid ón Roinn agus tá gearradh siar freisin ar mhaoiniú d'Údarás na Gaeltachta, cé go bhfuil cúram fiontraíochta tábhachtach ag an údarás. An aontaíonn an Aire Stáit go bhfuil sé tábhachtach úsáid na Gaeilge a spreagadh trí tacaíocht a thabhairt don údarás? An bhfuil sé sásta nach bhfuil ísliú céime tugtha don údarás maidir le fostaíocht agus le húsáid na Gaeilge a spreagadh? Tá sé an-tábhachtach postanna a chur ar fáil agus go mbeidh seans ag muintir na Gaeltachta postanna a fháil agus an Ghaeilge a úsáid agus a spreagadh ar fud na tíre.

**Deputy Dinny McGinley:** Is cinnte go bhfuil obair thábhachtach ar siúl ag Údarás na Gaeltachta sna ceantair Gaeltachta chomh fada agus a bhaineann sin le fostaíocht agus obair a chur ar fáil. Is cinnte freisin go bhfuil dualgais breise ar an údarás anois - le Acht na Gaeltachta 2012 - mar go mbeidh sé mar chúram agus mar fhreagracht air na scéimeanna teanga a fheidhmiú sna ceantair Gaeltachta. Sin an fáth gur éirigh linn €500,000 breise a fháil, le díriú isteach agus le cuidiú a thabhairt don údarás agus do na ceantair Gaeltachta a bheidh ag feidhmiú scéimeanna teanga - trí chinn i mbliana idir seo agus deireadh na bliana agus deich gcinn eile an bhliain seo chugainn.

Maidir le Údarás na Gaeltachta, is cinnte gur tháinig titim mór ar chaiteachas Údarás na Gaeltachta le roinnt blianta anuas. Mar shampla, i 2008, bhí €26 mhilliún ag Údarás na Gaeltachta mar dheontas caipitil. Thit sin an bhliain ina dhiaidh sin go dtí €16 mhilliún. I 2010 bhí sé anuas go €10 milliún agus i 2011 bhí sé ag €6 mhilliún. D'éirigh linn é a choinneáil ag sin, beag nó mór, ó shin, ach is cinnte i mbliana go bhfuil sé ag €5.7 milliún, ach beidh acmhainní dá chuid féin ag an údarás chomh maith. De réir mar a thuigim, beidh €2.4 mhilliún nó €2.5 mhilliún aige, rud a fhágann go mbeidh beagnach €8 milliún de chaiteachas caipitil ag an údarás. Tá mé dóchasach gur féidir leis an sprioc atá aige - 400 post a chruthú - a bhaint amach don bhliain amach romhainn.

### **Scoileanna Gaeltachta**

57. D'fhiafraigh **Deputy Pearse Doherty** den an Aire Ealaíon, Oidhreachta agus Gaeltachta an ndéanfaidh sé ráiteas maidir le todhchaí Eagraíocht na Scoileanna Gaeltachta Teoranta ó thaobh thacaíocht a Roinne de. [44626/13]

**Deputy Dinny McGinley:** Bunaíodh Eagraíocht na Scoileanna Gaeltachta Teoranta, nó ESG mar a thugtar air, sa bhliain 1987 mar bhrateagraíocht chun cabhair, treoir agus tacaíocht a sholáthar do bhunscoileanna agus d'iarbhunscoileanna Gaeltachta agus chun abhcóideacht a dhéanamh thar a gceann maidir le hábhair chomónta a bhaineann leo. Ón bhliain 2007 i leith, tá os cionn €780,000 ceadaithe ag mo Roinn don eagraíocht. I dtreo dheireadh 2011, bhí mo Roinn ar an eolas go raibh plé ag dul ar aghaidh idir Gaelscoileanna Teoranta agus ESG maidir leis an dá eagraíocht a chónascadh. Bhí an maoiniú a thug mo Roinn d'ESG in 2012 agus in 2013 coinníollach ar an gcónascadh sin a bheith ag tarlú. Tuigtear dom nach bhfuil an cónascadh sin ag dul ar aghaidh ag an bpointe seo. Dá bhrí sin, tiocfaidh deireadh le maoiniú mo Roinne d'ESG ag deireadh na bliana seo. Tuigtear dom fosta go bhfuil ESG ag breathnú ar an eagraíocht a scor.

San aeráid eacnamaíoch reatha, tá sé níos tábhachtaí ná riamh an éifeachtúlacht is fearr a

bhaint as allúntas an Stáitchiste. Sa chomhthéacs seo, ní miste cinneadh na Comhairle Aireachta Thuaidh-Theas ar an 10 Iúil a nótaíl, nuair a rinneadh na socrúithe nua maoinithe a thioctfaidh i gcomharbacht ar mhúnla bunmhaoinithe Fhoras na Gaeilge a fhaomhadh. Faoi na socrúithe nua maoinithe de chuid an fhorais, beidh sé eagraíocht cheannais ag feidhmiú ar bhonn uile-oileáin agus ag seachadadh tosaíochtaí straitéiseacha ar leith, lena n-áirítear tacú le hoideachas trí mheán na Gaeilge. Tá sé beartaithe go mbeidh an eagraíocht cheannais a bheidh ag plé leis an tosaíocht seo ag freastal ar scoileanna Gaeilge taobh istigh agus taobh amuigh den Ghaeltacht. Ní miste a nótaíl gur féidir le haon eagraíocht ar bith iarratas a dhéanamh ar an phróiseas léirithe suime atá fógartha ag Foras na Gaeilge ar a suíomh gréasáin, [www.forasnagaeilge.ie](http://www.forasnagaeilge.ie).

**Deputy Pearse Doherty:** Mar is eol don Aire Stáit, cuireadh in iúl d'Eagraíocht na Scoileanna Gaeltachta go dtiocfadh deireadh lena gcuid maoinithe i mí na Nollag na bliana seo caite agus, mar gheall ar sin, go dtiocfadh deireadh leis an eagraíocht féin. Níl dabht ar bith fá dtaobh de go bhfuil go leor inní ar phobal na Gaeltachta ó thaobh an ábhar seo. Is mór an buille do chúrsaí oideachais sa Ghaeltacht é. Ní mór dom a rá leis an Aire Stáit go bhfuil difear idir oideachas sa Ghaeltacht agus oideachas trí mheán na Gaeilge. Tá cur chuige ar leith ag teastáil i gcás oideachas sa Ghaeltacht. Rinne an Aire Stáit trácht ar an gcónascadh a bhí le tarlú idir Gaelscoileanna agus Eagraíocht na Scoileanna Gaeltachta Teoranta. Tá sé ag iarraidh a chur ina luí nach raibh faic tarluithe idir an dá eagrais, ach bhí go leor tarluithe mar go raibh go leor plé ar an gceist eatarthu agus go leor dul chun cinn déanta. De réir tuairiscí ó lucht na heagraíochta, bhí sé de dhualgas ar an Roinn Ealaíon, Oidhreacht agus Gaeltachta agus ar Fhoras na Gaeilge na céad céimeanna eile a thógáil. Tá sé ráite go poiblí acu go raibh an Roinn agus an foras ag tarraingt a cos ar an gcónascadh. Tá an dá eagrais seo ar tí aontú a shroichint. Tá an cumadh air go bhfuil an tAire Stáit i ndiadh an brat a bhaint óna gcos. Má leanann sé ar aghaidh mar seo, caithfear go leor saineolais a fháil fá dtaobh de déileáil le hoideachas sa Ghaeltacht. Ba chóir don Aire Stáit ról tógála a ghlacadh, in áit an ról gearrthéarmach agus gearr-radharcach atá á ghlacadh aige ar an gceist seo.

**Deputy Dinny McGinley:** Mar a dúirt mé, bhí tuiscint ann ó bhí 2011 ann go mbeadh comhtháthú idir an dá eagraíocht - Gaelscoileanna agus Eagraíocht na Scoileanna Gaeltachta. Bhí roinnt cruinnithe agam go pearsanta le hionadaithe ón eagraíocht. Bhí an tuiscint sin ead-rainn. Níl sé fíor a rá go raibh sé de chúram nó de fhreagracht ar mo Roinn nó ar aon Roinn eile iad a thabhairt le chéile. Bhí sé fágtha fúthu féin. Tá sé soiléir anois nach raibh sé sin chun tarlú, ach tharla rudaí eile idir an dá linn. Glacadh céim mhór ar aghaidh maidir le oideachas trí Ghaeilge ar an 10 Iúil, nuair a shocraíodh go mbeidh ceann de na heagraíochtaí ceannais a thioctfaidh i bhfeidhm faoin gComhairle Aireachta Thuaidh-Theas ag plé le oideachas Ghaeilge ar fud na tíre ar fad, Thuaidh agus Theas, Gaeltacht agus Galltacht. Dála an scéil, níl aon rud ag cur bac ar na scoileanna Gaeltachta cur isteach ar an eagraíocht ceannais sin. Níl fáth ar bith nach mbeidís ábalta aon eolas atá acu a chur ar fáil don eagraíocht úr uile-oileánda a bheidh ag plé le oideachas trí Ghaeilge sa tír seo.

**Deputy Pearse Doherty:** Luaigh an tAire Stáit arís na socrúithe nua maoinithe a bhaineann le Foras na Gaeilge agus leis an gComhairle Aireachta Thuaidh-Theas. Ní eagraíocht bunmhaoinithe í Eagraíocht na Scoileanna Gaeltachta sa chiall is a bhí sé i gceist leis na heagraíochtaí eile. Tá an eagraíocht ag brath ar an Roinn Ealaíon, Oidhreacht agus Gaeltachta, seachas ar an bhforas, don chuid is mó dá gcuid maoinithe. Fiú ag fágáil an cheist sin ar leataobh, bhí daoine ar an taobh istigh ar an eolas agus ar an tuiscint go mbeadh ceannáras i gceist a bheadh freagrach as oideachas trí mheán na Gaeilge. Ní raibh aon trácht ar oideachas sa Ghaeltacht a bheith faoi bhun an tsainréim seo. An athrú é seo ar critéir na sainréimithe? An raibh plé ag an

Aire Stáit leis an Aire ó Thuaidh? An raibh plé aige leis an bhforas ó thaobh bheith freagrach ar oideachas sa Ghaeltacht, nó ó thaobh todhchaí Eagraíocht na Scoileanna Gaeltachta?

**Deputy Dinny McGinley:** Bhí plé agam leis an tAire ó Thuaidh. Bíonn roinnt cruinnithe againn gach bliain i gcomhthéacs an Chomhairle Aireachta Thuaidh-Theas. Shocraigh muid go ndéanfar laghdú ó 19 go sé ar líon na heagraíochtaí bunmhaoinithe, agus go mbeadh ceann de na heagraíochtaí ceannais sin freagrach as oideachas trí Ghaeilge. Sílim gur céim ar aghaidh é go mbeidh eagraíocht ag déanamh ionadaíocht ó Thuaidh agus ó Theas anois, agus í freagrach as oideachas trí Ghaeilge a sholáthar. Beidh an eagraíocht ábalta úsáid a bhaint as an eolas atá acu ó Thuaidh agus an eolas atá againn ó Theas. Beimid uilig comhtháite le chéile. Is féidir le heagraíocht mhór amháin níos mó oibre a dhéanamh ná na heagraíochtaí a bhí ann go dtí seo. Is dul chun cinn riachtanach é sin ag an bpointe seo. Sílim gur céim ar aghaidh í. Tá áthas orm gur éirigh linn teacht ar comhthuiscint den chineál sin Thuaidh agus Theas. Tá mé iontach dóchasach go dtiocfaidh feabhas dá bharr sin ar chúrsaí oideachais trí Ghaeilge sa Ghaeltacht agus taobh amuigh den Ghaeltacht.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Peter Mathews):** That completes the questions nominated for priority. I gave bonus time there, as in the leaving certificate. We will move on to Question No. 58 in the name of Deputy Ellis.

## **Other Questions**

### **Expenditure Reviews**

58. **Deputy Dessie Ellis** asked the Minister for Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht if any progress has been made on a website portal and joint commercial and marketing strategy as outlined in the Comprehensive Review of Expenditure 2012-2014; if he will outline that progress; the projected income that such an initiative might accrue to the Exchequer; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [44239/13]

**(Deputy Jimmy Deenihan):** I refer the Deputy to my reply to Questions Nos. 37, 45, 56 and 59 on 18 September 2013.

As the Deputy may be aware, as part of the Comprehensive Review of Expenditure 2012–2014, my Department considered a range of possible options for savings in respect of its arts and culture programme area. This included a website portal and joint commercial and marketing strategy. Under the Croke Park and Haddington Road reform programme, we have now gone beyond what was contemplated by the comprehensive review of expenditure. Indeed, savings of the order of 20% to 25% in the Exchequer allocations to the cultural institutions have been made since 2010.

In tandem with that, the Government had agreed a range of reforms under the Public Service Reform Plan 2011 for a number of the national cultural institutions under the aegis of my Department. The focus within my Department and the national cultural institutions has been

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concentrated on the implementation of the reform plan and there has been an intensive engagement by all in that process. I have previously advised the House of the shared service models that are being developed for the national cultural institutions through my Department for corporate support services and, by formal inter-institutional agreement, for operational services. For example, the National Gallery of Ireland, the Irish Museum of Modern Art, IMMA, and the Crawford Art Gallery, Cork, have been working more closely together and this has recently been formally codified by way of a shared services agreement. This commits these institutions to working more closely together in a range of areas, including human resources, procurement, conservation and photography services, collection management, including cataloguing and digitisation, storage, insurance, enterprise and marketing.

Preliminary estimates for savings provided to me earlier this year indicate that approximately €100,000 will have been saved over the course of 2012 and 2013 through the shared services agenda at the three galleries.

*Additional information not given on the floor of the House*

As I outlined previously, in overall terms it is expected that operational and support savings in the region of approximately €1 million will be initially realised from the reform programme across the institutions involved, which are funded from my Department's Vote group, with further savings to be identified as the various cost efficiencies are implemented. This is all against the backdrop of respecting the programming, curatorial and operational independence of the directors.

**Deputy Sandra McLellan:** I am taking this question on behalf of Deputy Ellis. The Minister made deep and very damaging budget cuts under several headings in the Department. My question is asked on the basis that, where there are reductions in expenditure, cuts to front line and key services would be avoided as best as possible and that, where possible, such reductions in funding could be achieved through shared rather than reduced services. I mean that in a real way. Too often when this Government talks about shared services, one side or the other of an equation loses out.

I tabled a written question some time ago and the answer I received was less than satisfactory. It referred to Haddington Road, shared HR practice and to agreements between the key institutions on operational matters. A new approach to marketing strategy and a website portal would enhance the work of all these institutions and would, to a large extent, improve the web accessibility of the key institutions and museums. It could also save money for the marketing budget without necessarily cutting expenditure on exhibitions and research. Can the Minister tell us whether he will now engage with these organisations and discuss with them the benefits or drawbacks of such an approach?

**Deputy Jimmy Deenihan:** Several different options were and are being considered. I am delighted, as I outlined in my response, that last week IMMA, the National Gallery of Ireland and the Crawford Gallery signed a shared services agreement. This is unique and historical. The previous proposal was that the three galleries would be amalgamated into one. I decided against that. I thought it would not work so I left them as independent entities. However, I also asked them to share services which they are now doing, be it marketing, HR, legal or other aspects of their operations. Last week, IMMA signed up to shared services with our Department so things are really happening out there.

With regard to a website portal and a joint commercial and marketing strategy, we have not produced the website portal yet but it is a matter for consideration. We can certainly look at that option when the final rationalisation takes place and the changes occur when I introduce legislation and I can see some merits to it. It will depend on the resources available but it is not something I have totally dismissed.

**Deputy Sandra McLellan:** I thank the Minister for his answer. I am glad he will look at it. However, in times such as these, creative approaches to saving money are required and introducing such a Web portal could be of great benefit to the institutions.

**Deputy Jimmy Deenihan:** It is something we will keep under active consideration. I thank the national cultural institutions who have co-operated with my Department and officials and are very serious about rationalisation and saving money. Another departure will be reducing all numbers on State boards to nine members which, again, will result in a saving so things are happening out there, people are co-operating and there is a very good response to collaboration. I am certainly very happy with the progress. Deputy McLellan's suggestion merits serious consideration and I mean that sincerely. It will be kept on the agenda.

### **Cross-Border Co-operation**

59. **Deputy Jonathan O'Brien** asked the Minister for Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht the level of cross-Border work being undertaken by agencies under the aegis of his Department; the way in which relationships between arts, heritage and language bodies can be strengthened by his Department; the steps he will take to that end; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [44243/13]

**Deputy Jimmy Deenihan:** I assure the Deputy that my Department is fully committed to supporting North-South co-operation, particularly in the context of the Good Friday Agreement and the St. Andrews Agreement.

As the Deputy will be aware, my Department funds two of the six North-South implementation bodies established under the 1999 British-Irish Agreement. These are Waterways Ireland and An Foras Teanga, which comprises two agencies - Foras na Gaeilge and the Ulster-Scots Agency-Tha Boord o Ulstèr-Scotch. These implementation bodies carry out a range of activities in line with their statutory remits. They operate under the policy direction of the North-South Ministerial Council, NSMC, and are supported by funding from their two sponsor Departments - my Department and Northern Ireland's Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure.

In addition to the language and inland waterways sectors, my Department and bodies funded from its core Vote continue to explore ways of deepening and enhancing North-South co-operation. In this regard, my Department works closely with the British-Irish Council and supports artists on an all-Ireland basis to present their work internationally. Other areas of cross-Border co-operation include work on the planning of commemorations, collaborations between museums on either side of the Border and participation by a number of projects in Northern Ireland in Culture Night 2013 as well as engagement on built and natural heritage and environmental matters. For example, last April I accepted the invitation of the Northern Ireland Minister for Culture, Arts and Leisure, Carál Ní Chuilín, MLA, to visit Belfast and see at first hand some of the excellent work underway in that city in regard to language and culture and to meet with representatives of organisations active in that area. My colleague, the Minister of State, Deputy

McGinley, has also taken the opportunity of attending other cross-Border cultural functions, including Robbie Burns concerts and the launch of the Ulster-Scots Foundation Certificate in Highland Piping at Stormont.

Finally, I can advise the Deputy that I, along with the Minister of State, participate regularly in meetings of the NSMC in both the waterways and language sectoral formats. Four sectoral meetings have taken place to date in 2013 with another two planned for November. In addition, I participate at the highest level when the NSMC meets in plenary format.

**Deputy Sandra McLellan:** I am taking this question on behalf of Deputy O'Brien.

Clearly, we are a small island with substantial commonalities North and South as well as some differences, particularly in respect of the political dispensations that exist on either side of the Border. However, there are a number of key bodies on either side of the Border which deal with similar things. In particular, Foras na Gaeilge is one of the key all-Ireland bodies under the Good Friday Agreement and functions under the North-South Ministerial Council. More particularly, I wish to inquire about the arts and heritage bodies. This is particularly important in light of the significance of arts and heritage to our cultural identity. During the decade of centenaries we need to reflect on how matters which previously caused division were expressed through the arts and to consider how this generation might celebrate and commemorate our shared artistic heritage in a way that is not divisive. Will the Minister consider meeting the Minister for Culture, Arts and Leisure in the North on a regular basis to discuss matters relating to arts and heritage with?

**Deputy Jimmy Deenihan:** I am pleased to confirm that I meet Deputy McLellan's party colleague on a regular basis and that we have a good relationship. We will shortly be launching a programme, Gaeilge gan Stró, in the Dáil. I am sure Members will be invited to the launch. We launched the programme on Falls Road some time ago and we will launch it here when it is ready. The Arts Council and the Arts Council of Northern Ireland work closely with each other and both the Minister, Carál Ní Chuilín, MLA, and I have asked them to work closely together. We will be attending a joint meeting of the arts councils presently, which I have been requesting for some time. I hope the preparations have been put in place to allow us to meet. We have jointly launched a number of initiatives over the past two years. We agreed on a new approach to funding the Irish language and organisations. This approach was historical because it was around since 2004. We put it together with the Minister of State in my Department, Deputy McGinley. We enjoy close co-operation and I would personally like us to do even more together. A number of initiatives are envisaged on which we can work together.

**Deputy Sandra McLellan:** I thank the Minister for his reply. I accept the points he made about Foras na Gaeilge and Irish language co-operation. However, as regards other matters in his Department's remit, has he taken steps to ensure co-operation? Perhaps he might consider developing a framework for the arm's length bodies in order that such matters might be discussed.

**Deputy Jimmy Deenihan:** My officials maintain contact with their counterparts in Northern Ireland and they enjoy a good working relationship. There is considerable co-operation that people do not see. People are working closely together to avoid excessive duplication. A great example in the arts is the cross-Border youth orchestra, which is a very successful organisation made up of young people from both sides of the Border. They work closely together to produce good content and they travel to the UK and the USA. Although they work under the radar, they

are very effective. The orchestra is funded by the Irish Government and the Northern Ireland Assembly. There are good examples of which we do not often hear. I think we should hear about them more often.

### **Arts Funding**

60. **Deputy Clare Daly** asked the Minister for Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht if he will restore the 30% cut in arts funding which has taken place over the past five years, as a necessary measure to protect our culture and local artistic jobs and centres. [43519/13]

63. **Deputy Mick Wallace** asked the Minister for Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht the sections of the arts that will be affected by the most recent 7% cut in budget 2014; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [44524/13]

**Deputy Jimmy Deenihan:** I propose to take Questions Nos. 60 and 63 together.

My Department has policy responsibility for the conservation, preservation, protection, development and preservation of Ireland's heritage and culture. It also seeks to promote the Irish language, support the Gaeltacht and assist the sustainable development of island communities. A gross provision of over €238 million is being made available to my Department in 2014. A further €7.5 million is provided separately for the National Gallery of Ireland. In broad terms, the 2014 allocations are as follows: almost €123 million for arts, culture and film, including almost €56 million for the Arts Council and €14 million for the Irish Film Board; almost €45 million for the conservation and protection of Ireland's built and natural heritage; almost 40 million for the Irish language, the Gaeltacht and the islands; and over €38 million for north-South co-operation, including support for two North-South implementation bodies, Waterways Ireland and An Foras Teanga.

For 2014 there has been a core reduction of approximately €16.9 million, or 7%, in Exchequer funding to my Department. Therefore, as with every other Minister, difficult choices had to be made with regard to funding for next year. Notwithstanding this, and even with a reduced departmental budget, every week more than €2.3 million will be invested in arts, culture and film next year. That funding will go to a range of beneficiaries, including the Arts Council, the Irish Film Board, the national cultural institutions, regional museums, art centres, artists and arts and culture organisations. This weekly allocation will help to maintain and support the important role played by the arts in innovation and expression, job creation and economic recovery. In addition, funding for three jobs-rich initiatives, totalling €17 million, is also being made available. This will have a considerable positive impact on the arts and heritages sectors throughout 2014. The €17 million is new and additional funding that comes from the proceeds of the national lottery licence transaction. It includes €6 million for the Limerick city of culture in 2014, €6 million for projects relating to the decade of centenaries and €5 million for the 2014 traditional skills and buildings at risk jobs leverage scheme.

Funding for the arts, culture and film represents a significant contribution not only to sustaining the arts and national cultural institutions, but also to job creation. In line with other Departments, difficult choices needed to be made in this year's budget. As has been made clear, this budget is above all about strengthening our economy, creating jobs and exiting the bailout. I am confident that the allocation of more than €238 million to my Department will play a role in that respect not only by maintaining and supporting the important role the arts play in innova-



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tion and expression, but also in the potential for job creation in these sectors and for economic recovery.

The Government has reaffirmed its commitment to continuing to make progress, improving the economy, exiting the bailout and helping to create jobs. My Department and the sectors it represents will make a significant contribution to this work during the course of 2014.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Peter Mathews):** Deputy Clare Daly will ask the first supplementary question, followed by Deputy Wallace. Deputy Kevin Humphreys will also ask a question. The Deputies will have one minute each.

**Deputy Clare Daly:** I honestly believed that the Minister was answering a different question at the start. While it is heartening that he is confident that the money will go a long way, he is probably the only person in that category. He is missing the essential point, namely, that the trajectory of funding for the arts has been spiralling downwards in recent years. This year, it reached a critical point that even the one-off lottery allocation will in no way help. For the providers of the arts, many jobs are being jeopardised and many projects are on a knife's edge.

Last year's cut of 7% on top of the cuts of previous six years was a cut too far. For example, Culture Ireland has seen a 21% cut in its funding. Organisations such as it promote Ireland abroad. They herald and trumpet our great artistic achievements, but they cannot do so if the Government takes money out of their projects. Many projects are in jeopardy. If their budgets are cut, they cannot keep doing the job that they are supposed to do. I wonder how the Minister will square that circle.

**Deputy Jimmy Deenihan:** The Deputy is undoubtedly aware that this is a part of the framework. It was publicised last year, so people knew what their reductions would be. In 2006, there was a reduction of 24.3%. In 2009, there was a reduction of 10%. When I got the opportunity to work on the allocation for 2012, there was just a reduction of 2.9%. The Deputy mentioned a figure of 7% for the cut announced last year, but it was actually 4%. Unfortunately, the cut next year will be more than 7%. The National Museum and other national cultural institutions are under pressure to stay open and provide services, so I needed to limit the reduction in their funding. Some €6 million has been provided for the Limerick city of culture. Artists from all over the country will benefit, not just people in Limerick. They will get an opportunity.

I accept that Culture Ireland is important. We send our artists all over the world with a positive message about Ireland. However, its €2.5 million remains a great deal of money and I needed to focus funding on what was happening inside the country as much as on sending people abroad.

*3 o'clock*

**Deputy Clare Daly:** The fact that it was a smaller cut under the Minister's budget last year is missing the central point, which is that the Arts Council alone has had a cut of 34% since 2008. Obviously the arts cost money but we get that money back in multiples by investing in it. The Minister has not really dealt with that issue. If these organisations are given money to promote local groups, but that money is being cut, how can they then keep going? Many people, including young independent film makers, are being driven out of this country. They have talents which other countries will pick up. It is short-sighted to reduce funding in this way. This year, we will give €50 million to National Toll Roads for the Westlink toll bridge which has been paid for twice over, yet the arts budget gets butchered. It does not make any sense

whatsoever.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Peter Mathews):** The Minister should keep his reply as tight as he can because Deputy Kevin Humphreys has a question.

**Deputy Jimmy Deenihan:** I have been trying to encourage philanthropy in order to make up for the shortfall in Government funding. This is working to some extent. Last year, I had a small philanthropic scheme of €220,000 which yielded up to €800,000. I am trying to encourage more arts organisations to engage with business - like the "Business to Arts" organisation is doing - to make up that gap as much as possible through philanthropic measures. The Arts Council's RAISE scheme has held fundraisers for a number of organisations. Hopefully they will be able to make up for that reduction through such initiatives. I am trying to encourage this as much as possible.

People seem to forget that this country was broke and is still being challenged. Every Department has had to make a sacrifice, including my own. I inherited reduced budgets in the three sectors that form my Department. For example, the built heritage budget was cut from €15 million to €3 million. I inherited a small budget compared to others. I am doing my best to spread it as much as possible.

**Deputy Mick Wallace:** I do not hold the Minister responsible for cuts to the arts and I understand that it is Government policy. However, there is a serious lack of joined-up thinking, while short-term policies are being implemented by this Government. The Government is aware that we are not exploiting the massive tourism potential here. Other countries like Italy and Spain take in much more tourism revenue than Ireland as a percentage of GDP. We have an incredible potential to maximise tourism potential to much greater effect than at present.

Recently conducted independent research shows that the arts industry alone is worth a minimum of €700 million for this country. Approximately 2,500 people are directly employed in the sector. Tourism figures are up this year in Dublin and I can vouch for that in my own businesses. Hitting Culture Ireland now is not the way to improve things next year. It is a retrograde step to cut arts funding and it does not make sense.

**Deputy Jimmy Deenihan:** The arts are very much part of our tourism offering. For example, over 1 million tourists visit the National Museum annually. Our cultural institutions are free and we are trying to keep them that way because they are a huge attraction. The number of people coming to Ireland for the cultural encounter is increasing all the time. If The Gathering proved one thing, it was that most of the events were connected with the arts which constitute an important part of our tourism industry.

Culture Ireland supports artists to travel abroad and promote this country in their own way. I try to ensure that funding is kept at home as much as possible because we are under budgetary pressure. At the same time, Culture Ireland, which is part of my Department, will continue funding people to go abroad. We are trying to maximise the benefit from that funding. I have changed Culture Ireland to include the IDA, as well as Tourism Ireland and other State agencies, so that when an artist is going abroad these national agencies can capitalise on the presence of some of our best artists. In that way, they can bring their clients along and do other promotions with them. This is happening. We must get more for less.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Peter Mathews):** For time efficiency purposes, we will take the supplementary questions from Deputies Kevin Humphreys, Mick Wallace and Sandra McLel-

lan together.

**Deputy Kevin Humphreys:** As already stated, arts groups play an important role in Irish society in terms of them being ambassadors for Ireland at home and abroad. I know from my interaction with arts groups that they have done more with less over the past number of years. Planning and budgetary matters require certainty. Currently, arts groups can only plan from year to year. Will the Minister consider the introduction of multi-annual budgeting for this sector during the remainder of the lifetime of this Government, which would provide certainty and allow those involved to engage in long-term planning in respect of the services they wish to provide in the coming years? Would it be possible to provide this sector with a level of certainty in regard to funding over the coming years?

**Deputy Mick Wallace:** I am sure the Minister will share my view that investing in the arts is a double winner for this State in that any money spent on arts is good for the development of any country. It is also an economic winner. Greater investment in sports would also be a double winner. Not only is sport good mentally for the young people involved but it reaps dividends by helping to reduce our health bills in terms of addressing issues such as obesity and alcohol-related problems, which are costing the State approximately €6 billion.

**Deputy Sandra McLellan:** There has been a reduction of €9.2 million in arts funding, including an 8% reduction this year in culture and film funding on top of a 5% reduction last year. Less funding in arts means less arts in local communities and, more specifically, fewer plays and exhibitions and less support for young people getting involved in the arts. These cuts will result in the arts being only accessible to a few rather being a property of the people.

The Minister referred earlier to philanthropy. Has he given up on trying to secure Bank of Ireland, College Green for the arts?

**Deputy Jimmy Deenihan:** As regards multi-annual funding, as somebody who has been involved in a number of arts organisations for the past 30 years I agree with Deputy Humphreys on the issue of certainty around funding. I refer the Deputy to the framework published two years by the Government. The Arts Council is well aware of its budget. The Government was able to give the Arts Council more during the past two years under that framework. It is hoped the reduction for next year can be minimised. While that is not certainty it is positive. The likelihood is that unless there is a return to growth in the country there will be no change in what is already provided for under the framework.

On the point made by Deputy Wallace, we are all agreed that the arts is one of our strongest calling cards. Up to €1 billion has been invested in the arts in this country, some of which it should be acknowledged was provided by previous Governments. For example, physical plant throughout the country has been improved and there are now some high quality theatres around the country, including the recently opened Garage in Monaghan. It is hoped the Tullamore project and proposed Solas cinema in Galway will go ahead. We are still providing funding for the arts. There has also been a huge investment in human resources. There is a really vibrant and exciting young arts community in this country, including in the visual and performing arts. These people are producing content despite funding having been reduced. I encourage them to continue to be positive and to do things.

During the tributes in this House to Seamus Heaney a Deputy attacked the Government on the issue of arts funding, which was a little inappropriate at that time, and asked from where

would come the next Seamus Heaney. There was very little funding available to encourage writers when Seamus Heaney was a young man. Creativity rather than funding is required.

On Deputy McLellan's question, engagement with the Bank of Ireland is ongoing. It is hoped some accommodation can be found in the future, but it is not over by any means. I know that Deputy Ó Fearghaíl got a different response, perhaps from the Bank of Ireland director or whoever, but there are still ongoing discussions and it is hoped something will happen before 2016. Many possibilities are still being considered.

## **Arts Funding**

**61. Deputy Dara Calleary** asked the Minister for Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht the plans he has to advance further subsidised living space for artists in our cities, similar to the scheme established in Limerick; if he is concerned at the increasing financial pressures facing Irish artists; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [44502/13]

**Minister for Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Jimmy Deenihan):** The development of St. John's artists' apartments at St. John's Square, Limerick, was project managed by Limerick City Council and grant aided by my Department under the arts and culture capital enhancement support scheme, or ACCESS II. The development consists of eight apartments which provide accommodation and studio space for artists. Similar projects were grant aided under the ACCESS II scheme, in Athlone, County Westmeath, and two in Dublin city. The grants were made following a call for arts capital projects in 2006 and 2007 and were selected along with more than 70 other projects from in excess of 150 arts and culture projects. I have no plans at present for any new major arts and culture capital grant scheme similar to the ACCESS II scheme. My Department had a small capital grants scheme available this year that offered support to 29 projects. The maximum amount available under this scheme was €10,000.

The organisation with primary responsibility for artists' welfare is the Arts Council. Under the Arts Act 2003, the Arts Council is statutorily independent in its day-to-day operations and neither I nor my Department has a role to play in its executive or funding decisions.

My Department has also provided funding for a number of other capital projects in Limerick. These included the Belltable, Limerick City Gallery of Art, the Irish Chamber Orchestra, Daghda Dance and the Hunt Museum. The total investment in arts and culture infrastructure was in excess of €6.2 million, which will greatly assist in the delivery of a world-class arts and culture programme next year when Limerick hosts the first Irish national city of culture. The Government has allocated €6 million towards this historic year, which I anticipate will provide significant employment opportunities for artists in Limerick over the coming months.

**Deputy Seán Ó Fearghaíl:** I think it was a Visual Artists Ireland survey recently which indicated that young artists throughout the country are earning about €17,000, and that income is very precarious. One of the things we can do to assist them is to provide subsidised living accommodation, or subsidised workshop or gallery space. That is why the Limerick Arts Office is to be particularly praised for the work done in Limerick city. What sort of funding did the Department make available to that project? Would the Minister consider engaging with NAMA in respect of its many properties, especially in the cities and the larger urban centres? I suspect that such engagement could lead to similar developments taking place whereby residential units and workshop and gallery space could be acquired to assist the arts community. Such an initia-

tive would be worthwhile.

**Deputy Jimmy Deenihan:** The grant from our Department was €384,000, which is substantial. I opened the apartments and I got a very positive response from the artists concerned. They now can rent space in the city, whereas previously they had to pay high accommodation costs there. Work space is provided with the apartment, where they can do some of their backup work in their own apartments.

Calls were made in the past to engage with NAMA. There was general engagement, although I am prohibited by legislation from direct engagement. The Abbey Theatre acquired a major property from NAMA, which will now ensure it will have the footprint on which to build a new Abbey when it can afford it. The Lighthouse Cinema also represented a very positive engagement with NAMA as well, and now that cinema is very successful. I am sure there are other examples, but these are two very important examples. NAMA is also involved in Moore Street and I hope that, in time, with the co-operation of Dublin City Council, the owners and NAMA, we can get a satisfactory resolution to ensure we have a proper interpretative centre and monument on the street to honour the people of 1916.

**Deputy Pearse Doherty:** I agree with the position in respect of NAMA when it comes to living spaces. I am encouraged by the Minister's reply on College Green, but his failure to secure that property two years later is quite disappointing. Can the Minister look at the properties within his own Department? I did an analysis of Údarás na Gaeltachta buildings at the start of this year, and over half of them in Donegal are lying vacant. Can the Minister look at making vacant properties in his Department available to those within the arts who need the space in order that we can encourage the arts, following the reduction of funding that has taken place in recent years?

**Deputy Jimmy Deenihan:** If the Deputy has a list of buildings, he should bring them to my attention. I am not aware of these particular buildings. At one stage it looked like the State would own more than 50% of the College Green building, but now it is 15%, so we are in a much different position. We are continuing discussions with the authorities.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Peter Mathews):** The Deputy heard what the Minister said. If he has a list of the buildings, please provide them to the Minister.

### **Topical Issue Matters**

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Peter Mathews):** 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 Jonathan O'Brien -

the need for funding for the Cork local drugs task force;

(2) Deputies Simon Harris, Andrew Doyle and Terence Flanagan - the reduction in capacity of the DART service;

(3) Deputy Jim Daly -

the options available to persons contractually obliged to retire after January 2014;

(4) Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív - the need for emergency funding to be provided to the St. Nicholas of Myra Centre; (5) Deputy Paudie Coffey - the need to resource the senior alert scheme adequately; (6) Deputy Charles Flanagan - the need to resource the senior alert scheme adequately;

(7) Deputy Seamus Kirk - the current update of the Walsh report on symphysiotomy;

(8) Deputies Sean Fleming and Michelle Mulherin - the reduced planning development contributions in respect of wind turbines which are not supplying electricity to the national grid;

(9) Deputy John Deasy - modifications to the rates refund system for vacant commercial properties as proposed in the Local Government Bill 2013;

(10) Deputy Lucinda Creighton - that Dáil Éireann and Seanad Éireann be given an enhanced role in the scrutiny of EU legislation and policy;

(11) Deputy Clare Daly - the need to emphasise this country's neutrality in relation to an international campaign against the use of drones;

(12) Deputy Martin Ferris - an incident involving an infant in Bons Secours Hospital, Cork, last month;

(13) Deputy Barry Cowen - the impact of changes to the one-parent tax credit, in particular the significant financial loss that will result to many families;

(14) Deputy Denis Naughten - the need to review the decision to close the acute psychiatric unit in Ballinasloe, County Galway;

(15) Deputy Billy Kelleher - the need to issue a medical card automatically to protect children receiving palliative care; (16) Deputy Mick Wallace - the need to emphasise this country's neutrality in relation to an international campaign against the use of drones;

(17) Deputy Mattie McGrath - the need to address a proposed EirGrid grid link project and its possible impact on communities of south Tipperary;

(18) Deputy Dessie Ellis - the need to supply GPS enabled beacons for sufferers of dementia and similar disorders for their own safety.

The matters raised by Deputies Jonathan O'Brien, Seamus Kirk, Simon Harris, Andrew Doyle and Terence Flanagan, and Sean Fleming and Michelle Mulherin have been selected for discussion.

### **Leaders' Questions**

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** It is very clear that the policy choices that the Government took last year and in has taken in this year's budget impact far more severely on children, sick people

and our older population. Since July, Deputy Kelleher and I have been raising consistently the policy choice that the Government took last year to cull discretionary medical cards on an ongoing basis. Two weeks ago I raised this with the Taoiseach and I asked him to listen to people in this House and elsewhere on the discretionary medical card issue. We gave a range of individual cases where this was happening, but the Taoiseach chose to deny reality and he did not listen. It took Lydia Cleary and many others to come on “Liveline” last week to confirm once and for all what everybody knew, namely, that there was a wholesale withdrawal of discretionary medical cards from very sick children, very sick adults and people aged over 70. It exposed the untruths that were being articulated by the Taoiseach and the Minister for Health on the discretionary medical card issue.

Jonathan Irwin of the Jack and Jill Children’s Foundation has provided further confirmation of this. A glance at that organisation’s Facebook page shares the experience of many parents of children who are cared for by the Jack and Jill Children’s Foundation and their experience of the medical card issue, in particular the discretionary medical card.

In addition older people have lost their discretionary medical cards. A 67 year old gentleman at end-stage renal failure lost his medical card. A 70 year old with very complex ongoing medical conditions lost his medical card. There are many more in life-threatening situations. The Taoiseach keeps saying there was no change. However, the 2013 service plan, approved by the Minister for Health, Deputy Reilly, stated that policy changes would lead to a reduction of approximately 40,000 medical cards as a result of changes to income calculations, including for those over 70.

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

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** That has been the case from the beginning and it is why letters have been issuing all year to different families and communities. That is why people are terrified about next year and the provision in the budget for a reduction of €113 million on the basis of this wonderful word “probity”. They know what happened this year when the edict went out from Government to start removing cards from people. That is why people are concerned about random reviews that were initiated last year.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Put the question, Deputy.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** Will the Taoiseach acknowledge that there has been an ongoing policy of withdrawing medical cards and will he intervene to reverse that policy? It is never too late to change. This has been one of the most disgraceful manifestations of what the Government has been up to in the past 12 months. People throughout the country are witnessing it. Will the Government also withdraw the budget decision to take 35,000 medical cards from those over 70 as a result of the reduction of the income thresholds?

**Deputy Michael Healy-Rae:** The Taoiseach should tell the thousands of people protesting outside that there has been no change.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** This is Leaders’ Questions.

**Deputy Michael Healy-Rae:** Let him answer that.

**The Taoiseach:** One of the fundamental reasons we need to make difficult choices and difficult changes in the structure of our health system is to cut the cost while preserving the

services for those who need them. The main thrust of the changes being brought about is to protect services for those who need them - children, the sick and the elderly. We are doing that against a background of unmitigated disaster, which was aided in the main part by the gentleman speaking opposite.

**Deputy Robert Dowds:** Hear, hear. The Deputy should put on his sackcloth and ashes.

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

**The Taoiseach:** Deputy Martin was a member of a group that ran this country-----

**Deputy Robert Dowds:** Into the ground.

**The Taoiseach:** -----when we had more money that would ever have dealt with many of the major problems we have to face. He failed to reform that service. He promised to end hospital waiting lists within two years when he sat on these benches.

**Deputy Michael Healy-Rae:** The Taoiseach made his fair share of promises himself.

**The Taoiseach:** During Deputy Martin's 14 years sitting at the Cabinet table, the overruns in health amounted to €2.2 billion. He was the architect of the PPARS debacle which started at €9 million and ended up at €200 million. Above all, he promised to extend medical cards to an extra 200,000 people during his term, when in fact he cut them by 100,000.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** No, the Taoiseach is wrong again.

**Deputy Robert Dowds:** The Deputy should put on his sackcloth and ashes.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** The Taoiseach could not be right on that.

**The Taoiseach:** He has the cheek to come in here now and use his opportunistic political opportunity to say these things. The Minister, Deputy Reilly-----

**Deputy Robert Troy:** Great man.

**The Taoiseach:** -----against the most difficult economic background, has managed in these past two years to make serious changes to the structure of our health system, reducing the cost of the services, but protecting the services.

**Deputy Michael Healy-Rae:** Tell that to the thousands outside.

**The Taoiseach:** Deputy Martin said the policy changes were directed at children, sick people and old people. I do not suppose, therefore, that he wants to change tack in respect of 240,000 children under the age of five having free access to GP care.

**Deputy Robert Troy:** At whose expense?

**The Taoiseach:** I know Deputy Martin understands this because when he was Minister for Health and Children and the chief medical officer of the Department at the time suggested that free GP care should be extended to every child in the country, he supported it but then ran away and did nothing about it, just as he did with most other issues he faced.

In respect of discretionary medical cards, it is important to understand that the number of people with access to free GP care is the highest ever in the State. Some 43% of our population



now have that access. There are 1.866 million full medical cards and 124,900 GP-visit cards, giving a total of 1,991,000. When people have a GP-visit card, it means they have free access to their doctor, which is the start of the analysis to determine what little problem they might have. On becoming Minister for Health, Deputy Reilly instructed the HSE to appoint a clinical panel to assist in the process of vetting applications for discretionary medical cards. That ensures the specific circumstances of a person with a particular diagnosis can be determined case by case. I want to say this to Deputy Martin, politician to politician, man to man, citizen to citizen: I saw some of the cases mentioned in the media and these were cases that the system should have been able to deal with-----

**Deputy Timmy Dooley:** Blame the system.

**The Taoiseach:** -----but because of the process of change, something was missed. I know of two cases where the card has been granted in the meantime because of the full information becoming available.

**Deputy Robert Troy:** Because of “Liveline”.

**Deputy Timmy Dooley:** Thanks to Joe Duffy.

**Deputy Barry Cowen:** Ring Joe.

**The Taoiseach:** According to the most recently published information, there was a reduction of about 24,000 in the number of discretionary medical cards between the start of 2011 and July 2013. Of those 24,000, some 23,000 were awarded a medical card on the basis of full assessment of their income. On Monday, 14 October, the Minister, Deputy Reilly, met the chief executive of the HSE and the primary care team to express concerns directly about the communications, the letters, the answering of phones, the interest being expressed in dealing with difficult cases.

This might be of interest to Members of the House. By 1 October 2013, of the 97,121 people who held discretionary cards at the time of the assessment in March 2011, 38,000, or 39%, still held a discretionary medical card, 43,000 had ordinary medical cards based on the assessment, and 17,000, or 18%, had no medical card. When that 17,000 was analysed, 2,361, or 14%, were deceased, 6,265, or 38%, did not respond to correspondence from the HSE and their medical cards were suspended, 12% engaged in the review process but did not follow it through, and 6,165, or 37%, completed the review process and were found to be ineligible for a medical card or a GP-visit card. That represents 6.5% of all the people who held a discretionary card on 1 March 2011.

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

**The Taoiseach:** Yesterday I had a meeting with the personnel involved in this. A completely new communications strategy has been put in place to deal with people and allay their fears and concerns that those who need a medical card will get one and that those who require services will get them. As the Deputy knows, we have full medical cards, GP-visit cards, discretionary cards, emergency cards, long-term illness cards and cards on review. Sometimes these things can be very confusing. In fairness to the people who work in the HSE and want to be able to deal with these things, sometimes the information is not supplied. We are rectifying that.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** The Taoiseach did not answer the questions I asked. For example,

I asked if the Government would reverse the decision in the budget to take 35,000 medical cards from older people and he studiously ignored and avoided answering that question. I think the Taoiseach must be the only person in the country who believes there has not been a consistent attempt and policy to withdraw discretionary medical cards from people. The Taoiseach should read up on the case of Ms Lydia Cleary and her daughter, Eirin. She made all of those points; it was not an issue of communications. It is not about hard cases. The Taoiseach should stop all of that nonsense. Thousands of cards have been taken from people throughout the country, as every Deputy in this House has acknowledged. Eventually, the Taoiseach acknowledged it because his own Deputies got to him at their party's Ard-Fheis.

We all know what is happening and we have all instanced individual cases. Let us consider Katie Connolly's case this morning in the *Irish Examiner*. She is a young Down's syndrome child with juvenile arthritis. Her card is up on 13 November. It is policy. It should not have had to wait until yesterday when the Taoiseach intervened in this case. We have been saying this for months. It should have been when the service plan was approved last year, in 2013. The Taoiseach and the Minister for Health, Deputy Reilly, approved the plan in terms of a deliberate decision. It was a message to the HSE to find the savings in the General Medical Services, GMS, scheme. The Minister of State, Deputy White, confirmed it in May in the House before a committee. Let us consider the document that the HSE produced before the Oireachtas committee. It referred to the random reviews undertaken as part of the full suite of reviews to assist in determining that a medical card or general practitioner visit card meet the eligibility criteria. By God, the HSE has stuck by the new eligibility criteria.

Did anyone see the HSE official on "Prime Time" last Thursday night? Did the Taoiseach watch it? Christians among us would have been intrigued because on the third occasion he suddenly relented and it became evident that there was a change of policy. The interviewer identified one, two and then three policy changes in terms of the income guidelines in respect of medical card guidelines.

The Taoiseach should stop telling untruths to the public in respect of discretionary medical cards and stop all of this clever language to the effect that those who are entitled will get one.

**Deputy Bernard J. Durkan:** What language is that?

**Deputy Barry Cowen:** It is waffling.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** Those who have been entitled to it for the past year or two years have been denied it in case after case.

The pattern in the Taoiseach's replies is very consistent. For the Taoiseach, there is always someone else to blame for choices that are made on his watch.

*(Interruptions).*

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Order, please. Calm down.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** Today-----

*(Interruptions).*

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Deputy Martin, you are over time.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** I will conclude.

*(Interruptions).*

**Deputy Michael Healy-Rae:** Go and face the people outside.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** Today, very obviously-----

**Deputy Michael Healy-Rae:** Go and face the people outside.

**Deputy Finian McGrath:** The Government is hiding.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** Today, it is the system.

**Deputy Michael Healy-Rae:** Go to the gate and face them. The Government ran from them today.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Deputy, I told you already. Deputy Martin, to conclude.

*(Interruptions).*

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** I am endeavouring to conclude, a Leas-Cheann Comhairle. There is always someone else to blame. Today it is the system. Now, we have learned the Minister for Health, Deputy Reilly, has had meetings with the officials to tell them how to do communications better. I suggest that some of those officials are laughing behind the idea that the Minister, Deputy James Reilly, would give them advice on how to communicate better. That is a bit rich too.

The real issue I am raising today-----

**A Deputy:** They should listen to Joan.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** I am not into personalities. It should not take the mother of a very young sick child to come on the national airwaves to get a decision reversed in respect of her entitlement to a medical card. That is the bottom line.

This is affecting thousands of families throughout the country. I called on a family yesterday to whom the same thing happened. They have a five-year-old with a rare chromosomal condition and the card was taken from that young child. I do not want to come to the House every week listing case after case, because when one gets case after case one begins to realise it is systemic and not simply one individual hard case or a failure of communications. It is systemic. That is the point which I and Deputy Billy Kelleher have been trying to get through to the Taoiseach for the last number of months. There is something systemically wrong and it goes back to a policy decision that the Government took on health in last year's service plan and in this year's budget, although the budget is now up in the air in respect of medical cards.

**The Taoiseach:** The answer to Deputy Martin's question in respect of the change being brought about for over 70s and their medical cards is "No". There will be no change in that. I have already pointed out that 85% of the over 70s will still retain their medical cards.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** He said it was 97% last week.

**The Taoiseach:** It will be in the high 90s and those who do not have a medical card will have the GP card which gives them free access to their doctor. The weekly income is €500 for a single person and €900 for a couple in order to receive a GP visit card and the House knows what that means. Even after the change, at least 93% of persons over 70 years will still have access to a free GP card. I said 97% last week on the basis of figures coming in.

I will say this much: I recall Deputy Martin saying on discretionary medical cards-----

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** I would be happy to debate that some other time.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** The question has been asked.

**The Taoiseach:** It is not a case of having someone to blame. Deputy Martin put his foot in it and his footprints are all over the place. Deputy Martin said previously that there would be a clarification of the guidelines under which health board chief executives issue discretionary medical cards and that there were clearly variations between health boards in terms of how they administer them.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** The health boards are gone eight or nine years.

**The Taoiseach:** We should not have situations like those involving the children and their mothers who I saw on the television. We have 1.9 million medical cards issued. I put it to Deputy Martin that after speaking to these people directly there was a systems failure that did not take into account or did not know about the information involved, whether it be a failure on some of the people in sending in information. I was given an indication this week that some do not reply.

**Deputy Robert Troy:** Is the Taoiseach blaming the parents now?

**The Taoiseach:** Some get scared when a letter comes from the HSE but we are changing all of that so that where children need attention or, in particular, facilities, aides or appliances, the system is able to cope with that.

**Deputy Barry Cowen:** It is not.

**The Taoiseach:** There is a centralisation of it whereby the assessment is the same for everyone whether in Donegal, Kerry, Waterford or Louth. The change in that structure has led to these cases being highlighted. I hope that out of all this difficulty for the parents and their children the matter will be addressed and it will be. I have spoken to parents myself.

*(Interruptions).*

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** The question is asked.

**The Taoiseach:** I have spoken myself to parents in the last few days. We have had some

exceptional cases where because of a lack of information or whatever they have been refused.

**Deputy Barry Cowen:** It is because of policy decisions.

**The Taoiseach:** The question of aides and appliances and the treatment of these will all be addressed. It may well be, as Deputy Martin rightly pointed out, that of all of the ministries, the Department of Health is the most challenging because one never knows what pressures may arise from difficulties in various parts of the country. The Minister, Deputy Reilly, is seeking, at central level, to cut the cost of the provision of the services and maintain services so that the children, the sick, the elderly and anyone else who needs medical attention can have it available as close as possible. The answer to Deputy Martin's question is that there will be no change now in the budgetary position which has gone through. These will be implemented.

There are challenges facing the health area but they can be met in the context of a change of culture and a change of structure which will bring about far more cost-effective services for all our people who need them. The evidence in respect of discretionary medical cards speaks for itself. Since the beginning of this year 20,000 new medical cards have been issued on a discretionary basis. Even in the middle of all that, when the assessments were taken into account, many of those people-----

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** There are 26,000 fewer medical cards now.

**The Taoiseach:** Many of them were well in excess of the guidelines for medical cards but because of the weighting attached to their particular discretionary requirements the cards were issued. Fully 20,000 new discretionary cards since the beginning of this year have been issued. Significant numbers of those people were well in excess of the guidelines set down.

**Deputy Gerry Adams:** Tá seanfhocal ann a deireann - Is cuma le fear na mbróg cá leagann sé a chos. Cuireann an seanfhocal seo Rialtas an Taoisigh i gcuimhne dom. The Taoiseach said there would be no change in these awful, spiteful, shameful, *sleekit* measures that the Government has brought in. The Taoiseach must be aware that senior citizens are outside protesting. They are deeply concerned about the reduction of the over 70s medical card, the ending of the bereavement grant, the axing of the telephone allowance and the increase in prescription charges. The Government has now targeted €113 million in cuts to the medical card system in 2014. This will result in thousands of citizens who need medical cards losing them. This is not an issue of communication or a lack of information. This is a policy decision by Fine Gael and the Labour Party.

Let us consider some examples, which I sent to the Taoiseach last week. Let us take Kate McShane from Drogheda. She is just over a year old and has Down's syndrome. She has required heart surgery and will require long-term GP and hospital care. Let us take Ryan Healy, a seven year old with a congenital heart condition. He has been denied a medical card and so has Kate. To deny the full medical card to sick children reliant on medication is punitive, petty and unfair. While the Taoiseach claims the Government is moving towards universal free GP care, it actually is moving in the exact opposite direction. The Government again has set its face against reversing any of these budget measures, which means that come what may or whatever happens, it will cut €113 million from those entitled to the medical card. The Taoiseach should outline to Members his vision of the type of small country that will emerge from these austerity policies. The Government is making the State the worst small country in the world in which to be sick or to grow old. The Taoiseach should outline his vision. What will be the product

of these austerity measures? Will it be the best small country in the world for bankers and the elites? The Taoiseach should tell Members.

**The Taoiseach:** Ní chreidim sa rud a dúirt an Teachta ar chor ar bith agus ní fíor é.

**Deputy Gerry Adams:** Is fíor é.

**The Taoiseach:** This is the third budget introduced by this Government and it was introduced on the basis of sorting out the unholy economic mess with which it was left to deal, and the Government is dealing with it. I might point out to Deputy Adams that the changes which have been made in the agri sector mean that Ireland's exports will be between €10 billion and €12 billion next year.

**Deputy Timmy Dooley:** That was on foot of the Food Harvest 2020 programme drawn up by the previous Government.

**The Taoiseach:** Moreover, the most recent budget, which was pro-business, pro-enterprise and pro-start-up opportunity for so many people, means there is real opportunity for those who wish to get out and provide employment, as well as a chance to have a career themselves. The construction sector will be revitalised to an extent, hopefully effectively, by virtue of the credit that is available for people to get involved in reconstruction grants or in reconstructions or developments of their houses, aided and assisted by the scheme from the Department of Communications, Energy and Natural Resources in respect of assistance from the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland for insulation and so on. As for the impact and the challenge for the Government in providing opportunities for training, internships, apprenticeships, as well as JobBridge and Momentum-----

**Deputy Gerry Adams:** What of the elderly and the young?

**The Taoiseach:** -----an additional sum of €14 million has been provided there and is an example of further development.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** That is pathetic.

**Deputy Finian McGrath:** The Taoiseach should mention Grangegorman again.

**The Taoiseach:** In addition, I note the recognition on the part of the Government of the sustaining of an industry and the creation of 15,000 extra jobs in the hospitality sector through the retention of VAT at the lower rate of 9%. Indeed, it also showed its understanding of the competition the newspaper industry faces by keeping the rate at that level for that sector.

In respect of the elderly, I still hold my strong view that by 2016, we will demonstrate we have left the bailout far behind us. We have put the shutters up on going back to the kind of culture that created all of that. Moreover, we will have an economy that is effectively run and that is running strongly in the interests of growth, prosperity and jobs for people-----

**Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn:** Enough of speaking notes. What about an answer to the question?

**The Taoiseach:** -----and in which resources will be available to provide facilities for elderly people through the primary care system and through a universal health care system that will provide opportunities and facilities for young children, the extension of the free GP care sys-

tem, opportunities for those in the middle to have work, careers and opportunity, as well as for those who are elderly to live in a country with a sense of dignity and respect. I acknowledge it is difficult to make these changes. The choices are always unpalatable when one tries to shift a structure that is as ingrained as the health system had become over many years. Fundamentally, the Minister, Deputy Reilly, is focused on cutting the cost of the provision of services but keeping those services for those who need them, particularly children and the elderly, as well as those who are sick.

I might add to Deputy Adams that I also spoke in recent days to a number of parents with children who have particular difficulties. They are aware of the availability of the long-term illness card, as well as the capacity to provide aids, appliances and facilities. One couple told me they were not entitled to a medical card as both were public servants and they were well over the income limit. While they did not seek a medical card, they had children with particular problems and sought assistance in that regard and this is the flexibility of the scheme, where discretion and weighting to that discretion applies.

I hope both the case in Drogheda and the second case mentioned by the Deputy can be dealt with in that fashion and that those concerned can be given an understanding that this is still a caring country. Changing the system has not been easy where some applicants either have not responded or the information has not been full or complete. I guarantee the Deputy that the structure that now will be in place for dealing with all cases in the first instance will make clear to people that when reviews take place, it is important that they be replied to but that on the other end, there is empathy and understanding of the difficulties that families in particular may face from one source or another.

**Deputy Gerry Adams:** First, I remind the Taoiseach the Government has no mandate to do what it is doing. Fine Gael has no mandate to do what it is doing and neither does the Labour Party.

**Deputy Tom Hayes:** You often did things without a mandate.

**Deputy Gerry Adams:** The Taoiseach stated it is difficult to make these decisions but these are the easy options. It is difficult to tackle the elites, the wealthy and those who actually are in power in the State. It is not difficult to tackle the elderly, those who are sick and young people. How does the Taoiseach expect the health service to survive a cut of up to €1 billion next year on top of the billions taken out of health over the past five years by this Administration and by Fianna Fáil? How does he expect it to survive at all? Moreover, this is not a mathematical question but one of ideology. Either citizens have the right to universal health care or they do not. The Government clearly believes they do not. Moreover, it is wedded to this austerity agenda in face of all the facts, all the disadvantage and all the hardship that is being caused, as well as all the destruction that is being inflicted on society, on communities and families.

To take the example of prescription charges, the Government promised it would cut them. When in opposition, the Government parties railed against Fianna Fáil when it introduced a change during its stewardship. However, the Government has increased this charge fivefold, despite giving a clear commitment during the general election campaign that the Minister, Deputy Reilly, would abolish prescription charges. The Government has also axed the telephone allowance, thereby increasing the social isolation of elderly people in rural Ireland in particular but also in urban areas.

A big question going about at present is whether the Minister, Deputy Reilly, should resign. That is a no-brainer, as of course he should do so.

**A Deputy:** The Deputy has questions to answer too.

**Deputy Gerry Adams:** However, I repeat the Government has no mandate to implement these policies. The Taoiseach talks all the time about the people and democratic revolution. I have a question for the Taoiseach.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** A question please, Deputy.

**Deputy Gerry Adams:** Why does the Taoiseach not resign? Why does the Taoiseach not do the right thing, go to the people and let them have their say? That is what the Taoiseach should do. The Government should go and give citizens their say on its policies.

**Deputies:** Hear, hear.

**Deputy Simon Harris:** That was constructive.

**Deputy Timmy Dooley:** Brass necks all round.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** I call upon the Taoiseach for his final reply. Order please.

**The Taoiseach:** Deputy Adams has great faith in Ireland really. He is the man who went off to America to get his health care provided by a private benefactor. I am glad to see he is in a good, healthy condition to raise these points here.

**Deputy Gerry Adams:** The Taoiseach should answer the question.

**The Taoiseach:** I might point out to Deputy Adams that an additional €100 million was provided in this budget for facilities for elderly people to give them one of the highest rates of pensions paid in Europe, to maintain their travel, electricity and heating allowances and not to have any change in their net income.

**Deputy Finian McGrath:** What about their telephone allowance?

*(Interruptions).*

**Deputy Timmy Dooley:** Look at how upset poor Pat was by the taking away of €5 million from RTE.

**A Deputy:** What about milking RTE?

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Can we have some order please?

**The Taoiseach:** The mandate given to this Government was to sort out the unprecedented economic mess left behind by incompetence, greed and a culture to which we will never return. That is my mandate as Taoiseach-----

**Deputy Gerry Adams:** Half the people.

**The Taoiseach:** -----and it is my privilege to lead the Government, which is making serious



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decisions to make serious changes to rectify this. I pointed out to the Deputy that there have been 16 consecutive months in which there has been a fall in the numbers on the live register.

**Deputy Sandra McLellan:** That is because they are all in Australia.

*(Interruptions).*

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Order, please.

**The Taoiseach:** The unemployment rate has fallen from 15.5% to 13.5%, consumer confidence is at its highest for six years and there has been a return in places around the country to confidence in the construction sector, which is very important. There are unprecedented levels of confidence and potential in the agrifood sector.

**Deputy Gerry Adams:** And poverty.

**The Taoiseach:** Deputy Adams does not wish to know these things because his deputy leader sitting beside him last week sought to confine all the young people to the dole for the rest of their lives.

**Deputy Timmy Dooley:** Joan wants to send them to Canada.

**Deputy Michael Healy-Rae:** To Abu Dhabi.

**The Taoiseach:** Sinn Féin does not see opportunities for them to get out to have an opportunity to have a job, a career or to have retraining or upskilling in the many areas of opportunity and potential in the time ahead.

**Deputy Sandra McLellan:** The Taoiseach is clueless.

**The Taoiseach:** Consequently, I do not accept Deputy Adams's premise for a resignation. The Government is not in the business of shirking responsibility, unlike some others on the far side of the Chamber.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** If he read the *Irish Independent* this morning, the Taoiseach would see who was shirking responsibility to whom. It was savage stuff.

**The Taoiseach:** This is a case of dealing with reality and people's lives, and we will make those decisions in the fairest and most equitable way that we can.

**Deputy Sandra McLellan:** No.

**Deputy Pearse Doherty:** The Taoiseach does not understand it.

**The Taoiseach:** In 2016 the people will have their opportunity to judge this Government on whether we fulfilled our mandate.

**Deputy Michael Healy-Rae:** And they will judge you.

**The Taoiseach:** Between this and then we will continue to make our decisions in the interests of our country and people in the fairest and most equitable way we can. Things are not easy and decisions are never easy. It must have been great to do budgets in 15 minutes when you had

mountains of other people's money to throw out without any responsibility.

**Deputy Timmy Dooley:** The Taoiseach had even more-----

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Order, please. I call Deputy Clare Daly and I ask Members to have respect for the speaker.

**Deputy Clare Daly:** I thank the Leas-Cheann Comhairle for that. The Taoiseach's responses to the previous speakers reveal what a fantasy world he lives in, one which has no bearing on the real lives of ordinary citizens. Does he not think it is an indictment of his Government that the grey army has had to take to the streets again on this wet and miserable day, not to enrich themselves and not for their own personal gain but to defend the idea of society's social wage, the rights and entitlements built up over decades that make the difference between a decent civilisation and absolute poverty, rights and entitlements which the Taoiseach's Government has consistently stripped away, not because it is necessary and not because it does not have another choice but because of its relentless pursuit of the ideas of neoliberalism?

I do not think the pensioners will be alone. They will probably be joined on Thursday by another section of society. This time it will be Dublin Bus workers, who face their fourth ballot on the so-called new restructuring plan, which obviously is not new at all and is just a rehash of the previous three. The Government can dress it up anyway it likes, what is being proposed for these workers is the taking of more than €6 million out of their pay packets as part of a rationalisation package of more than €12 million, the erosion of their jobs and conditions and the bringing in of a race to the bottom, and just in case they might have the neck to reject that package again, the Government has focused their attention. The Taoiseach's Ministers have come out and told them there will be very stark consequences if they vote "No". Reminiscent of William Martin Murphy, these people are being told "vote for this, or else". Capitulate or the alternative will be worse. They are aided in this by the media chorus telling them why this cannot be done and asking what is wrong with Dublin Bus workers when everybody accepts being bled dry.

Not everybody else accepts being bled dry. The members of ASTI, the junior doctors and the tens of thousands of other workers who voted against the recent pay deals do not accept it. At the heart of this discussion, as with the protest today, is what type of society we want to live in and what will be the Government's legacy. Public services cost money and it is not good enough for the Taoiseach to expect workers to pay for that out of their wage packets because his Government is not prepared to invest and properly subsidise a decent transport system in this State. The reason it is not prepared to do that is not that it does not have the money, it is that it is too busy subsidising the wealthy.

Like many citizens, I thought the Taoiseach has some neck yesterday to give his address to the nation and talk about a welfare dependency culture, a code for an onslaught on poor and vulnerable people, but he said nothing about the dependency culture of the parasites who got us into this mess in the first place, the people he has no problem bailing out and subsidising. Instead he prefers to go to low-paid bus workers or pensioners and ask them to pay up.

When is the Taoiseach going to end this economic and social lunacy and start investing in public transport and services and stop expecting workers to pay for this through an erosion of wages and conditions, stripping these companies bare and facilitating a privatisation for the wealthy interests he so clearly represents?

**The Taoiseach:** The Deputy covered a lot of ground in her speech. As I said in response to

Deputy Adams, the budget included €100 million more to maintain pensions for the elderly at a very high rate, much higher than in many other countries in Europe. I made the point that the State pensions, the carers scheme, the free travel and the free television licence have not been touched. Neither has the free fuel allowance because it is important. The tax treatment of the elderly remains unchanged with no change in net income for pensioners under this particular budget. Those who are aged over 65 will continue to have more favourable tax treatment than any other taxpayers in the country. That favourable treatment has been protected in the budget. The preferential treatment for the elderly in terms of the universal social charge, USC, remains in place whereby a person aged 70 or over will not be liable to the highest rates of USC, if his or her income does not exceed €60,000.

**Deputy Dessie Ellis:** So they had no reason to protest, had they?

**The Taoiseach:** The USC does not apply to social welfare payments, including pension payments made by another state or any other territory and of a similar nature to State pension payments.

**Deputy Finian McGrath:** Get up on the lorry and tell them that.

**The Taoiseach:** I advise Deputy Daly that such payments will not be taken into account in determining if an individual has exceeded the €60,000 threshold. These are all protectionist measures and facilities because we recognise the importance of the contribution made by elderly people over the years. As the Deputy will be aware, those aged 66 and over are not liable to pay PRSI on any of their income, including their unearned income, in comparison with an average worker on €33,000 per annum who faces a marginal tax rate of 52%, including income tax, universal social charge and PRSI payment.

There are no increases on excise on fuel or on the 23% or 13.5% VAT rates, and all these measures are positive for the elderly. The bereavement grant has been removed. In the event of a death, the remaining spouse, civil partner or cohabitant receives six weeks of the payment after death. In addition, to that, anybody who faces genuine financial hardship in respect of a bereavement or a funeral can obtain assistance from the Department of Social Protection under supplementary welfare support.

There are also a range of additional supports for people following a death and which are worth considerably more than the bereavement grant. For instance, there is the widow's, widower's or surviving civil partner's pension, which is a weekly pension based on contributions or a means test. Second, the widow's or the surviving civil partner's grant is a once-off payment of €6,000 where there is a dependent child up to the age of 22 in full-time education. There is a guardian's payment where a person is looking after an orphaned child. If a person dies as a result of an accident at work or occupational disease, a special funeral grant of €850 is also paid.

The level of the living alone allowance has been maintained at €7.70 per week. There is a commitment from the Minister, Deputy Hogan, and the Minister for Social Protection in respect of the senior alert scheme. The level of coverage between the full medical card and GP-visit card for everybody over the age of 70, even after the changes are implemented, will be 93%. The announcement of an additional €200 million in the budget in new capital projects includes 5,700 grants for adaptation of houses for the elderly and the disabled.

As the Deputy will be aware, the DIRT measures do not affect married couples aged 65 and over with incomes below €36,000 or single people aged over 65 with incomes below €18,000.

These are measures that have been introduced and maintained and protected for our elderly people. Therefore, the Deputy's charge of all these items being stripped away is invalid.

In respect of the Deputy's comment on Dublin Bus and in terms of that issue, I hope the workers will accept the proposals. Despite the introduction of a number of cost reduction measures, Dublin Bus has lost €84 million over the past five years and this level of loss is unsustainable. The Labour Court recommendations to achieve the savings have been accepted by the non-driver grades in the company but rejected on three separate occasions by the drivers, as the Deputy will be aware. The Government, ICTU and IBEC have together made one final attempt to resolve this and engaged industrial relations personnel who went into the company to examine in great detail and to analyse the issues which led to the rejections. Those people have published a set of proposals for operational change which will address the concerns of the drivers while enabling the Labour Court recommendations to be implemented, and I hope these can be accepted. I understand the drivers are balloting on the proposals later this week and I hope a positive outcome will result. It is in the interests of the drivers of the company and of the citizens at large.

**Deputy Clare Daly:** I am beginning to wonder if the purpose of the Taoiseach's response was to put us into some sort of hypnotic trance whereby he just mumbled back the same nonsense we have been hearing for weeks and does not address any of the issues raised. When one cuts through the waffle, what he is actually saying is that the citizens who built this country over decades of work and who are outside the gates of this House in the rain are obviously missing something, that they are obviously deranged and that they do not understand the wonderful paradise on earth that the Government has created for them. However, it is the Taoiseach who is out of touch and they are ones whose feet are on the ground.

*4 o'clock*

If on paper a pensioner's income in Ireland is more than it is in other European countries, that is because the purchasing power they have and the lack of social services they can access with that money is considerably worse than anywhere else in Europe. These people do not deserve to be bled dry. The Taoiseach talks about them being given favourable treatment. The reality is that the only favourable treatment that has been meted out by his Government is to the wealthy in our society. The top 10% of earners now share the same in that regard as the bottom 10%.

The Taoiseach spoke about us not being able to afford public services. The reality is that we have cut public spending by about 40% since 2008 and at the heart of this is a sea change in social policy. Can the Taoiseach not admit that his Government is wedded to the ideas of neoliberalism and that his strategy is to strip public services to facilitate privatisation and a race to the bottom?

I understand why the Taoiseach is out of touch. It is because his friends in the likes of Independent News & Media, who got a big subsidy and bailout from this State of about €60 million, clap him on the back and tell him he is doing a great job.

Dublin Bus is a vital public service. It is not supposed to break even. It should be subsidised because we have the lowest form of public transport subsidy of any European country. I would like the Taoiseach to explain the reason Dublin Bus workers, who have a modest wage, should forfeit that to facilitate a process whereby every year €50 million is allocated for the

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West Link toll bridge, a project that was paid for twice over.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Thank you, Deputy.

**Deputy Clare Daly:** Millions of euro are given out every year in public private partnerships for roads that are not being used yet buses which are being used cannot get an adequate level of subsidy. It is upside down economics and it demonstrates how out of touch the Taoiseach is.

**Deputy James Bannon:** The Deputy is anti-rural.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** I call the Taoiseach for a final reply.

**The Taoiseach:** I hope the Deputy's attempt at derangement, waffling or mumbling speaks for itself. The Department of Social Protection pays €75 million a year for free travel. Whether the Deputy likes it or not-----

**Deputy Joe Higgins:** Do not start that again-----

**The Taoiseach:** -----contributory and non-contributory pensions in this country for our senior citizens are among the highest in Europe. The ESRI, which, for the Deputy's information, is a completely independent body, has said that since the bank guarantee and all of the adjustments that have taken place, elderly people have lost about 1.4% in all of those adjustments.

Deputy Daly might think that her feet are more on the ground than anybody else's but does she think it is not right and fair that people should have allowances for free travel, free electricity or free fuel?

**Deputy Gerry Adams:** Come on.

*(Interruptions).*

**The Taoiseach:** Does she think it is not right and proper that the contribution made by these people-----

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** That is sleeveen stuff.

**The Taoiseach:** -----over past generations should be reflected in favourable treatment in the way the country looks at them in terms of tax, the universal social charge, USC, or exemptions in respect of PRSI payment?

**Deputy Barry Cowen:** Charlie Haughey-----

**The Taoiseach:** As I have said to the Deputy, on the question of Dublin Bus, which is a fundamental service for the public in this capital city of our country, the non-driver grades have accepted the recommendations. The drivers have rejected this on three occasions. The best personnel that could be got from the Government, from ICTU and from IBEC have made a genuine last attempt-----

**Deputy Joe Higgins:** IBEC. The Taoiseach should go out and drive himself for a week-----

**The Taoiseach:** -----to see that all of the issues that were of real concern to the drivers would be analysed in terms of the Labour Court recommendations. I hope the drivers in their

ballot this week will accept the recommendations based on the proposals from the personnel who went in there to examine them. It is an essential fact of life, whether the Deputy likes it or not, that Dublin Bus be returned to viability. That case has been made clearly by the Labour Court and by the recent independent investigation report. I hope the drivers, in their balloting this week, will accept the recommendations and have Dublin Bus back on the street providing a very valuable service for the citizens of this city and for those who visit it from both at home and abroad.

## **Ceisteanna - Questions (Resumed)**

### **Cabinet Committee Meetings**

1. **Deputy Micheál Martin** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet Sub-Committee on Economic Recovery and Jobs last met. [39089/13]

2. **Deputy Gerry Adams** asked the Taoiseach the number of times the Cabinet Sub-Committee on Economic Recovery and Jobs has met since the beginning of the year. [40732/13]

**The Taoiseach:** I propose to take Questions Nos. 1 and 2 together.

The Cabinet Committee on Economic Recovery and Jobs has met seven times this year, most recently yesterday. A sub-committee of this committee, dealing specifically with Pathways to Work, has met on seven occasions to date in 2013, once since the summer recess.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** Did the Taoiseach say No. 1-----

**The Taoiseach:** Go mo leisceal. I will read it again for the Deputy.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** No. I just want to know which questions he is answering.

**The Taoiseach:** I said I was taking Questions Nos. 1 and 2 together.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** Thank you.

**The Taoiseach:** That is Deputy Micheál Martin and Deputy Gerry Adams.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** That is fine. Apologies. I was engaged-----

**The Taoiseach:** As the Deputy knows, rather than taking them all together we divide them up-----

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** I am happy with that. I just wanted to check. I was in discussion with Deputy Halligan and that is why-----

**The Taoiseach:** Deputy Halligan is entitled to ask a question if he wishes.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** I thank the Taoiseach for his reply. The question is on the Pathways to Work and young people in particular to which I hope to get further answers. In budget 2014 the Government stated that €14 million would be provided to roll out a youth guarantee

scheme in the coming months. That is aimed at providing guaranteed access to work, training and education for any young person out of work for four months. I put it to the Taoiseach that is about €211 per person under the age of 25 currently on the live register. Does the Taoiseach have a starting date for when the youth guarantee will come into operation? Also, will he respond to the fact that live register figures show that during 2012, 41,000 people under the age of 25 were without work for four months or more but during that same timeframe, the figures show a total of only 18,000 training, education and work experience opportunities available for young welfare recipients?

In September 2013, 66,183 young people under the age of 25 were on the live register. How many training places will be provided for those young people? The Department of Social Protection has said it is too early to say how many opportunities will be available but it was likely to be significantly up on the 18,000 estimated for 2012. The National Youth Council of Ireland has estimated that approximately €273 million would be necessary to implement the youth guarantee model in Ireland along the lines of the successful Swedish model. The Minister, Deputy Burton, has pledged that the guarantee would direct young people into good quality work, training and educational opportunities for young people and that JobBridge, the national internship scheme, along with other welfare supports, would be drawn upon to facilitate that.

Will the Taoiseach accept that the fund as it is now is not adequate? A sum of €14 million euro will go nowhere near meeting the needs of over 66,000 young people under the age of 25 to get guaranteed access to employment, training or education. I refer to the change to the vocational training opportunities scheme, VTOS, in the current budget and the ongoing restrictions in the back to education scheme. For example, from next year if one wants to become a teacher the old H.Dip is going. One needs a Master's education degree now to get the vocational qualification that would qualify one to teach. That will not be covered under the back to education allowance. It is this mismatch in policy and the lack of joined-up thinking between different schemes that will further militate against the success of any guarantee scheme. If the figure is only €14 million it is will go nowhere near providing the opportunities for young people that are so desperately needed. I ask the Taoiseach to indicate in his reply if there will be an increase on that figure or is he satisfied that the requisite number of places will be made available?

**The Taoiseach:** As the Deputy knows, the budget was based first, on Ireland being able to exit the bailout programme and, second, to provide opportunities for jobs. The Deputy understands that we have to be able to incentivise and motivate young people to a life beyond the dole or being on the unemployment register. That is a challenge for Government and it is not one that is easy to deal with in a very short time. However, €14 million has been put into this system to address the challenge we now have to deal with in respect of young people being available for work and reforming the welfare system.

Deputy Martin will be aware that the number of jobless households, where nobody in the house works, increased from 10% to 15% between 2004 and 2007. That is about double the European average. Like myself, the Deputy will have been in houses like this, where nobody works. Before too long, nobody in the family works. That is very bad for the social dimension of who we are as Irish people in a nation which has always prided itself on its ability to work.

There is a range of changes here. Deputy Martin will be aware of the decision made at the European Council about the youth guarantee which will aim to provide adequate further training and education places for unemployed young people. That will kick in from January 2014 in areas where the level of youth unemployment is above the European average. Budget 2014,

as the Deputy rightly pointed out, allocated an additional €14 million to increase the number of places for people, in particular for young people, including 1,500 places on the new JobsPlus scheme and it amends the criteria for eligibility for under 25s to only six months unemployment. There are 1,500 new JobBridge places for people under 25. Some people decried the JobBridge scheme which began with ideas of collaboration between the private sector and the Department of Social Protection. I know from talking to many of the young graduates who were unemployed and who got on the JobBridge scheme, that approximately 65%, or so I am told, are offered full-time employment out of that. Some 2,000 training places are being ring-fenced for under 25s who are out of work in 2014 at a cost of €6 million. Those places will be provided in the follow up to the very successful Momentum programme which operated in 2013.

Next year the Department of Social Protection will spend €1.08 billion on work, training and education places and on related supports for jobseekers. That is approximately an €85 million increase on the spend this year. The changes relating to jobseekers allowance for young people are being made in that context and that is to place a greater emphasis on work, training and education supports rather than on just income supports.

There has been a lot of ill-informed information about the JobBridge, or national internship scheme, but the facts speak for themselves. It started as a pilot programme, originally set at 5,000 places but it has now exceeded 20,000 places. As I said, 60% to 65% of participants receive full-time employment.

In response to Deputy Martin's specific issues, the Estimate for the total expenditure on take up of training, education and work experience opportunities by 18,000 young welfare recipients in 2012 was €170 million. Those figures do not include spending on a wide range of education and training opportunities which are taken up by young people who are not unemployed - for instance, apprenticeships, university or college places, post-leaving certificate courses and so on. Expenditure and the number of places in 2014 will be significantly up on those figures.

As I pointed out, an implementation group has been asked to produce the report for an Irish youth guarantee by the end of the year. That plan will be focused on helping 59,000 under 25s who are out of work. That figure has been reduced by 11,000 over the past 12 months. There are five main approaches to tackling youth unemployment, namely, education, training, job search assistance, work experience and encouraging job creation. That covers a range of Departments and agencies.

The Youthreach programme provides 6,000 integrated education, training and work experience for early school leavers without any qualifications or vocational training who are between 15 and 20 years of age. The vocational training opportunities scheme provides a range of courses to meet the education and training needs of another 5,500 who are unemployed and over the age of 21, but particularly focusing on school leavers. Almost 1,000 young people participated in that last year.

The Deputy will be aware of the back to education allowance scheme which is run by the Department of Social Protection and provides income maintenance for unemployed people returning to further or higher education. Some 6,500 participated in this in the last academic year. Some 12,000 people aged under 25 completed a training course with FÁS, whose name is soon to be changed, in 2012 and that excluded apprenticeships and evening course. The Momentum scheme, to which I referred, continues to support the provision of free education and training



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projects for 6,500 long-term jobseekers so that they can get skills and access work opportunities in areas identified as growing sectors. Some 1,250 of these places are assigned to people under the age of 25.

The JobBridge, or national internship scheme, is focused on providing work experience to young people with a total of 2,700 placements in 2012. Long-term unemployed youth will benefit from the JobsPlus initiative. Under that scheme, the State will pay €1 for every euro it costs the employer to recruit a person from the live register, which is another incentive.

In regard to the apprenticeship scheme, the allocation of apprenticeships is driven by employer demand. I listened to the chief executive of Aer Lingus speak at the Global Irish Economic Forum in Dublin recently. He made the point that in a European context, a major firm would employ not just 20 apprentices but perhaps up to 200 and that they would not be employed permanently by the major company but would go on to work in different spheres. We need to look at the capacity of Irish employers and firms to avail, to a far greater extent, of the opportunity to train, re-train and upskill young men and women in apprenticeship and so on.

The private sector is now creating 3,000 job per month. Budget 2014 allows for expansion there, including the retention of the 9% VAT rate. Some 15,000 jobs were created on top of the industry being stabilised by that. We hope next year will be a very good one.

There is a start-your-own-business scheme for young people who have been unemployed for 15 months or more offering them a two year income tax exemption. When I talk to young people and young people's groups, they ask if there is a chance for them to start their own businesses, whether manufacturing or whatever.

There is a range a of measures to support the construction sector. The home renovation incentive will prove very beneficial and when that is allied to the scheme available from the Department of Communications, Energy and Natural Resources, there will be real capacity. It can be done on an accumulated basis to claim back the tax credit. There has been an extension of the living city initiative to Cork, Galway, Kilkenny, Dublin and Dún Laoghaire for all pre-1915 buildings which a lot of people are interested in renovating and doing up. Some €200 million has been allocated for new capital projects, including the Cork city event centre, heritage buildings, the national sports campus and all the additional capital sports grants. There have been changes in respect of housing for the elderly and the disabled and the social housing construction sector. All of these will add greatly to the opportunities for young people.

It is not the answer to all our problems but given the circumstances in which we find ourselves, it is a good opportunity for 2014 to provide more incentives and opportunities for young people to get training, upskilling and jobs, which is what everybody wants.

**Deputy Gerry Adams:** The problem is that the Taoiseach recites all of these figures, statistics and so on but I cannot see any sign of an appropriate and focused investment by the Government in job creation. There is no ongoing effort to try to provide a better context for small businesses. The problems small businesses have are too high rates, too high rents and the fact they cannot get credit. These people would employ another person - a neighbour, a family member or someone from their community - if they were assisted in doing so. Let us look at the jobs figure because the Taoiseach misses something all the time. I am increasingly intrigued about the effect of emigration on us as an island people. It is causing significant societal damage to communities. The Taoiseach recites figures, but I can remind him that an

average of 1,700 citizens emigrate every week. I can also remind him of recent unemployment figures. The major job losses took place in 2008 and 2009. By 2010, the rate of unemployment was 13.8%. When the Taoiseach came into government, the percentage of people on the live register was 13.5%. After two and a half years of austerity policies, the figure is now 13.4%. Tá sé mar a bhí sé. It is still the same. That does not take account of the emigration of almost 300,000 people. Teachtaí Dála from Sinn Féin and all other parties welcome any job announcement or any fall in unemployment. Exports have recovered and that is also to be welcomed. The problem is that the jobs lost in the domestic economy have not returned. The Government should focus on this instead of punishing young people.

I have listened to what has been said by the Minister for stating the obvious, Deputy Burton, about young people being better off in work than on the dole. Was some consultant paid a fat fee to figure that out? Of course everybody would be better off at work than on the dole. Where are the jobs? That is the problem. The issue of demonisation arises in this context. When I represented west Belfast, the mantra was that the people of west Belfast did not own alarm clocks because they did not need them. We put together our own jobs recovery programme - the Obair report - and we undertook an audit of the skills in the community. The people there had faced decades of discrimination and generational unemployment because they were quite rightly perceived to be disloyal to the state. This type of demonisation is the subtext of our dealings with young people nowadays. It is almost as if we consider unemployment to be a lifestyle choice, or we think people are doing well on the dole. We heard last week about flat screen plasma televisions. We have heard about the Government's plans to incentivise these young people to go to work. They need to be given jobs.

The precise proof of this Government's stewardship of many of these matters is the depth, the focus and the amount of real investment in jobs. Opportunities should be pursued on the basis of our strengths. We proposed a fair budget and produced a jobs document. The Minister, Deputy Rabbitte, might be interested to learn that Labour Youth has advocated an increase in the bank levy to end the withdrawal of medical cards, the reductions in the benefits paid to young unemployed people, the cuts in youth services and the discontinuing of the telephone allowance. The idea proposed by Labour Youth makes it clear that there are choices that can be made. When we raise matters of this importance, only to be numbed by mumbled statistics being thrown at us, it is hard for us to respond in a passionate manner. The policies that are required to get people back to work have not been developed under the Taoiseach's watch. This Government is embracing emigration as a policy choice, just as successive Governments have done. That is why earlier today I called on the Taoiseach to resign. We need a change of Government. We need a Government that keeps the promises it makes at election time, faces the elites, the wealthy and those who scundered us, so to speak, and put us into this situation, and works on the genius, intelligence, wit and potential of our people. We are recycling Governments here. We will be recycling these issues until there is a seismic change in how we do our business. This Government will not do that, unfortunately.

**The Taoiseach:** I do not accept the Deputy's premise. I ask him to consider where we were when we came in here just over two and a half years ago. The country was blocked out of the international markets. Interest rates were 15% and rising. We had neither word nor integrity. Ireland had gone over a cliff. We have had to make many difficult decisions since then. Where are we now? Interest rates have dropped to 3.7%. The National Treasury Management Agency has built up a buffer of more than €20 billion by going out on the international markets. Some 34,000 new jobs were created in the past 12 months. Some 3,000 jobs a month are being cre-

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ated at the moment. Young men and women throughout the country are being employed in jobs in different areas as a consequence of the stimulus package that is developing bundles of schools, primary care centres and roads despite the economic circumstances. Details of a multi-billion investment that will take place between now and 2015 will be announced by the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform in due course.

I have visited companies like Twitter, Dell, PayPal, Qualtrics and O'Brien Fine Foods. I have listened to a young man from America who came here and said he had a problem trying to find more space, rather than more people. He said he would be back again in 18 months to employ more people. We are very proud of the young men and women who have been given opportunities by people who want to invest in this country. This cosmopolitan and energetic city is seen as a great place in which to invest because of all the movement and action that takes place here. Some 10,000 entrepreneurs will come here at the end of the month for the world digital forum, which is driven by Mr. Paddy Cosgrave. No other country in the world can deal with that. These young, energetic, innovative, thinking, creative and imaginative people are dealing with the creation of the future.

The Deputy raised a couple of interesting points. Clearly, the Government focused on the creation of jobs in the budget that was announced last week. I meet young people all over the country who are not afraid of the future. They point to proposals and ideas they would like to see happening. The Government reflects this in many ways. One of the issues was the retention of the 9% lower rate of VAT in the hospitality sector. When I meet people from that sector, I am told that they are proud to work in it and to be part of the reception committee from Ireland that gives people a really good experience and makes them want to come back. Whether those who decried The Gathering like it or not, the evidence of that initiative speaks for itself.

The Government's brave decision to abolish the travel tax was the right one. It was responded to immediately by Ryanair when that airline gave a commitment to bring an additional 1 million people to this country. If those people have good experiences, get good value and have an opportunity to reflect kindly on Ireland, that will lead to repeat business from places from which we might not have got many visitors before now. I think that is good. There are 150,000 people employed in the agri-sector. I went to Naas some time ago to turn the sod on a €100 million expansion by the Kerry Group, which is already employing 200 young graduates - men and women - as researchers and innovators in the food area. Food science is a major issue. As I have said, we are exporting more than €9 billion of produce to more than 150 countries. Deputy Adams was at the ploughing championships and so was I. The majority of the young people who were there see potential up ahead. Government has a response and a requirement to respond to that by opening the doors of opportunity. That is why, for instance, in a small but important gesture, the farmer's flat rate addition was increased from 4.8% to 5%, with effect from 1 January next. That is to do with compensation for farmers for VAT incurred on their outputs. We extended the capital gains tax retirement relief to disposals of long-term leased farm land in certain circumstances because when quotas go - as Glanbia is now investing on the Kilkenny-Carlow border - there will be 2,500 new jobs created on farms through the potential that exists there. We are a grass-based country and there are serious opportunities ahead. The eligibility for young trained farmer's relief is also being extended by three more qualifying courses. The Deputy is aware of the increased interest in that.

I have referred to the home renovation incentive and the €200 million injection in capital programmes for that. NAMA is also willing to make €2 billion available in vendor capital to purchasers of commercial properties in Ireland. It has lent €375 million across six major trans-

actions already. These are all filled with job potential.

**Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources (Deputy Pat Rabbitte):** On-line trading.

**The Taoiseach:** We are retaining the 12.5% corporation tax.

As the Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources, Deputy Rabbitte, has reminded me, the potential for on-line trade in the retail and other sectors is enormous. Only a very small percentage of that is generated in Ireland. That will rise to serious numbers in billions of euro over the next period.

In respect of the Deputy's point about small and medium enterprises, SMEs, the Irish economy will be built on their backs. The major banks have measured up in terms of the objective for each to lend €4 billion in new loans for 2013. I expect those targets to be reached. I have difficulty with some of the SMEs because, irrespective of whether their applications or proposals are valid, many are turned down and the Credit Review Office needs to consider the conditions applied. There was a ten-point plan in last year's budget specifically for SMEs. The cash receipts basis threshold for VAT is now increased from €1.25 million to €2 million with effect from 1 May next year. The overall increase of €1 million will assist cash flow for those SMEs.

I was in Wicklow at the location for the filming of *The Vikings*. It is an extraordinary location with huge numbers employed. Having met personnel in America to discuss this, I am glad the film relief scheme was extended to 2016 and included non-EU talent. It is a very labour-intensive area.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** We need the Vikings to come back.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** Through how many more countries does the Taoiseach have to travel before he reaches the conclusion to this answer?

**Minister of State at the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Tom Hayes):** Deputy Boyd Barrett would object to their coming back.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** They are coming down the east coast.

**The Taoiseach:** I am talking about SMEs. I mentioned the start-your-own-business scheme whereby young people can start their own businesses, unincorporated and with a two-year exemption from income tax up to €40,000. That is a real incentive. To encourage innovation, the key recommendations for the research and development tax credit have been implemented. These relate to the outsourcing of research and development qualifying expenditure in relation to the base year. That is important as is the capital gains tax relief for entrepreneurs who reinvest the proceeds from a disposal of assets on which capital gains had previously been paid, in a new investment and in productive trading activities. In other words, a person who invests in a business and who would normally have to pay capital gains tax on the proceeds can now reinvest on an ongoing basis in a new venture. These things are important for SMEs.

Deputy Martin says he does not see the evidence. I was in Limerick a couple of days ago-----

**Deputy Gerry Adams:** The Vikings were there too.

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**The Taoiseach:** I visited a major firm there, Vistakon.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** Vistakon has been there a long time.

**The Taoiseach:** All of the sophisticated equipment there, the robotics and the software, was developed and designed by young Irish engineers in that region. The sophistication of what they do is incredible. One of the most serious statements made in this country was made by Intel.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** A Leas-Cheann Comhairle, is there a time limit on answers to questions?

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** No there is not.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** There is not; fair enough.

**The Taoiseach:** The new Quark chip on the Galileo board is marked “Designed in Ireland”, for the first time in 40 years. That has the capacity to provide enormous potential for our young creators. Government wants to be in that space, assisting young people with their ideas, proposals and requests. We cannot do it all at once but these are serious decisions that will affect in a small way particular groups, all of which adds to the growing picture of a country on the move.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** May I ask one question?

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** The Deputy will have to be brief because Deputies Adams, Higgins and Boyd Barrett want to come in.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** I asked a very specific question. There were 66,183 people under the age of 25 on the live register as of September. In the context of the youth guarantee scheme, how many training places have been provided for these 66,183 young people? In 2012 there were 18,000 places. Will the Taoiseach accept that the €14 million added to the budget this year can in no way make up the gap between the 18,000 places that were available last year and the 66,000 young people on the live register this year? That is an increase of 20,000 people on last year’s figure. How many training places have been provided for these people? Can the Taoiseach outline when the guarantee scheme will commence?

**The Taoiseach:** From a European perspective the youth guarantee scheme starts in January and the programme must be prepared before the end of the year. The Minister for Social Protection is anxious to move on this as quickly as possible, with the extra €14 million. Many of those 66,000 are back in education. I am not sure whether the Deputy has those figures in front of him.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** I have nothing.

**The Taoiseach:** I attended a Cabinet discussion on this matter this morning. I would like to take a few Ministers from the main Departments and focus on the extent and capacity of what we can actually put in place.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** Do we know how many will be put in place?

**The Taoiseach:** I have read out the list.

**The Taoiseach:** The figure was 18,000 last year.

**Deputy Pat Rabbitte:** There are a great many more this year.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** How many?

**The Taoiseach:** Obviously, a lot more than last year.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** Everybody has been talking about this guarantee scheme since the end of the EU summit. There was to be a €6 billion - it then became €8 billion - guarantee in Europe. They say it will provide a guarantee for every young person in Europe and in this country. I am asking a question months on, and while I accept that in the budget €14 million has been added to the existing money, no one has a clue how many additional places will be provided. Is this all rhetoric or is it meaningful and will there be a substantive convergence between the 66,000 on the live register and the actual number of training places to be provided? I am talking about training, education and work experience opportunities from now on. Do we know?

**The Taoiseach:** As part of the European Presidency we put together a budget of €960 billion for the EU, a part of which is the €6 billion for youth unemployment. Of course that will not do the business. There is no point leaving it lying around until 2020 when young people will have moved on, in respect of their age and what they are at.

We want to rise to the challenge of providing as many places as we can. Programmes have been developed, either through the State or the State agencies, or as an amalgamation of private and State enterprise, for example, the JobBridge scheme was piloted for 5,000.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** That was under a previous government.

**The Taoiseach:** It has gone over 20,000 people, 60% of whom end up in full-time employment, which is a very good thing.

We could have a longer discussion about this in the House at an appropriate time.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** I do not think we will. We never have these discussions.

**The Taoiseach:** All the Deputy wants is for me to give him a figure so he can come back and tell me we did not reach the figure, whatever it might be. I know that is what the Deputy is at.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** It is not what I am at.

**The Taoiseach:** As far as I am concerned we want to provide the maximum number possible through all the different schemes.

**Deputy Gerry Adams:** It is reasonable to ask what targets the Government has set. The additional spend earmarked in the budget is approximately €260 per unemployed young person. Is that enough for quality training? Is that enough for education? Does the Government have a strategy or has it even discussed the fact that so many people have left and are leaving? We have welcomed some of the measures put forward by the Government and advocated some of them ourselves. I still think the Taoiseach is remiss in respect of the enormity of the problem. He has been in office for two and a half years so it is a very reasonable question to ask. The number of unemployed young people under the Government's stewardship has increased by 18,000. The response is all stick. There is no incentive and there are no jobs for these young

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people to go to. They want to work. We should not tar them with the same brush as if there is some sort of plague out there to the effect that because people come from a certain social background, they do not want to work or this is a lifestyle choice.

Can the Government not bring forward more than the generalities of what it is producing? What has this committee on economic recovery and jobs been doing if it has not been setting targets? What about the report card idea? Does he remember the report card?

**The Taoiseach:** We will shortly produce the action plan for jobs quarterly report. The Deputy will see the facts of life exposed there both in terms of the successes and failures. I am more interested in the outcome of these rather than just saying I have implemented a percentage of so many actions. Deputy Adams continually refers to emigration. He seeks to address it with a Sinn Féin proposal for a higher third rate of income tax of 48% leaving a total top tax rate of 59%. He would drive every initiator and entrepreneur out of the country.

**Deputy Gerry Adams:** We will not.

**The Taoiseach:** I have the privilege of meeting people in different locations - not that I travel abroad too often - but I am very happy to meet people who have gone because of the requirement to get greater experience or because their company sends them. I meet the people who have left because they felt they had no hope here. They are the people we need to encourage to come back. I was very pleased last week when one of the major road contractors was able to tell me that it had brought back six civil engineers from London to work on its site here in the west. It was only a small thing but it is an important trend. We need to see more of that. The more capital investment-----

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** What county was it in?

**The Taoiseach:** It was the Ballaghaderreen bypass - one of the few that went ahead last year. The point is that the company brought back six engineers. It is a very small thing but it is important for those people. It is not a case of not recognising the fact that many people have left. There is a delegation in the US talking to the public representatives in Washington, DC, about the undocumented Irish. It is not all rosy in the garden when people go away. Prices have increased in Australia, it is not as easy as people might imagine to pick up employment, and skills and trades are very important. That is all part of the mix here.

When I meet these politicians from abroad, they see how Ireland has moved into a very different space. Please God, 2014 will be a more progressive year for the country economically and from a jobs perspective. The more we can rectify our economic problems, the more we can invest in facilities and opportunities. We have programmes for technological universities and the integration between the world of academia and business. I see how, around the country, there is clearly a need for the institutes of technology to be able to provide technicians who can go beyond their local area, for the universities to be able to supply engineers and for an engagement between the academic and commercial worlds. The other day, I saw how at that plant in the midwest, all of the material - robotics, electronics and software - had been designed by local engineers in different firms, which is great. When companies ask their employees for ideas about how they improve the situation, they are moving to a different level and that is where we need to be.

I meet some of these people who invest in Ireland. Why do they come here? Yes, tax is a fundamental issue but the setting of the bar high enough for people who want to get in there

is a factor. Not everybody can be a PhD or get a Master's degree but it is the responsibility of Government to be as open as possible to create as much business as possible. That is why we need competence, effectiveness, a strong economy running well and an education system that is flexible enough to meet the demands that are coming in the times ahead.

Others look at us with a degree of envy in many respects. We are not perfect by any means but we will work very hard in the time ahead to make the difference. I see a real opportunity for Irish-based and Irish-grown small and medium-sized enterprises that employ locally and supply larger firms or export directly. At the national ploughing championships, I was struck by the extent of new Irish engineering firms in a range of areas that have grown up in the last period. That is a great development and we must encourage more of it. Insofar as the Government can work with these creators of opportunity, we will.

I recently visited Cherrywood when the most recent full commercial licence for a bank was issued by the Central Bank in the case of Dell Financial Services. It supplies money to firms that use its technology at its rates, which is a move towards the supply of finance and credit for small and medium-sized enterprises that is non-mainline banking. Much of this has been supplied in other countries for many years. I see a trend emerging in that area as well. It is all about listening to groups and people but also being provocative in making decisions that might involve some risk, such as the abolition of the air travel tax. Let us hope that it works and impacts on the hospitality sector for the benefit of everybody in all areas around the country.

**Deputy Joe Higgins:** The reality is that the level of Government spin on so-called economic recovery and jobs over the past two months has reached a scale that is truly Orwellian and bears no relation to the reality of people's lives in this State or outside it who have been driven out by economic crisis. Will the Taoiseach accept that the figure of 400,000 people on the live register who are unemployed or seriously underemployed is only the beginning? Will he accept that one can almost add another 100,000 from various spurious holding schemes such as JobBridge? A total of 20% of those participating found work with their host company and 16% found work with other companies.

The Taoiseach spins the figures. He does not give the real figures that were put out after the Indecon report. Is it not pathetic that the Government must funnel young talented people through this ScamBridge, as my colleague Paul Murphy, MEP, calls it, for 18 months when they might have an offer of a job? If the job is there, why would it not be given at the proper cost rather than at €50 per week? It is pathetic. Does the Taoiseach accept that if one takes the current live register plus the people on the schemes and the 300,000 who have been forced out of our country in economic emigration in the past five years, the real number on the live register would be 800,000, which is an indication of the real scale of the crisis?

Does the Taoiseach accept that his proposal is a Mickey Mouse one, and that is to dignify it? Is he for real in proposing to get rid of a travel tax costing a few euro as a job creation measure? Does he not understand what is going on in the real world of Irish capitalism? In 2007, gross fixed capital formation, in other words, investment, was €48 billion. In 2012 the figure had fallen to €17.4 billion. That is where the story begins and ends. If there is no investment by the private sector there will not be employment. In the eurozone alone, up to €2 trillion in accumulated profits is being hoarded by big corporations which refuse to invest because it is not profitable enough for them to do so. Against that context, has the Taoiseach studied the figures from the Nevin Economic Research Institute which show that every €1 billion that the State invests in job creation - which would be only €575 billion net because of what would come back



in taxes - could create 16,750 jobs directly and indirectly? Is the implication not clear for what Government policy should be? Instead of tapping around at the edges, why will he not go to the heart of the matter? I ask him to be specific in his answer because he is more masterly than his predecessor, Bertie Ahern, at spinning acres and acres of cotton wool and figures that engulf us in a miasma through which we cannot find our way.

The Central Bank stated that net domestic wealth in quarter 4 of 2012 was €461 billion. This figure is deliberately not analysed properly in terms of who has the wealth in our society but the Wealth of Nations report from the Bank of Ireland, which was the most recent analysis in this regard albeit published years ago, estimated that 1% of the population held 20% of the wealth. That means 1% held €92 billion, all of them multimillionaires. A tax of 1% on this amount would yield €583 million and if the Government imposed an emergency tax of 5% next year, it would get €2.9 billion. These people would not even miss the money. It is cigar money for them. Why will the Taoiseach not take radical action of this nature in order to invest the money in public job creating investment programmes that could deliver tens of thousands of jobs? The private sector, such as the small businesses about which he speaks, would also blossom from the downstream effects of that investment. That is how he should tackle employment and provide for economic recovery. Why does he not implement measures of this nature rather than the makey-uppy stuff that will leave our people in misery for the coming years, with forced unemployment, parents seeing their children leave and the misery of the dole?

What the Taoiseach was up to in yesterday's *Irish Independent* with his article on welfare was an outrage, alongside the Minister for Social Protection. This Government is quickly evolving into the most right-wing Government, economically, in the history of this State. It is outrageous to blame unemployment on the unemployed and the crisis on young people. It is time to call it as it is. Only a few of us are doing so because the media are in the Government's corner.

**The Taoiseach:** I was recently in Blanchardstown, which I understand is in Deputy Higgins's constituency. I had the privilege of opening a new data content storage facility with investors from Ireland and Canada. The people working at that facility, in the Deputy's constituency, are real people. They go to work every day, they earn their living and they pay all their taxes.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** Unlike the wealthy.

**The Taoiseach:** The Deputy does not seem to think that is real. In fact, he does not seem to want that kind of investment, despite the fact that reports on the area of data content and storage capacity indicate increases of between 15% and 17% year on year until 2017. That means the extra space in the aforementioned facility will be filled before long not only with equipment but also with people working in the Deputy's constituency.

I suggest he go to Newlands Cross to examine the roadworks underway there. People are working there. That comes about from investment and decisions made in appropriate conditions to put up that kind of money. The same applies on the road south and, next year please God, on the road from Gort to Tuam to shorten travel times and to provide opportunities for people to work. Does the Deputy not think the PPP programme, whereby eight major schools are being built and 1,000 jobs are being created, should be implemented? These are real jobs for craftsmen, block layers, scaffolders, welders and electricians. Does he not think that is a good thing to do?

**Deputy Joe Higgins:** We want more of them.

**The Taoiseach:** He said these are Mickey Mouse jobs. Mickey Mouse seems to be around these corridors a lot these days. Deputy Higgins is not the only one to have caught him in a trap.

**Deputy Joe Higgins:** I was speaking about scambridge.

**The Taoiseach:** I do not accept the Deputy's use of the description by Paul Murphy, MEP, of the JobBridge scheme as scambridge. Paul Murphy, MEP, is yet to be elected by the people. Deputy Higgins has been elected and he is entitled to speak in this House. If he speaks to the young graduates who now have jobs in his constituency they will give him a very different version of the opportunity to work through their qualification with an employer and the opportunity to get a permanent job or to start their own businesses. I remind him that 25,000 people are coming to this country every year. They are emigrating from other countries and they contribute to our economy, our welfare and our work ethic generally. The Deputy does not appear to recognise that.

He is confusing the banking crisis and collapse, whereby the wealth of this country was eroded since the time to which he referred, with investment opportunities in Ireland and our export potential. Last year was the best for the IDA in the past ten years and last year and this year were the best for Enterprise Ireland, which assists companies from this country to export abroad. Both new investors and expanding companies are staffed by workers who measure up in terms of productivity, change and direction. The Deputy does not seem to recognise that. It appears that, in his warped philosophy, he does not want anybody to work.

**Deputy Bernard J. Durkan:** He is old fashioned.

**The Taoiseach:** His native county has never had a better year for the hospitality sector and it wants more of that. One would think that kind of investment would be recognised by the Deputy as an advantage for the country, our economy and our people because these are real jobs.

**Deputy Joe Higgins:** I recognise that Kerry's football clubs are decimated by emigration.

**The Taoiseach:** He does not seem to want that. I reject completely his assertion about Mickey Mouse opportunities. These are opportunities for young people to get a start on the ladder and if he is like the promoters of the party in front of him in wanting them to languish on the dole queues with no opportunities, responses or incentives, that is not the space the Government is in or the space I am in.

*5 o'clock*

We are working very closely with the Minister for Social Protection in changing the structures so that people can have opportunities to work.

I visited the Intreo offices in Dundalk and Sligo. In group interviews and individual interviews, people were asked what they would like to do, what were their talents, what were their skills and whether they wanted to become technicians, welders, block layers or whatever. There are opportunities created for young people. They have all got a talent. They have all got a flare. They may not all be PhDs or have masters degrees in scientific analysis but they have a part to play and we want to give them that opportunity. That is where the investment for Government will continue to be. I do not accept the Deputy's assertions at all.

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**Deputy Bernard J. Durkan:** Deputy Higgins is Joe Mouse.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** Does the Taoiseach not believe that he should give a straight apology for-----

**Deputy Gerry Adams:** The Mickey Mouse stuff.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** -----the suggestion that he made at the weekend that there was something called a welfare dependency culture? He has just made the same implication about people languishing on the dole as if there is some voluntary element to it and that forcing them into what he laughingly calls labour activation measures by cutting social welfare payments for 22, 23, 24 and 25 year olds is actually the way to get people back into work. The implication is that these young people - or anyone on the live register - are on it through their own fault. The Taoiseach should admit that a welfare dependency culture is not the problem. Unless, that is, we are referring to the welfare dependency of bankers and the super wealthy. They have a serious dependency. They know that they can wreck an economy and rip people off royally for years and years, yet the Government will come along and bail them out at every turn. How does that stimulate the economy, enterprise and creativity? Some of the people in question are still in the most senior positions in the Irish banks despite having promoted mad-cap development plans and bankrupting the country in the process. They are still running our banks. That is a dependency culture that we want to root out. We must take serious action to deal with it.

It is clear that the overwhelming majority of people are forced - let me emphasise that word - to sign on because there are no jobs. Why does the Taoiseach not admit-----

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** There are less than three minutes remaining. Does the Deputy want a reply from the Taoiseach?

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** -----that fact? Some 40,000 people are leaving the country every year because there are no jobs, not because they are lazy. Is the Taoiseach not ashamed to be in a Government that oversees 40,000 of our best and brightest people leaving per year? Does it not have an obligation to make the investment that would create real jobs, not pretend jobs or a massaging of the figures?

Department of Finance officials last week told the finance committee of an interesting anomaly in the public finances. There used to be something called jobless growth. We now have growthless jobs, that is, virtually no growth while the Government claims a decrease in unemployment and a great deal of job creation. The officials could not quite explain this anomaly. Has the Taoiseach examined it? The only explanation is mass emigration and the Government's massaging of the unemployment figures by putting people into schemes. This is the reality - not jobs, but schemes with no real jobs at the end in most cases. Why does the Taoiseach not admit the truth about the scale of emigration and unemployment? Let us deal with these issues in a real way for those who are languishing in that position involuntarily. They do not want to be there or to be demonised or stigmatised by the Taoiseach or anyone else. What they need are real jobs, not pretend jobs, scam jobs or Gateway jobs, in which people will do the work of local council workers for €20 on top of their dole, thereby replacing full-time and properly paid jobs. It is a disgrace.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Our time has almost concluded.

**The Taoiseach:** That is the usual Deputy Boyd Barrett rant. First, he has-----

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** After the Taoiseach's usual blather.

**The Taoiseach:** -----an outrageous capacity to say that people insult our young people.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** The Taoiseach was insulting them.

**The Taoiseach:** What I said was that Deputy Higgins was giving the impression that they should be left to languish on the dole queues. I do not believe that.

**Deputy Joe Higgins:** No, I did not give that impression.

**The Taoiseach:** I do not accept that.

**Deputy Joe Higgins:** Do not be ridiculous.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Deputy, please.

**The Taoiseach:** The responsibility of Government is to open the doors of opportunity for business.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** Open the doors on emigration.

**The Taoiseach:** One cannot do it with interest rates at 15% when we were blocked out of the international markets and when we had neither word nor reputation. That has been changed.

I would like Deputy Bord Barrett some day to say how, if the banks all collapsed, he thinks that the economy would function. Perhaps that is what he wants, given his warped political philosophy. I do not accept from him that real jobs are not real jobs.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** Talk to the finance officials.

**The Taoiseach:** The Deputy cannot argue with the Central Statistics Office facts and figures of the number of people who are at work. He cannot argue with the fact that the live register has declined for 16 consecutive months.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** If there were more jobs, there would be more GNP. It is a simple fact, but there is none.

**The Taoiseach:** I would be the first to say to him that people have emigrated from the country and continue to do so. I resent that they feel that they have to leave. The Government has got to do the very best that it can in meeting that challenge. No more than Deputy Higgins's view of employment, I hope that, when the living city initiative is transferred out to Dún Laoghaire and that the pre-1915 houses and properties are being done up and renovated by plasterers, tradesmen, carpenters, brick layers and roofers, Deputy Boyd Barrett will recognise that somebody is prepared to work, that these are real jobs and not pretend jobs and that it will enhance the infrastructure-----

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** I will believe it when I see it.

**The Taoiseach:** -----and the society where he lives and where he goes around spouting-----

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** I will give the Taoiseach the names of plenty of brick lay-

ers who are looking for work.

**The Taoiseach:** -----his individual political philosophy every week that people cannot work, that people should work, and that he has some magic wand that can transform this into a situation where one can have a couple of hundred thousand real jobs created just like that. Life, unfortunately, is not like that.

**Deputies:** Hear, hear.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** It was in Fine Gael's election manifesto.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** Correct.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** NewERA and 100,000 jobs.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** NewERA is the old era.

**The Taoiseach:** That is a major investment in strategic infrastructure and a lot of jobs will come from it, as Deputy Martin will find down in his own country before too long.

*Written Answers follow Adjournment.*

### **Order of Business**

**The Taoiseach:** It is proposed to take No. 3, Local Government Bill 2013 - Order for Second Stage and Second Stage. It is proposed, notwithstanding anything in Standing Orders, that the next fortnightly Friday, for the purposes of Standing Orders 88(2) and 117A, shall be Friday, 8 November 2013, the time and date by which notice of a committee report or Bill in connection with that sitting shall be received by the Clerk shall be 11 a.m. on Friday, 25 October 2013, and related Standing Orders shall apply accordingly. Private Members' business shall be No. 121, motion re older citizens.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Is the proposal for dealing with the sitting and business of the Dáil on Friday, 8 November, agreed to?

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** About what will it be?

**The Taoiseach:** Friday, 8 November will be on a Private Members' Bill.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** As well as a committee report on that day.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** I am demonstrating a bit of vigilance.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Is the proposal agreed to? Agreed.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** The Taoiseach may recall how, on last Wednesday's Order of Business, I put to him the comments of the HSE's national director of acute hospitals, Mr. Ian Carter, who warned of further dysfunction if the Government kept taking money out of the

system. I raised that issue in the context of the Health Service Executive (financial matters) Bill. I was asking the Taoiseach basic questions about the €666 million that had been cited in the previous day's budget as the amount of savings to be effected in health. I explained to the Taoiseach that there had been a press conference after the budget in which the Minister for Health, Deputy Reilly, did not explain properly from where all of those savings would come. I then asked the Taoiseach if the figures had been signed off by the director of the Health Service Executive. I asked if they stood over the figures and the Taoiseach said "Of course". We now know, however, that the director of the HSE did not stand over the figures. I want the Taoiseach to correct the record because he misled the House in that regard. Perhaps he thought they had, but they clearly had not because at a meeting of the Committee on Health and Children on the Thursday it was made clear by the HSE director that there would have to be independent verification of the €666 million figure, and in particular of the €113 million that had been put in for probity. Therefore he had not signed off on it. It is unprecedented, and I have never witnessed it before, for a budget to be presented to the House and a formal mechanism put in place to provide for a post-budget independent verification of the figures.

The situation was clouded even more yesterday by the Minister, Deputy Reilly, who is saying that he does not know whether it is between €666 million or €1 billion. He said that is what the independent verification is all about. He said that officials from the Department of the Taoiseach and the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform are coming in to independently verify the figures. He says their job is to verify whether it is €666 million or €1 billion. On Saturday, *The Irish Times* reported that it was €1 billion. Obviously, the Department of the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, Deputy Howlin, has been leaking fairly hard against the Minister for Health. Today's *Irish Independent* reports that the Minister for Health sought €1 billion and went out minus €1 billion, all in the space of 24 hours.

Will the Taoiseach correct the record of the House concerning his statement that the HSE's director had signed off on this health Estimate? Where does the health Estimate stand now?

**Deputy Paul Kehoe:** A Leas-Cheann Comhairle-----

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** Deputy Kehoe is not the Leas-Cheann Comhairle and should not try to be.

**Deputy Emmet Stagg:** Deputy Martin's question is out of order.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** My understanding is that this is to do with the record of the House.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** Yes, I am trying to correct the record of the House.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** I must ask the Taoiseach to reply.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** I am also trying to raise a legislative matter. This is an important matter under Standing Orders concerning a budget that was prepared for the House. Whenever Estimates are published-----

**Deputy Emmet Stagg:** They have been passed by the House, too.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** They have not, actually. They have to be independently verified.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** We cannot have this debate now.

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**Deputy Micheál Martin:** That is my point. Does Deputy Stagg not get it?

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** The Deputy has put a question to the Taoiseach and I want to call the Taoiseach to reply.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** I will seek the guidance of the Leas-Cheann Comhairle on this.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Yes.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** I have never before come across a situation where budget figures are put before the House and passed, yet two days later we are told by all the authorities involved that they are not the real figures because they have not been verified.

**Deputy Emmet Stagg:** Nobody is saying that.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** Yes. The HSE's director has said it and so has the Minister, Deputy Reilly. The Minister said that with the help of the Department of the Taoiseach and the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, they would verify whether it is €666 million or €1 billion.

**Deputy Bernard J. Durkan:** That is something the Deputy never did.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** The point is that the House was presented by Ministers with a solemn budget that contained the €666 million figure. Is the figure €666 million or €1 billion? Which is it?

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** I call the Taoiseach.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** Can the Taoiseach answer that question and say when the legislation will be published?

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** We are not having the budget debate today, but there is an issue concerning the record of the House.

**The Taoiseach:** Sometimes there is a lot of noise in here, which means it is difficult to pick up individual comments.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** What does the Taoiseach mean by that?

**The Taoiseach:** Sometimes it is difficult to hear when the Deputy interrupts and people are shouting.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** There were no interruptions when I asked the question.

*(Interruptions).*

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** The Taoiseach tries to clog it up but there was absolutely no interruption when I asked the question.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Order, please.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** I asked the Taoiseach a straight question and there was no noise.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Can I have order for the Taoiseach, please?

**The Taoiseach:** The figures in this budget have been signed off collectively by the Government. As regards the Vote for the Department of Health, the Health Service Executive must prepare a service plan based on those figures and come back to the Minister for Health in the next three to four weeks. I expect everybody involved in the Department and the HSE to work assiduously on the production of that service plan. The figures therein are challenging but they are achievable.

*(Interruptions).*

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** The Minister has said that he has to verify them independently.

*(Interruptions).*

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** We are getting different messages from the Government. The Minister is saying that he is not standing over the figure of €666 million.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** We are not having a debate on the budget now. Deputy Martin should resume his seat.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** The HSE director is not standing over the figures either.

**Deputy Bernard J. Durkan:** Does the Deputy remember what happened when he was there?

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** The Chair is on its feet. The Deputy should resume his seat. I ask the Taoiseach to conclude on this.

**The Taoiseach:** The situation is that the Government decided collectively on the figures in the budget and those figures stand. The figures in respect of the Department of Health are as outlined in the budget. The Health Service Executive must prepare a service plan based on those figures and report on that plan to the Minister in the next three to four weeks. That work is ongoing. The figures are challenging but they are achievable. They are in the interests of dealing with the reduction of costs and the provision of services. The overall budget is based on our country getting out of the bailout by the end of November or December.

If Deputy Martin took me up wrongly, or if I said that the people had signed off on the figures-----

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** The Taoiseach did.

**The Taoiseach:** -----then I wish to correct the record. I am saying that the Government signed off on the figures and the Health Service Executive must prepare a service plan based on those figures. I hope there is no ambiguity about that.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** To clarify, when I asked the Taoiseach, he said, “Of course, they stand over the figures”.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Order please. I call Deputy Adams.



**Deputy Gerry Adams:** I understand the Department of Social Protection must do a social impact assessment of the budget. Has that assessment commenced and, if so, when do we expect to have it? Is the Taoiseach aware that the European Commission has criticised the fact that these assessments, which are quite limited, are done after the budget as opposed to before it? The assessment does not include budgetary measures, such as health and education, and the impact of indirect taxes. Will the Government consider the criticism from the European Commission? Will the Taoiseach let us know when and if the Department of Social Protection is going to do a social impact assessment of the budget?

**The Taoiseach:** I note the comments from Commissioner Rehn, the ESRI and the independent Fiscal Advisory Council in respect of the decisions made by the Government and the general thrust of the budget as we move towards an exit from the bailout. At its Cabinet meeting this morning, the Government approved the publication of the Social Welfare and Pensions Bill. Deputy Adams will have plenty of time to comment on that Bill and the issues contained therein. The Government has approved the Social Welfare and Pensions Bill and the Vote for the Department of Social Protection has been signed off on collectively by the Government, as it has also done in respect of all other Departments.

**Deputy Gerry Adams:** The Taoiseach avoided the question I asked, which was whether the Department of Social Protection would do a social impact assessment of the budget. If so, when can we expect to have it?

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** This is not Question Time.

**The Taoiseach:** We always do an analysis of Bills going through and an analysis of the consequences of every budget. That is normal practice. The Government has signed off on it and agreed this morning that the Social Welfare and Pensions Bill will be published shortly by the Minister for Social Protection. The debate will then commence in the House.

**Deputy Gerry Adams:** When can we expect the social impact assessment?

**Deputy Ray Butler:** When is it expected to publish the civil registration (amendment) Bill to amend the Civil Registration Act 2004, following a review of its operations, including provision of the compulsory registration of fathers' names on birth certificates, validation of embassy marriages, civil partnerships, the prevention of marriages of convenience and the registration of deaths of Irish people who die abroad.

**The Taoiseach:** The heads of that Bill were approved in July. The Bill is expected to be published early next year.

**Deputy Bernard J. Durkan:** My question concerns promised legislation. An electronic media outlet proposes to reintroduce the broadcasting of sadistic and gratuitous acts of violence and what could be termed as pornography, which is deemed to shock people and condition them to an acceptance of that type of violence, including decapitation. Would it be possible to deal with this in the context of the criminal justice (cybercrime) Bill? If not, perhaps other alternatives might be considered?

**The Taoiseach:** It is a matter of concern to a number of people. I do not have a date for publication of the criminal justice (cybercrime) Bill. I will advise the Deputy of progress made on it.

**Deputy Peadar Tóibín:** The Taoiseach will be aware that subcontractors have suffered tremendously over recent years as a result of the recession. Many of them have been at the mercy of ruthless contractors in terms of payment. I spoke today to a subcontractor who is working for a contractor working directly for the Department of Education and Skills. He told me that a €160,000 payment has been withheld from him, resulting in him having to let people go and a loss of access to credit by him. The relevant legislation has been three years in the making and has not yet been enacted. Given the pressure on these individuals when will that legislation be enacted? Will the Taoiseach ensure it is enacted as soon as possible to take the pressure off subcontractors?

**The Taoiseach:** As far as I am aware, the legislation was enacted on 29 July. Unless a commencement order is required, the Bill which was signed by the President, should be effective.

**Deputy Peadar Tóibín:** I have been told by individuals in the Department that it has not yet been enacted and will not be enacted until some time next year.

**Deputy Pat Rabbitte:** The Bill has been already signed by the President.

**The Taoiseach:** As far as I know, it was signed by the President on 29 July.

**Deputy Peadar Tóibín:** It is functional?

**The Taoiseach:** Yes.

**Deputy Robert Troy:** Last night, the Fennessy family appeared on “Prime Time” pleading on their own behalf and that of five other families for the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, Deputy Fitzgerald, to intervene in relation to Russian adoptions. What does the Government propose to do to resolve this matter? Will the Taoiseach commit today to amend the Adoption Act 2010?

The National Vetting Bureau (Children and Vulnerable Persons) Act 2012 was passed by both Houses of the Oireachtas eight months ago but is still awaiting ministerial instruction in terms of enactment. The absence of vetting legislation in regard to soft information seriously compromises our child protection system. What is the reason for the delay in enacting this legislation? What is the reason the Minister, Deputy Shatter, has not commenced this Act during the past eight months?

**The Taoiseach:** I do not know the reason. The Minister, Deputy Shatter, is always diligent in commencing legislation. I will inquire as to the reason for the delay and advise the Deputy accordingly.

The Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, Deputy Fitzgerald, is considering what is the best thing to do in the context of the adoption legislation referred to by the Deputy. I am aware of the decision by the Russians not to-----

**Deputy Robert Troy:** The deadline is 31 October 2013.

**The Taoiseach:** I am aware of that.

**Deputy Lucinda Creighton:** The Social Welfare and Pensions Bill 2013 is scheduled for discussion this week. I understand the Bill will not be circulated until tomorrow. Perhaps the Taoiseach will confirm if that is the case.

While I welcome the Taoiseach's commitment to tackling welfare dependency, the budget for which is €20 billion, does he consider adequate the allocation, as provided for in the Dáil schedule for this week, of only nine hours and 35 minutes to debate that Bill in the context of the measures it introduces as per budget 2014? The Taoiseach, when in Opposition in 2009, condemned the idea of, to use his words, "the social welfare Bill being bulldozed through the Dáil in two days".

**A Deputy:** A woman scorned.

**Deputy Lucinda Creighton:** The Government is only allocating one hour in which to debate each €2 billion of taxpayers' money, which I do not believe is adequate.

**The Taoiseach:** It is important, in the context of the way in which we deal with legislation, that adequate time is provided for people to voice their opinions on legislation. The Government approved the Social Welfare and Pensions Bill 2013 this morning. It will be published tomorrow. The Whip understands the necessity for people to have an opportunity to comment on Bills. However, we do not want to play games and to provide additional time for the sake of it. If the Opposition Whips are prepared to discuss with the Minister the timeline required, the Government Whip will be as generous as possible. However, we cannot allow measures to be dragged out unduly, with people seeking additional time for the sake of saying they secured it.

**Deputy Lucinda Creighton:** There will be no guillotine.

**The Taoiseach:** The Whip will be as flexible and as generous as needs be. We do not want the debate to drag on interminably.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** On that point, I raised this matter last week with the Tánaiste. The Taoiseach has said the Whip will be as generous as possible. The bottom line is that the Whips were told that Second and Committee Stages would be taken on Thursday and Friday and that they could make up their minds in regard to how much time they wished to spend on Second and Committee Stages, respectively.

It is the view of most Opposition parties that Second Stage should be taken this week, with Committee Stage not being taken until such time as Members have had time to reflect on the Second Stage debate. There is no rush in respect of this Bill. The only reason advanced for this by the Whip was that the legislation might be held up in the Seanad.

**Deputy Paul Kehoe:** That was never said.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** It was said to the Whips that the fear was that the Bill, because of the Government's difficulties with the Seanad, would be delayed by it. That is no basis for how debate on a Bill should be scheduled. There has been much talk about Dáil reform and the Seanad referendum is over. We were promised reform of the Dáil and the Government is again rushing through the Social Welfare and Pensions Bill on Thursday and Friday. What we are being offered is a Hobson's choice of a five hour Second Stage debate and a three hour Committee Stage debate. There is no need for it.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** There are six other Deputies offering and only 11 minutes remaining.

**Deputy Lucinda Creighton:** I would like clarification on a matter.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** I call the Taoiseach to respond to the questions asked.

**The Taoiseach:** It is not true that the Bill is being guillotined. I am not in the business of wanting to guillotine Bills. Members will have plenty of time to argue their points and state their case. This is an important Bill that affects many people in terms of the changes being introduced.

**Deputy Billy Kelleher:** Yes, and in a negative way.

**The Taoiseach:** We do not want debate on the Bill to be dragged out. There is a great deal of legislation waiting to go through the Houses. The Whip has asked the other Whips to consider the timescale set out and to engage constructively with him in that regard. The response will be on that basis. We must get Bills through.

**Deputy Timmy Dooley:** Is the Government open to amendments?

**The Taoiseach:** We will allow people to have their say.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** The Bill does not have to go through this week.

**Deputy Lucinda Creighton:** A Leas-Cheann Comhairle-----

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** I am not allowing Deputies in again. I call Deputy Healy-Rae.

**Deputy Lucinda Creighton:** In fairness, it is important to those of us who do not officially have a Whip and wish to contribute to the debate on the Social Welfare and Pensions Bill that the Taoiseach clarifies that we will have an opportunity to speak on the Bill and that debate on it will not be guillotined on Friday.

**Deputy Timmy Dooley:** Hear, hear.

**Deputy Lucinda Creighton:** It is important that any Member who wishes to contribute to the Second and Committee Stage debates has an opportunity to do so.

**Deputy Timmy Dooley:** Hear, hear.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** The Deputy has made her point adequately. I call Deputy Healy-Rae.

**The Taoiseach:** As I said, the Whip will be as generous as possible.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** That means nothing to us. The idea of the Minister of State, Deputy Kehoe, being generous-----

**The Taoiseach:** We are not going to drag out debate on the Bill interminably.

*(Interruptions).*

**Deputy Timmy Dooley:** The division is becoming greater.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Order, please. I call Deputy Healy-Rae.

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**Deputy Michael Healy-Rae:** I wish to ask about two items in the context of the programme for Government. Earlier today, an elderly lady protesting outside the House took ill and had to be assisted by the Garda Síochána. Like many thousands of elderly people from throughout the country, the lady concerned had come here to protest at this Government's handling of issues relating to older people.

**Deputy Tom Hayes:** To what Bill does that issue relate?

**Deputy Michael Healy-Rae:** I am speaking about what was committed to in the programme for Government. If the Deputy wishes, I will remind him of the promises which he and his colleagues, including the Taoiseach, made to the elderly people of this State.

**Deputy Bernard J. Durkan:** What promises?

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** The Deputy can raise that issue another time.

**Deputy Michael Healy-Rae:** I want to ask the Taoiseach-----

**Deputy Tom Hayes:** We were here when the Deputy's father was making promises day in and day out.

**Deputy Michael Healy-Rae:** What answers does the Taoiseach have for the people outside the House today?

**Deputy Tom Hayes:** The Deputy should ask his father.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Does the Deputy have another issue to raise?

**Deputy Michael Healy-Rae:** The Government has broken all of its promises.

**Deputy Bernard J. Durkan:** What did the Deputy sign up to?

*(Interruptions).*

**Deputy Michael Healy-Rae:** My second question relates to the Local Government Bill 2013. The Seanad debacle, for which this Government was responsible, was a case of the people having their say. Is there any hope that the Taoiseach and his colleagues will reconsider the Local Government Bill 2013 and give the people in towns the opportunity to decide for themselves, by means of a plebiscite, whether they want to have town councils? That is all I am asking. Let democracy work. If I am wrong and the Taoiseach is right, well and good, but we should let the people decide like they decided about the Seanad.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** We will not go back over that.

**Deputy Michael Healy-Rae:** The Taoiseach thought he was right on the Seanad, but he was wrong and so were his colleagues.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** I call the Taoiseach.

**The Taoiseach:** I hope that the good lady who took ill is well and was properly looked after, and that she makes a full recovery. We have gone past the stage of what the Deputy has called for. The Bill is in the House and will proceed. As the seanfhocal used to say, "in your father's

time”, there were secret deals signed between him and the Government about which nobody knew anything. At least we now know, with openness and transparency, what is involved here.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** I call Deputy Fitzpatrick.

**Deputy Michael Healy-Rae:** If the Taoiseach thinks he can make that swipe and get away with it, we are talking about a man that had a respectable track record and did a lot of good things for a lot of people and who never misled anybody.

**The Taoiseach:** I never made any comment in contrary to the good man’s character.

**Deputy Michael Healy-Rae:** That is okay, but let us be very clear on that.

**The Taoiseach:** In fact, he and I were very good friends, but while we were good friends, he never divulged to me the secrets of Fatima contained in that document.

**Deputy Michael Healy-Rae:** It is a good job that he delivered, because the fellas with the Taoiseach would not deliver a bag of eggs.

**Deputy Bernard J. Durkan:** One marina on top of a mountain.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** We are nearly out of time. I call Deputy Fitzpatrick.

**The Taoiseach:** When he opened the filling station in Glenbeigh, he delivered one of the finest speeches I had heard in donkey’s years.

**Deputy Peter Fitzpatrick:** When can we expect the publication of the radiological protection Bill? This will put in place the legislative basis required for the merger of the RPI with the EPA and to ensure that Irish legislation is compatible with the terms of the convention on physical protection of nuclear material and nuclear facilities, and that Ireland may ratify this convention.

**The Taoiseach:** The heads of that Bill were cleared in July and the Bill will be published early next year.

**Deputy Seamus Kirk:** Perhaps the Taoiseach might advise the House about the Narrow Water bridge project and where it stands now. Can we expect it will proceed or what exactly is the position?

Unfortunately, many businesses are being wound up around the country for obvious reasons. Local authorities appear to have a difficulty on rates arrears and there are constraints on local authority accounts departments to negotiate these arrears. They claim that the legislative position is that they are not allowed to reduce the rates bill where representatives of businesses in distress are prepared to negotiate the figure with them. Perhaps the Taoiseach might look at that.

**The Taoiseach:** The time is fast approaching for a decision in respect of the European element of funding for the Narrow Water bridge. There have been discussions between Newry and Mourne Council and Louth County Council, the Executive and the Government here. We have always supported this in principle. The Deputy is aware of the estimate for provision of the bridge, but the tender which came in was very much in excess of that estimate. The Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform discussed the issue recently and discussions are still ongoing.

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The question about arrears on rates should be raised during the debate on the Local Government Bill 2013. In my time on a local authority, rates bills could always be dealt with by local authorities and there used to be an opportunity at that time to cut a deal, depending on the circumstances in which an individual retailer or commercial business would find themselves. I suggest the Deputy raises it as part of his contribution to the debate on the Bill when it is before the House.

**Deputy Robert Dowds:** Where stands the Valuation (Amendment) (No.2) Bill 2012?

**The Taoiseach:** That is on Committee Stage in the Seanad.

**Deputy Billy Kelleher:** Last week, the Minister for Finance came into this House and effectively drove a coach and four through the Government's health policy on the terms of universal health insurance by announcing a cap on the relief for premia for private health insurers. Given the commitment in the programme for Government that universal health insurance would be implemented, where lies the White Paper on universal health insurance? That is a central plank of the Government's policy, but the Minister for Finance seems to be undermining the taking out of health insurance, which is a policy statement of the Government of which he is a member.

**The Taoiseach:** The first step in the provision of universal health insurance is the free GP care for under fives. The White Paper on universal health insurance, leading towards universal health insurance, is to be published by the close of this year or very early in the new year.

**Deputy Peter Mathews:** Deputy Troy spoke about the amending legislation needed for the adoption Bill. The deadline is 31 October and I ask the Taoiseach to ensure that the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs and whoever else is involved would do that speedily to achieve the result for those five families.

I understand the challenge facing the Government on the overall budget, and particularly the social welfare budget, apropos the earlier discussion about the time needed to discuss it. The time is not just needed to discuss it because Deputies also need the time to explore and understand properly the underlying economic basis and assumptions for that social welfare Bill. They need to be discussed and it can be done in a generous amount of time, as the Taoiseach said. As Deputy Creighton pointed out, it is nine hours 35 minutes for €20.24 billion worth of expenditure and savings, and the underlying economic assumptions need to be explored and examined.

**The Taoiseach:** Long before the Deputy came in here, the late Deputy Vivion de Valera used to raise the question of the appropriations Bill going through in ten seconds every year, and the corresponding amount of money which was voted through without any debate at all. Second Stage is for general observations and issues about a Bill, whereas Committee Stage is for exploration and analysis. I have already said that the Whip will be as generous as possible in moving this along.

**Deputy Peter Mathews:** We do not want the cart before the horse.

## Topical Issue Debate

## **Local Drugs Task Forces Funding**

**Deputy Jonathan O'Brien:** I am sure the Minister of State is very aware of the work of local drugs task forces. On 2 October the co-ordinator of the Cork local drugs task force wrote to all the elected representatives in the Cork area, in particular the members of Cork City Council, some of whom are members of that task force. The co-ordinator outlined some of the cuts they have had to endure since 2008 and the impact they are having on the delivery of services in this area. It has become all the more critical because at a recent joint policing committee meeting, the chief superintendent indicated to those present that Garda detection of drug possessions has increased. Cork city has a growing problem with heroin, and the agencies are doing considerable work to try to stem that and keep it under control. There have been a number of deaths as a result of heroin use in Cork city.

The task force was established in 1997 to try to address some of the growing alcohol and drug issues local communities were facing. Since 2008 it has had a 23% decrease in its budget, almost €500,000. At present it has approximately 21 local projects and since 2008 it has ceased funding about eight of those projects because the money taken from its budget has meant that cuts have had to be made. There has been a reduction in opening hours and even staff losses in some projects. I am sure the Minister of State is familiar with the work these task forces do in the Dublin region. They fund local community and voluntary groups and statutory agencies, and they play a pivotal role in combating not only the rise of drug use but also alcohol abuse. They also play a pivotal role in educating schoolchildren of the dangers of alcohol and drug abuse. The funding cuts to the local drugs task forces are having a real impact. Without a change in policy and unless some of the cuts are reversed, we will condemn more young people to a life of drug or alcohol abuse, which will end up costing the State in the longer run.

On behalf of the communities I and other Deputies represent, I ask that the funding to local drugs task forces not be cut. At the moment, the Cork local drugs task force does not even know what its budget for next year will be. Therefore it has been unable to plan any of the initiatives or programmes it wants to implement. It does not even know how much funding will be taken out. In turn, the local projects have been unable to agree implementation plans. I ask that this be conveyed to the co-ordinator of the local task force as soon as possible.

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Alex White):** I thank the Deputy for raising this matter. The Government is committed to addressing problem drug use in a comprehensive way, as is clear from the programme for Government. Our overall strategic objective is to tackle the harm caused to individuals and society by having a concerted focus on the five pillars of supply reduction, prevention, treatment, rehabilitation and research.

As Minister of State, I fully recognise the work of the drugs task forces as an indispensable element of the overall national drugs strategy in delivering on local action plans. These plans identify existing and emerging gaps in services in each of the pillars of the strategy and support a range of measures covering the pillars. The drugs task forces provide a mechanism for the co-ordination of services and strategies in their areas while, at the same time, allowing local communities and voluntary organisations to participate in the planning, design and delivery of those services. The measures being implemented by the drugs task forces are designed to complement and add value to the range of interventions being delivered through the State agencies.

Some €29.95 million has been allocated to the drugs initiative in 2013, the bulk of which contributes to the running of community-based drugs projects supported by local and regional



drugs task forces. The drugs task forces have allocated funding to projects and initiatives, such as those the Deputy outlined, based on priorities identified in their respective areas, and 323 projects are in place. The types of projects being supported include delivering services such as advice and support for drug misusers and their families, community drug teams offering treatment, outreach and crisis intervention services, and drug training programmes for community groups.

A total of €1.53 million has been allocated to the Cork local drugs task force in 2013. Some 20 projects have been funded through the task force providing a range of services and supports to tackle problem drug use in Cork city.

I am working hard to ensure the optimum use is made of available resources. The Government has to operate within the current budgetary framework and it is inevitable that we have to make cost reductions. I assure the House of the Government's commitment, in particular my commitment, to the national drugs strategy and to the work of the drugs task forces, including the Cork drugs task force. We will continue to ensure available resources are directed towards tackling the drug problem, in particular at local level.

I hope to be in a position in the coming weeks to confirm the 2014 allocations for each of the drugs task forces. I am not in a position to give an account of final decisions in that regard today. I am paying very close attention to this matter. As late as this afternoon, I was addressing this issue. Tomorrow afternoon I will meet representatives of the local drugs task forces nationwide. On Thursday we have a meeting of the oversight forum on drugs. This issue is a very live one for me. I thank the Deputy for raising it. I know of his commitment in this area. I know we intend to do the very best we can on the 2014 allocations in the context of the financial constraints that exist.

**Deputy Jonathan O'Brien:** I thank the Minister of State for his reply. I recognise we are in very tough economic times and that difficult budgetary decisions have to be made. I am not laying all the blame for this at the feet of the Minister of State, because there have been reductions in funding to the Cork local drugs task force since 2008 and it is not the sole responsibility of this Government. In those years there has been a steady decrease in the level of service provision, which is inevitable if money is taken from an entity such as the Cork local drugs task force which funds 21 projects in the city and county which are doing sterling work. In some cases very tough decisions made at local level have resulted in the reduction of funding to some local projects which has had a very detrimental impact on that local community. Staff with experience and expertise have been let go because the money is not available. Is it the co-ordinators of the local drugs task forces whom the Minister of State is meeting tomorrow?

**Deputy Alex White:** The chairs.

**Deputy Jonathan O'Brien:** They need to know their budgets for next year as quickly as possible, as I am sure the Minister of State would agree. We cannot have local projects, dependent on funding from the local drugs task force, not being able to plan and co-ordinate activities for next year. I cannot stress that too much. When I sat on the local drugs task force, when we did not know how much funding we were getting, we could not advise the local projects how much funding they were getting. They all have work plans they want to put in place and they know how much those will cost. Much of that is dependent on the funding. When setting the budgets for the local drugs task forces for next year, I appeal to the Minister of State if at all possible at least not to reduce their allocation. They have had reductions every year since 2008

and they cannot take any more.

**Deputy Alex White:** I cannot argue with anything the Deputy has said on the work the drugs projects do and the desirability or necessity of having clarity on the funding for next year. I will arrange for that to be done as soon as possible, but I need some more time to finalise the matter. I would like to be able to inform the House that there will be no reduction, but I cannot say that. My job is to curtail the reduction, as I am doing. That is what I did last year and I intend to do it again this year as best I can.

### **Symphysiotomy Report**

**Deputy Seamus Kirk:** I thank the Ceann Comhairle for the opportunity to raise this matter. The issue of symphysiotomy is rather topical and important in the north east but the debate is not confined to there. A number of people throughout the country are directly affected by it. There are between 232 and 250 in the age range of late 50s to 90s who are directly affected by the issue. The Government invited Professor Una Walsh to prepare a report or reports on the matter. One preliminary report has been tabled and released by the Minister for Health. We await the publication of the most important report, which is the second report.

The Minister indicated some time ago to representatives of people affected that the Walsh report would be released soon. Survivors of symphysiotomy were interviewed orally and have made written submissions to Professor Walsh. The question of the legislative change that may be necessary, for example, the lifting of the statute bar in the legislative system, clearly needs to be accelerated. The Minister for Health indicated his intention to appoint a judge, establish a redress arrangement and publish the Walsh report in August last. We await announcements on those fronts.

Unfortunately, some survivors have died even since the meeting in August last. Many of the people involved fear the prospect of going to court. Many are frail at this stage. Furthermore, files are missing or incomplete. There is a need to accelerate and address the matter as quickly as possible.

The reality is that much heartache and pain has been endured by the women involved. The opportunity to bring relief and some comfort to the 230 plus women affected by symphysiotomy exists now. This group of women require peace of mind and the opportunity to deliver this rests with the Minister for Health. If the Minister of State, Deputy White, was in a position to make an announcement this evening on the publication of the Walsh report, the appointment of a judge, a redress scheme and the progression of the legislation on the statute bar, it would be welcome. This is an urgent matter and I urge the Minister of State to address it immediately.

**Deputy Alex White:** I thank Deputy Kirk for raising this matter. Following peer review, the independent report by Professor Walsh was submitted to my colleague, the Minister for Health, Deputy James Reilly, at the end of May last. The Minister met the three support groups representing the women concerned in August 2013. At that meeting the Minister proposed to appoint a judge to meet the women to facilitate decisions on how best to bring closure for the women concerned. Department officials are actively considering the issue and the Minister intends to bring proposals to Government in the coming weeks. I confirm that the Minister intends to publish the Walsh report when the Government has had an opportunity to consider the matter and approve an approach regarding how best to proceed. It should be acknowledged

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that this is a complex issue for the Government to address. I am aware that legal proceedings have been initiated in more than 100 cases but the Minister is not a party to these proceedings. In addition, complex legal issues regarding liability have yet to be resolved.

The Minister's priority continues to be to ensure that the greatest possible supports and services are made available to women who have had this procedure and to ensure that their health needs are comprehensively and professionally met. The women concerned continue to receive attention and care through several services and pathways of care put in place in the HSE. These can be accessed by women on request from a HSE symphysiotomy liaison officer. Services available on request include full GMS eligibility; independent clinical advice; the organisation of individual pathways of care; the arrangement of appropriate follow-up care such as medical, gynaecological and orthopaedic assessment, counselling, physiotherapy, reflexology, home help, acupuncture, osteopathy and fast-track hospital appointments where possible; and a support group facilitated by a counsellor set up in Dundalk and Drogheda in 2004 for women living in the north-east region, of which the Deputy is aware. The Minister is committed to facilitating a mechanism to help bring closure to this issue for the women concerned.

**Deputy Seamus Kirk:** We need to inject urgency into this matter. It has been around, as the Minister has noted, since 2004 and it has been on the agenda since then. We need urgency and we need it to be dealt with as quickly as possible. The sooner the Government considers the Walsh report and what is to be done subsequently, the better because we need to bring comfort and solace to the people involved.

**Deputy Alex White:** The Deputy is correct in that regard and I share his sentiments. I am sure the matter will be brought to a conclusion as soon as possible. I thank Deputy Kirk again for raising the issue.

## **Rail Services**

**Deputy Simon Harris:** I thank the Minister of State with responsibility for public transport, Deputy Alan Kelly, for being in the House this evening to take this important debate. Irish Rail stated that it needed to save money on energy costs and therefore it intended to reduce the capacity of DART trains at off-peak times. Unfortunately for commuters in Greystones and Bray and those along the DART line, the company has not kept to that commitment. We have seen commuter chaos in Greystones and Bray as Irish Rail reduces capacity at busy peak times.

The Minister of State is not responsible for minding Irish Rail on a day-to-day basis but I call on him to hear our concerns and take note of these problems. I also call on the Minister of State to ask Irish Rail to fulfil its commitments, adhere to some quality of service for commuters, who are already paying through the nose for the service, and to adhere to safety standards.

I will use the brief time available to me to put on the record excerpts from a diary I have received from a constituent who has been using the DART service. On 26 September, the constituent got the 6.30 p.m. DART train from Pearse Street station to Greystones, which was a four-carriage train. People were left on the platform as they could not board the train due to overcrowding. On 30 September on the same service, the 6.30 p.m. train from Pearse Street station to Greystones, again it was a four-carriage train and people were left on the platform. On 1 October in the opposite direction, the 7 a.m. DART train from Greystones to Malahide had four carriages and there was not enough capacity. On 2 October in the case of the 7 a.m.

Greystones to Malahide train, on arrival passengers were told the train had been cancelled due to a problem with overhead lines. Then they were told to change platform and take the Rosslare train to Dublin. Only five minutes later they were told to get off the Rosslare train because all trains between Bray and Greystones were cancelled due to a problem with overhead lines. The commuters were told to use Dublin Bus services instead. On 14 October due to a DART dispute there were two-carriage trains. The diary goes on and on up to yesterday, when the DART train was delayed by eight minutes up to 10 a.m. The chaos is clear.

We need people in Greystones and Bray to use the DART service. It has been remarkably successful. People campaigned hard for the service. However, at the moment Irish Rail must get a grip on this. It should stop telling us one thing in its press releases and doing another in reality. The company must ensure that there is proper capacity and safety standards at peak times.

**Deputy Andrew Doyle:** I thank the Ceann Comhairle for selecting this Topical Issue which I tabled with my colleagues, Deputies Simon Harris and Terence Flanagan. As Deputy Harris stated, this has become something of a saga in recent weeks. When Irish Rail announced the changes at the outset some months ago it was with the intention of saving money and shortening the carriages during what were termed off-peak times rather than cut down on the frequency of the service. That seemed absolutely sensible.

We do not seem to be able to get a straight answer on the matter but it seems the company did not assess what constituted peak times when it was setting out the new arrangements. Furthermore, any efforts to address that seem to have been met with resistance. It appears some form of industrial dispute is ongoing and this is compounding the problem.

The fact is that overcrowding is now regularly occurring and causing significant inconvenience for commuters. Previously, Irish Rail undertook to monitor the changes to ensure this sort of congestion did not arise. On one or two days the overhead lines have been inactive and that probably would have occurred anyway but it is happening every day and has happened every day for the past two weeks. The sight of four carriages and sometimes two carriages now when six and eight carriages were the norm is perplexing. This is a public service which has been very efficient and proven to alleviate traffic. It has also proven to be a reliable service and has improved over the years, but these difficulties are undermining it.

*6 o'clock*

While the principle of not being obliged to use full-length trains to save energy off-peak is good, Irish Rail should now re-evaluate the decision. It should consult the organisations representing all the staff and ensure this can be done in a way that saves the money and improves the service.

**Deputy Terence Flanagan:** I also thank the Ceann Comhairle for the opportunity to raise this important issue together with my colleagues, who are Deputies from the south side. I am a Deputy from the north side with eight DART stations in my constituency. The DART is a vital lifeline to my constituents, who use it on a daily basis to travel to and from the city, as well as to the south side and beyond. As noted earlier, customers experienced an extremely crowded situation on the DART last Monday, with some services operating with four-carriage trains or even with two-carriage trains in some instances, particularly at peak times. As the Minister of State is aware, this was due to the dispute between train drivers and management. However, this has been an ongoing issue for some time, with fewer carriages coming into play. As Deputy

Harris noted, Iarnród Éireann has stated this pertains to saving energy costs. The company has a smaller budget as a consequence of the economic situation. However, customers have been paying more in increased fares and it was announced recently that the cost of ticket prices is set to increase by a further 10.3% next year. These price increases are not justified, particularly if customers are receiving an inferior service.

Customers do not expect to get a seat at peak times in particular, that is, before 8:30 a.m. or after 5:30 p.m. However, they deserve better than cramped, extremely harsh and overcrowded trains. The *Evening Herald* newspaper reported on the conditions experienced last week and, having experienced it myself at first hand, it certainly is a major health and safety issue. Given the claustrophobic conditions in which commuters can find themselves, one certainly must take heed of the situation and ensure this does not happen.

What discussions has the Minister of State had with Irish Rail in respect of the length of trains and number of carriages? Does he believe Iarnród Éireann has the funding to provide six or eight-carriage trains at peak times? The Minister of State also might provide an update regarding the industrial dispute. In addition, is there any way in which commuters can be forewarned as to the length of the approaching train? Could such a warning be displayed on the screens located in all DART stations in order that at least, the actual arrival of a train with only two carriages does not create panic with everyone running about?

**Minister of State at the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Alan Kelly):** I thank the Deputies for raising this matter. While the provision of DART services is an operational matter for Irish Rail in conjunction with the National Transport Authority, NTA, I have been in touch with both parties in respect of this issue today. Irish Rail states that at peak times, over the past 18 months it has operated a mix of four, six and eight-carriage DART trains. It monitors closely the numbers travelling to ensure it provides as efficient a service as possible by matching the train size to actual demand. This includes allowing for full loading, which on some services increases the levels of standing passengers. Irish Rail has stated this is the norm in urban rail systems internationally at peak times. This initiative delivers fuel and maintenance savings with associated environmental benefits. As Irish Rail is anxious to maintain service frequency, train size is its main means of adjusting to current demand levels. It of course will increase train sizes if services are unable to cater for the numbers travelling. It has already done so with some peak and off-peak services as demand patterns change and will do so in the future. This will be a process of ongoing monitoring and review and should the company perceive significant growth in demand, it has the fleet capacity to respond to it.

I have been informed by the National Transport Authority that it has given conditional approval to Irish Rail's request to reduce the number of DART carriages in operation for the period 19 September to 31 December 2013. The NTA is reviewing on an ongoing basis the operation of the reduced DART carriage numbers by means of the information contained in a four-weekly report produced by Irish Rail, any other feedback or reports received and by raising queries with Irish Rail as required. In addition, the NTA shortly will carry out a customer survey to assess the impact of the reduced number of DART carriages on commuters. The information gathered from the above activities will be used to inform the NTA's approval of Irish Rail's DART carriage strategy.

The Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport, Deputy Varadkar, and I, together with the departmental officials, have been engaged almost constantly over the past 18 months in dealing with the financial situation in CIE and its subsidiary companies, including Irish Rail, to ensure

a return to financial stability to enable them to continue to provide an essential service to the public. Irish Rail has incurred accumulated losses of €130 million in the past five years, a position which I am sure all Members will agree is unsustainable. My Department and the National Transport Authority are working with Irish Rail to increase the efficiency and attractiveness of existing rail services.

The Government continues to provide substantial Exchequer investment in the rail network despite the significant financial challenges. In the past two years, almost €385 million has been invested in Irish Rail. Despite the reduced level of funding available, my Department has allocated more than €135 million towards the rail network this year. In addition to safety-related works, Irish Rail is undertaking infrastructural works to improve journey times such as removing or upgrading level crossings, providing automated ticketing machines and improving station facilities, all of which contribute to making the railway more competitive and attractive to passengers. In addition to capital investment, Irish Rail also received a total allocation of €127 million in 2013 for public service obligation services. Given the pressure on the public finances, there is no possibility of additional funding by the Exchequer. The board of CIE also is pursuing a range of measures to address the financial position, including cost reductions across the three operating companies in order that its rail and bus services can be provided efficiently and cost-effectively over the plan period.

I am scheduled to meet the chief executive of Irish Rail tomorrow. I already have tabled a number of questions to him and I give the Deputies a commitment that I will raise this issue directly with him on a face-to-face basis tomorrow. Furthermore, Irish Rail has assured me that over the coming weeks, it will be engaged in adjusting and monitoring the requirements on the DART line in accordance with the needs for various different forms of carriages, particularly at peak times. Members will appreciate that the majority of travel on the DART, that is, 65%, takes place either in the morning or evening and the other 35% of travel takes place during the other 14 hours of the day. Irish Rail must tweak and concentrate the carriage numbers in respect of peak hours and I have stressed that point to the company as recently as today.

**Deputy Simon Harris:** I thank the Minister of State for his reply and am grateful that he intends to raise these issues directly with the chief executive. All I ask is for the chief executive and Irish Rail to keep the commitment they made to commuters and the Minister of State on 9 September 2013, when they issued a press statement stating this capacity issue would only affect off-peak DART services. My colleagues and I are telling the Minister of State clearly that commuters in Greystones, Bray and all along the DART line to the north side have noticed this happening at peak times. While I note the Minister of State mentioned the NTA intends to carry out a survey, I have carried out my own online survey of commuters, which literally hundreds of people have completed thus far. People are telling me the 7 a.m. train and the peak-time train home in the evening are operating at a reduced capacity. A fortune was spent on increasing the platform lengths to facilitate longer DART trains and the Minister of State quite correctly tells Members that Irish Rail has the capacity and fleet for that time. It must carry out what the Minister of State called tweaking very quickly and I appreciate the Minister's view on that. As for the economic argument, Irish Rail can make money by getting people on the trains and by making the DART an attractive service and that is precisely what the company must do.

**Deputy Andrew Doyle:** At the outset, it was stated that this measure would save €3.2 million and would only affect off-peak services. In his response, the Minister of State noted there was no possibility of additional funding by the Exchequer. However, no one is asking for that and that is not in question because this is about management and putting together trains with

the appropriate number of carriages for the demand at the time. As the Minister of State stated, there are 14 hours in the day when demand is not at peak and this makes up two thirds or three quarters of the entire day. While it makes no sense to run empty six or eight-carriage trains along the length of the DART line from Greystones to Howth, they should be in place when they are needed and the energy can be saved during the remaining period.

**Deputy Terence Flanagan:** I thank the Minister of State for his response and ask him to comment on the industrial situation within Irish Rail. In his response, he stated “as efficient a service as possible” would be provided “by matching train size to actual demand” and that the NTA has given conditional approval to Irish Rail. I assume this permission to reduce the number of DART carriages relates to off-peak times, as it would be extremely concerning otherwise. Will the Minister of State raise at the meeting tomorrow if the number of carriages on trains could be indicated on the signage on the platform to enable passengers to be aware of the numbers of carriages as the train approaches the station? If shorter trains continue to be norm, can the ventilation system, in particular, be examined and upgraded? It is a major concern. As I said, it was reported in the *Evening Herald* that not enough space is available and people feel claustrophobic on the trains. I have had experience of that and I know from where they are coming.

A disruption to DART services on the northside is planned on the bank holiday weekend. No services will be available between Pearse Street Station and Howth due to the city centre resignalling project, a project that is to be welcomed. To not have any DART services on that line on the bank holiday weekend seems like an own goal. Perhaps Irish Rail could reschedule those works for a different time. The Minister of State might also raise that point at the meeting tomorrow.

**Deputy Alan Kelly:** I will respond to the Deputy’s last question first. The reason for the disruption is that a significant resignalling programme is going ahead this weekend. I accept the Deputy’s concerns but because it is required from a safety point of view to carry out testing over three consecutive days, the alternative would be to do carry it out on a bank holiday weekend during the summer. It is probably the lesser of two evils to do the testing this weekend. That is the honest answer. Under safety regulations, testing must be carried out consecutively for three days. Clearly it cannot be done during the week having regard to the numbers commuting.

**Deputy Terence Flanagan:** It could be done over the Christmas period or a holiday period.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Paudie Coffey):** Deputy, allow the Minister of State to respond.

**Deputy Alan Kelly:** Regarding the IR situation, matters are progressing towards a satisfactory solution. There is some movement and I am confident that it is going in the direction.

I will take up with the chief executive tomorrow the possibility of advance signalling of the number of carriages on trains in terms of safety concerns. It is a fair point, as is the point regarding ventilation. The real time passenger information, RTPI, service signals the time trains are due. I do not know if that service can be tweaked to signal the number of carriages on the train but I will ask about that tomorrow.

I repeat to the Deputy and the other Deputies who raised this issue that we and the NTA will be having discussions with Irish Rail in terms of monitoring the situation and ensuring that at peak times the size of the trains in terms of the number of carriages are sufficient to meet

demand and whatever changes or tweaking are required that they will be made to ensure that customers have the best service possible and that we maximise revenue accruing from DART services. I can assure the Deputies that this will be done. I thank them for raising this issue.

### **Planning Issues**

**Deputy Sean Fleming:** I thank the Acting Chairman for allowing me to raise this issue. I want to find out the reasons behind the decision of the Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government to require local authorities to consider reduced or no planning development contributions in respect of wind turbines which are not supplying electricity to the national grid. Many people will be aware of the existence of many local windfarm projects throughout the country, which are contributing to Ireland meeting its targets in respect of renewable energy. They all went through the planning process and paid their development levies and rates. Many other windfarm projects currently in construction will go through the same process.

Why has the Minister of State or the Minister entered into a special arrangement in respect of two companies, and two companies only, requiring local authorities to exempt them from planning development financial contributions in respect of their wind turbines? This special arrangement is not available to any other company. The two companies to which I refer are Element Power and Mainstream. The Minister of State must be aware of the controversy in respect of these companies, each of which is planning the construction of 750 wind turbines in the midland region in Laois, Offaly, Kildare, Longford and Westmeath. Their turbines will be 186 m high, higher than anything else in the country. I am aware the Minister intends to produce new planning guidelines in terms of set-back distance but before we have the planning guidelines, he has already changed the rules financially for these two companies. The Minister issued guidelines to the local authorities entitled Development Contributions Guidelines for Planning Authorities in January 2013. That document states that “[P]lanning authorities are required to include the following in their development contribution schemes”. It further states that “For example, authorities are encouraged to consider reduced or no charges in respect of renewable energy development which is not supplying electricity to the national grid”. The Minister of State knows full well that this relates to only two companies in respect of which her party colleague, the Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources, Deputy Rabbitte, has already signed an outline agreement with the UK for the export of electricity, which will not be going to our national grid but to the UK national grid. Why has the Minister entered this special arrangement for two companies only?

**Deputy Michelle Mulherin:** The gist of the matter I wish to raise is slightly different. I do not know if the Minister of State has the wording of it but I have asked that the position regarding the community fund in respect of windfarm projects, transmission projects for erecting pylons and high powered electricity lines and all other energy infrastructure would be put on a statutory basis and that part of the planning code would allow local authorities to make it a condition of planning permission that communities would benefit. That is not currently happening *vis-à-vis* the local authorities.

The background to this, and this is perhaps from where Deputy Fleming is coming on this issue, is that there is a great deal of negative press about various proposed energy infrastructure developments, be they windfarms or transmission lines. Many such developments gives rise



to chaos in communities. There is a great deal of fear about them and many individuals and communities ask why they have to tolerate living next to a pylon or some other development. It is beholden on the Government and all the stakeholders to involve stakeholders in the community and to open up the debate and shift the focus to the reason this infrastructure is being attempted to be developed and what the benefits of it are. Aside from jobs, the need to modernise our energy infrastructure and to tap into our renewable energy potential, the local people on the ground have to be considered. They have to put up with, at the very least, having to look at the development and with other aspects including health concerns. The nettle must be grasped in this respect. Anybody who has to put up with the construction of energy infrastructure for the benefit of the entire nation must be particularly compensated. I am not only talking about landowners because provision is made for them.

One aspect of this issue is the community fund. Currently, provision in that respect is very *ad hoc*. It depends on the developer in the case of wind energy projects and some are more generous than others. It leaves communities in general not knowing where to turn because there is no table or script to indicate that such a price is a fair price to get per megawatt installed. In that context, I would also include EirGrid in terms of its transmission lines.

**Minister of State at the Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government (Deputy Jan O’Sullivan):** I hope I can clarify somewhat the issues that were raised. I thank both Deputies for raising this issue. In January of this year, my colleague the Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government issued updated guidelines on development contributions under section 28 of the Planning and Development Act 2000, as amended. Planning authorities and An Bord Pleanála are required to have regard to the guidelines in performance of their functions under the Planning Acts. The principal aim of the new guidelines is to provide non-statutory guidance on the drawing up of development contribution schemes to reflect the radical economic changes that have impacted across all sectors since guidance last issued in 2007. While it is recognised that the adoption of development contribution schemes is a reserved function of the elected members of each planning authority, one of the outputs of the new guidance should be a greater level of consistency in development contribution schemes on a national basis providing enhanced clarity to inform investment decisions across different local authority areas.

Local authorities now, more than ever, need to achieve the right balance between funding necessary infrastructure through planning gain and supporting and promoting economic activity and job creation by reducing costs to business. Subject to the overriding principles of proper planning and sustainable development, adopted development contribution schemes should contribute to the promotion of sustainable development patterns, economic activity and to securing investment in capital infrastructure and economic activity. To bring this about, planning authorities are required to provide for reduced rates of development contributions or waivers for certain specified developments. Included in those are options for reduced charges in respect of renewable energy development to promote uptake of renewable energy technologies. For example, planning authorities are encouraged to consider reduced or no charges in respect of renewable energy development which is not supplying electricity to the national grid, but I want to explain that. This is primarily intended to apply, for example, in situations where landowners install wind turbines on their own land for the purpose of generating energy for their own use.

Authorities should also ensure that their schemes distinguish proportionately between large and small-scale. For example, it would be inappropriate to charge the same flat rate charge to a 6,000 MW wind turbine as it would for a 3 MW wind turbine.

It should also be made clear that such reduced development contribution arrangements or waivers are not intended to apply in respect of the development of wind farms where the energy generated is “for export” and is not supplied to the national grid. If that needs to be further clarified for Deputy Fleming, I would be happy to do so.

The construction of wind farms are subject to the planning code in the same manner as other developments. Planning authorities and An Bord Pleanála must also have regard to my Department’s 2006 Guidelines for Wind Energy Developments. We are currently undertaking a targeted review of these guidelines focusing on the issues of noise, proximity and shadow flicker. I expect those revised wind energy development guidelines will be finalised around the middle of next year.

To turn to Deputy Mulherin’s issue of community gain in the context of energy-related infrastructure projects, the Government Policy Statement on the Strategic Importance of Transmission and Other Energy Infrastructure, published by the Department of Communications, Energy and Natural Resources in July 2012, recognises that the delivery of long-lasting benefits to communities is an important way of achieving public acceptability for infrastructure. The statement also sets out the Government’s support for a community gain approach in the delivery of energy infrastructure as a means of mitigating potential visual disamenity. The policy statement underlines the imperative for early and ongoing engagement and consultation with local communities and all stakeholders before projects enter the planning stage. This is essential for building public confidence, ensuring a more balanced public debate and a more timely delivery of projects.

The Government will keep under close review the effectiveness of the consultation processes at local level as well as the Strategic Infrastructure Act in delivering the necessary outcomes which balance the concerns of local communities with the economic, social and energy security benefits of other projects.

While everyone, ultimately, benefits from national energy infrastructure, potential negative impacts resulting from concerns about visual amenity, health and safety need to be mitigated through the consultation process and, where appropriate, the application of community gain measures. The Government considers that greater focus must be given to co-operative work with local communities and local authorities on landscape, biodiversity and civic amenity benefits bringing long-lasting benefits for communities. It is therefore appropriate for State companies and energy project developers to examine suitable means of building community gain considerations into their project budgeting and planning. The Government is fully supportive of a community gain approach being applied in the delivery of energy infrastructure.

**Deputy Sean Fleming:** First, I accept the Minister of State’s well-meaning intention when she says this must be clarified but I do not believe what she said is fully accurate. She said this is primarily intended for local small usage and is not intended to apply in respect of energy generated for export. As drafted, it clearly means those not connected to the national grid and the biggest such projects are the ones for export. Second, and most importantly, the companies involved know it applies to them because time and again both of those companies, in their documentation, stated that each year there will be a benefit to the local community through rates and payment to the landowner. They never said they will be paying development levies because they would have listed that as a benefit if they were paying levies to local authorities. They know they are out of the gap on this one.

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Also, if Ireland is not charging development levies the Minister of State is effectively subsidising companies to compete for electricity prices in the United Kingdom. Is that in breach of European Union state aid rules? The Minister of State has not explained the reason this deal was done, the advisers and Ministers who met these companies and, in particular, the situation regarding the board member of Mainstream Renewable Power, Mr. Brendan Halligan, who also happens to be the chairman of Sustainable Energy Ireland. That needs to be clarified. Finally, will the Minister's Department show the same favouritism in the planning process by issuing directives and policies to An Bord Pleanála to grant these two companies planning permission just as she has directed local authorities not to charge them development levies?

**Deputy Michelle Mulherin:** I refer to the last line in the Minister of State's reply which states, "The Government is fully supportive of a community gain approach being applied in the delivery of energy infrastructure". I fully accept that but I am asking for the practical translation of that to be put on a statutory basis. I will give the Minister an example that prompts this question. We will have what will probably be one of the biggest wind farms to be developed in this country, aside from plans for the Midlands, in my area, namely, the Oweninny wind farm being developed by Bord na Móna and Coillte. The type of community fund they are offering per megawatt installed is paltry compared to what some private developers offer and the community have nowhere to go other than to bargain with State companies that do not operate on the same basis as private developers.

The county council has drawn up a guideline as to how communities should be compensated under a community fund but cannot put a condition in the planning permission because there is no statutory basis for it. That is necessary for wind farms, Eirgrid projects and these transmission projects. It is not just landowners who will be affected. Equally, the neighbour will be looking at it but they are not getting a cent for it on paper. We must change the conversation from the lofty heights of aspirations for 2020 targets, listen to the fears of people on the ground and compensate them in a fair manner. Otherwise, we will never reach 2020 targets for renewable energy to be installed. I ask the Minister that that be put on a statutory basis.

**Deputy Jan O'Sullivan:** I thank both Deputies. They are separate but related issues. I assure Deputy Fleming that the intention is not to exempt these-----

**Deputy Sean Fleming:** That is what is written in the reply.

**Deputy Jan O'Sullivan:** The intention is to exempt the small person having a wind farm or other forms of energy for their own use. That is the intention and if we need to clarify that, we will do so. I would also make the point that these large for export proposals are nowhere near getting permission at this point in time. They have a number of hoops to go through first, including an intergovernmental agreement, the policy development within the Department of Communications, Energy and Natural Resources, and then the planning process. I state categorically that we have no intention of interfering with the independent role of An Bord Pleanála and for the Deputy to even suggest it-----

**Deputy Sean Fleming:** They are bound by Government policy.

**Deputy Jan O'Sullivan:** We have no intentions of interfering. They have an independent role, and rightly so, and I have no intentions of getting involved in any way in that regard.

I hear what Deputy Mulherin is saying and we will certainly look at it. We have the draft guidelines out for consultation at the end of this year and in that context we will be developing

policy. The Strategic Infrastructure Act is kept under review. We will look at the proposal the Deputy is making but I cannot give her any commitments today.

### **Local Government Bill 2013: Order for Second Stage**

Bill entitled an Act to make further and better provision in relation to local government and, in particular, to amalgamate Limerick County Council with Limerick City Council, Waterford County Council with Waterford City Council and North Tipperary County Council with South Tipperary County Council, to provide for the position of chief executive in relation to each local authority, to dissolve town councils, to make provision for municipal districts, to assign additional reserved functions to local authority members, to dissolve county development boards and city development boards and make provision for the establishment of local community development committees, for planning and oversight of local and community development programmes, to provide for an increased role for local authorities in economic development and enterprise support, to amend the Local Government Act 1991 and provide for regional assemblies, to enable (subject to certain preconditions) a plebiscite to be held in the administrative areas of the local authorities in the Dublin area in respect of a directly elected Mayor for that area and for those and other purposes to amend the Local Government Acts 1925 to 2013, the Local Elections Acts 1974 to 2012 and other enactments relating to elections, the Housing Acts 1966 to 2013 and the Planning and Development Act 2000, to amend other acts in connection with the foregoing matters and to provide for related matters.

**Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government (Deputy Phil Hogan):** I move: “That Second Stage be taken now.”

Question put and agreed to.

### **Local Government Bill 2013: Second Stage**

**Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government (Deputy Phil Hogan):** I move: “That the Bill be now read a Second Time.”

This Bill provides for the most fundamental overhaul of the local government sector in 100 years, bringing the Irish local government system into the 21st century so that it is more representative of and more responsive to the needs of our citizens and communities.

This Government was elected with a mandate to reform the economy, the banking sector and the political system and today is yet another step towards fulfilling that mandate. We remain committed to ensuring that citizens are at the heart of decision-making in this country and as part of this, we are rebuilding local government as the primary vehicle of governance and public service at local level. For many people, local government is their main interaction with the State and I am personally committed to ensuring that this reform programme delivers better

engagement with and service to our communities.

The Bill gives legislative effect to many of the reforms to local government that were decided by Government and set out in Putting People First - Action Programme for Effective Local Government, published last year, which provided a roadmap for the far reaching reform of structures, functions, funding, operational arrangements and governance within local government.

Our communities deserve a local government system that meets their needs in a way that is efficient, flexible and, most importantly, accountable. Their voices need to be heard in terms of how services are provided at local level and this Bill strengthens our local democracy so that our citizens are well-represented and well-served by their local councils.

The action programme recognises that it is not enough to change the institutions of local government and that we need to create a system that is more locally focused and engaged with communities, while also eliminating duplication, outmoded arrangements and inefficient practices.

This Bill does just that by providing for a major reorganisation of the structure of local government particularly at sub-county level. It will reduce the layers of administrative duplication, address unbalanced representation and remove other long-standing anomalies through dissolving 80 town councils and replacing them with municipal districts. Under this new system of municipal districts, councillors will work more directly for the interests of their communities across the country rather than working as dependent agents of central government.

The Bill also provides the basis for completing the mergers of Limerick City and County Councils, North and South Tipperary County Councils and Waterford City and County Councils on which I am pleased to say much of the heavy lifting at an administrative level has already been completed. It provides for the overhaul of existing regional structures, again removing duplication through new consolidated regional assemblies. We are doing this to strengthen our system of governance and public administration at local and regional levels to make it more rational, effective and responsive to the needs of our citizens.

While structural reform is much-needed, it is equally important that we strengthen the powers and functions of local government and refocus its role more towards activities that promote the quality of life of citizens and communities.

For the first time, the complete set of functions reserved to the elected members are set out in one place, providing clarity to underpin elected members fully discharging their roles and ensuring there is no hiding place for those members that might prefer to avoid the hard decisions they need to make from time to time. Most reserved functions of a local nature will be discharged by the municipal district members. The more strategic and county-wide decisions will be made at county level.

The Bill also introduces some 20 new reserved functions at both county and municipal district levels - a figure which will probably increase as we go through Committee Stage when I intend to bring forward additional provisions, including in regard to annual service delivery plans and local economic plans. I will discuss the significant power of elected members to vary the local property tax. In addition to that, this Bill will provide new powers to approve local and community plans, to establish a local community development committee or adopt an implementation plan following a national oversight and audit commission, NOAC, recommendation,

all of which will significantly enhance the role of the elected council in determining policy, directing its implementation and overseeing service provision by the local authority.

There are also new reserved functions for municipal district members which again will bring local government closer to the people. These functions relate particularly to the devolution of responsibility for the preparation of municipal district budgets and schedules of works within the wider local authority budget process as well as the making of charges on amenities, facilities or services provided by the local authority within the district.

As part of our overall commitment to support local and community development and to create a strong synergy with local government, the Bill offers new mechanisms for co-ordinated and coherent action through the establishment of local community development committees. In future, local government will be centre stage in the local and community development effort, bringing its resources and democratic mandate to bear while retaining and building on the existing strengths of local initiative and commitment.

All of this is supported by major reforms to the governance and oversight of local government - both the elected councils and the executive - provided for in this landmark Bill. At national level, we will establish a national oversight and audit commission which will ensure local authority performance is monitored and assessed in a meaningful way. Coupled with this, at local level, we are providing for the elected councils to have a greater oversight role in the development and implementation of policy, in furthering economic development and enterprise support as well as facilitating the devolution of more functions from central level to local government.

There will be cost-efficiencies to be gained, particularly in regard to the dissolution of the 80 town councils and the reduction in the number of councillors from more than 1,600 to 949. However, that is not the primary objective of, or rationale for, this important legislation. Rather, this Bill is centrally connected to our overarching vision of building a better, more responsive and more accountable system of local government where the voices of all citizens are heard and the needs of our communities are addressed. In that regard, Deputies will also be interested to know that I have recently established a working group, chaired by Fr. Sean Healy, to report to me with recommendations on how we can provide for more extensive and properly structured input by citizens into the decision-making process in local government. Local government cannot operate on a stand-alone basis - it must be informed by the communities that it serves.

We need to mobilise communities to more active, positive engagement with local government. In so far as people have a relationship with the local authority, it can often be in a negative context - a complaint about, or a payment for, a service - or it can be a dependency-based one. I will look to the working group to recommend mechanisms by which individuals and groups and leaders of communities who are interested in promoting the quality of life of their areas can work with the local authority towards that goal.

Before commenting more specifically on the contents of the Bill, I would like to comment briefly on some important measures that, although outside the scope of this legislation, will improve the engagement between citizens and local government. The first of these is the local property tax. As I have said many times, the local property tax is essential to renewing the relationship between local authorities and the citizens they serve. Its introduction offers a real opportunity for meaningful local government. As citizens will be directly investing in their communities, councillors will be much more accountable for the spending and tax decisions

they will make. This financial measure reconnects the citizen with local services for the first time since 1977.

Councillors have rightly complained that without fiscal power, local government would continue to be ineffective. Under the new regime, elected members will have an important role in determining the appropriate level of the tax, with discretion to increase or decrease the rate by up to 15%. This is a very real power for elected councils to exercise according to local circumstances, whether it is to increase the rate to provide for worthy projects in their area or to decide on a lower tax regime as they see fit. Above all, they will be accountable for these decisions, which is the essence of local democracy. In many ways, I consider this to be the most important reform that we have introduced in local government - one that can change our system from one of local administration to real local government.

Complementary to the provisions around local and community development in the Bill and given the importance of a robust network of economic and enterprise supports, my colleague, the Minister for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation, Deputy Bruton, has brought forward important complementary legislation to the Bill before us. The Minister's Bill provides for the dissolution of the city and county enterprise boards as those functions are now to be integrated with the business support units of individual local authorities. The local enterprise offices which each local authority will establish will expand the footprint of the CEBs in terms of the support services they currently offer, combining them with the services and supports provided by the local authorities to provide a much-needed and more effective one-stop-shop for small businesses. Entrepreneurs in the current climate need every encouragement they can get to set up, develop and expand in business and these local enterprise offices will be designed to meet their needs directly rather than through disparate set of service providers.

The changes in regard to enterprise and local development are major departures in local government functions, reversing the tide of marginalising local government over the past few decades. I have no doubt that this momentum will be built on and with the more streamlined structures, stronger funding base and more effective governance arrangements of the reform programme, we will see local government progressively taking on a wider role, further enhancing its relevance to the citizens it serves. To facilitate this widening of the role of local government in the future, the Bill extends the existing provision for the devolution of functions of Departments to include the functions of State bodies more generally.

I will now go through the main provisions of the Bill in detail. This substantial Bill is set out in 10 Parts made up of 65 sections, with five associated Schedules. Part 1 contains standard provisions dealing with title, collective citations, construction and commencement. It also provides for interpretation of key terms, regulations, orders and directions, repeals, revocations and amendments to the Local Government Act 2001, which remains the core local government statute, and a number of other codes, as well as other technical provisions such as legal savers and provision for expenses.

Part 2 contains the major provisions relating to the reform of local government structures at county and city levels. Specifically, it provides for the dissolution of the existing city and county councils in Limerick, Tipperary and Waterford and the establishment of new amalgamated authorities as their successors, as well as other consequential amendments to the definition of local government areas and local authorities in the Local Government Act 2001. The implementation work on the merger processes, which has been progressing on an administrative basis in all three areas, is well advanced. These provisions will provide the necessary legal basis for

the completion of this work, with the full merger of the authorities to take place after the local elections in mid-2014. This part also provides for a ministerial order to decide on an establishment day when these new arrangements will come into force. This day, which I envisage being 1 June 2014, will also apply to the replacement of the town councils, dealt with in Part 3 of the Bill.

Part 2 also provides for the revised membership levels of local authorities following on from the local electoral area boundary committee report, which was published in May of this year. The revised council membership numbers, as set out in section 15, will ensure more equitable representation and better proportionality in the number of electors per member. These provisions are essential to address disparities in the ratio of councillors to population between different counties. In some areas, the current numbers of councillors no longer relate to the populations they represent following major changes in population. For example, the ratio in Leitrim is 1:1,445, whereas in County Cork it is 1: 9,329. In three of the Dublin local authority areas, there are more than 10,000 people per councillor.

Part 3 provides for the introduction of the new system of sub-county governance in all areas of the country except for the four Dublin authorities and Cork and Galway cities. This configuration of municipal districts, which will replace the existing 80 town councils, in effect, will be based on the recommendations of the local electoral area boundary committee report. The districts will consist of one or more local electoral areas, which will be determined by order under section 23 of the 2001 Act. As I have said, this will give effect to the recommendations of the boundary committee's report. Following the 2014 local elections, elected members for county councils and for city and county councils will also be members of their municipal districts. In effect, this will do away with the current inefficient and inequitable duplicate representation which town councils created. The municipal districts will be established as components of the county councils. Elected members for each district will perform functions of the local authority on a devolved basis for the district. Contrary to what some ill-informed comments have suggested, we are not centralising powers at county level. Instead, we are devolving important elements of the statutory functions of county councils to district level. Therefore, we are increasing subsidiarity and making local government much closer and more responsive to the day-to-day needs of communities and much more representative of their priorities in setting policies and making decisions.

Schedule 3 sets out the reserved functions that may be performed by elected members at municipal district level, at either municipal or county level, or at county level only. These reforms will bring much needed clarity and visibility to the powers of elected members and will eliminate the current duplication of work between town and county councils. Councillors will have a clear understanding of their powers and their responsibilities to the communities they represent. The Bill will create a stronger local government, where elected members are empowered to effect real change in their communities. Elected members at municipal district or county level will have the power and responsibility to make sure services are provided in line with needs and resources. Their capacity to do this will be greatly strengthened by the unified structures being put in place. They will work under a single organisation and combined resources instead of, for example, 12 separate authorities in Cork and nine authorities in Tipperary. Leaving aside any nostalgia about town councils, the logic is self-evident. We must strengthen our resolve if we are to build a system of citizen-focused local government that is rational and effective.

Part 4, together with Schedule 4, sets out a range of consequential provisions to ensure the



dissolution of the city and county councils in Limerick, Tipperary and Waterford and the town councils will involve a seamless transition from the existing structures to the new arrangements.

Part 5 deals with a range of financial issues following the dissolution of the current city and county councils in Limerick, Tipperary and Waterford and the town councils. Specifically, it provides for the establishment of a single rating authority for each county and a process for the harmonisation of commercial rates between towns and counties. As we have sought to avoid any shocks in the move to harmonised rates, this transition to a single rate will take place over a maximum of ten years, beginning in January 2015. This will give the elected members the discretion to link the adjustments, where possible, to savings as they arise from implementation of the reforms and, where practicable, to pass these or other savings on in the form of reduced costs to local businesses.

Part 5 also includes provisions for the standardisation of rates refunds on vacant premises across the country and for the amalgamation of valuation lists. On the rates refunds on vacant premises, a separate refund regime entitling commercial property owners to a 50% refund of their annual commercial rates liability in the event that a property is unoccupied is currently operating in Dublin city, Cork city and Limerick city. Elsewhere in the country, refunds are 100% of rates liability. The Bill standardises the level of refund at 50% nationally. I recognise that these are difficult economic times for many businesses, including property owners. There are numerous factors to be considered when proposing an amendment to rates legislation, including its effect on business sentiment and its impact on local government finance. There may be a perception that this standardisation provision is a further cost on business, but my intentions are wholly the opposite. I am considering further how this provision will work in practice to ensure consequences other than those I intend are not realised. I will revert to this matter again as the Bill makes its way through the Houses.

Part 6 contains provisions relating to the much-needed alignment of the local and community development sector with local government. Our communities deserve a co-ordinated and coherent approach to the social, economic and physical development of their areas. I consider the provisions of this Bill to be an important step in achieving that objective. Specifically, provision is made in this part for the establishment of local community development committees in each local authority area, with a mandate to bring greater coherence and strategic co-ordination across the range of local and community development interventions. As these committees of the local authority are established, the county and city development boards will be wound down. The Bill provides for their formal dissolution. For the purposes of ensuring a coherent and co-ordinated approach to local and community development programming at local level, the Bill makes provision for co-operation by public authorities and other publicly funded bodies in the work of the committees.

Section 35 provides for the Minister to make regulations for the establishment of the committees, the performance of their functions and the development of a local and community plan, as well as procedures applying to the decisions of the committees, among others. The committees will have a lead role in local and community development. They will have particular responsibility for the preparation and adoption of a five-year plan for the local and community development of the area. Provision is also made in that context for the approval of the plan by the elected council of the relevant local authority. To ensure these new committees are effective, their membership needs to be as broad as possible. The Bill provides that they will include members and officials of the local authority, representatives of local statutory bodies and representatives of local development interests, including publicly funded local development bodies

and community representatives.

Part 7 sets out some of the most significant reforms of how our local government system is governed and managed. I have already highlighted the new reserved functions at both county and district levels, which are set out in Schedule 3. In particular, Part 7 provides for an enhanced policy making role for elected members, including with regard to economic development and enterprise support, particularly through the establishment of dedicated strategic policy committees. As I mentioned earlier, the separate passage of the County Enterprise Boards (Dissolution) Bill 2013, which is being led by my colleague, the Minister, Deputy Bruton, will pave the way for the delivery of microenterprise supports by local enterprise offices in local authorities, enhancing the role of local government in implementing economic development and enterprise support measures.

Fundamental changes are being made to the role of the manager within the system of local governance and the balance of powers between the executive and the elected council, through a range of new provisions in this part of the Bill. The Bill provides for the replacement of the traditional city and county manager position by a new post of “chief executive”. The change from manager to chief executive, which reflects modern terminology, is an important aspect of clarifying the appropriate roles of the executive in implementing policy of the council as, in effect, the board of directors of the authority. In that context, elected members will have the power of decision over the appointment of the individual recommended by the Public Appointments Service for the chief executive post in their authority, while retaining the independence of the selection procedures of the Public Appointments Service. More importantly, the change to a chief executive post is accompanied by a range of significant provisions to give substance to the rebalancing of roles. For example, there are increased obligations on the chief executive to provide additional advice and assistance to elected members in the discharge of their roles at council and municipal district levels and in various committees. Chief executives will be obliged to have regard to the views of elected members while policy options are still in formation and will have to assist elected members in the development of new policies at an early stage of the policy development process. Chief executives will also have to prepare monthly management reports for the elected members, which will be placed on the council agenda for follow-up as the members consider appropriate.

The powers of the elected members in overseeing the implementation of policy by the chief executive are also being strengthened, including specific provision for oversight and superintendence of action taken pursuant to directions of the elected council. Where members are not satisfied with the chief executive’s approach to implementation of their policy, they may request a report in which the chief executive must indicate what new or different actions may be pursued or other possible adjustment to the policy. Section 140 may no longer be used to direct the chief executive in relation to planning functions, following a recommendation of the Mahon tribunal, and this also applies to decisions involving financial or other benefit to individuals or specific organisations. Exclusion of section 140 from these types of functions allows for the procedural requirements related to the use of section 140 to be relaxed, with a shorter timeframe for notice in the context of modern communications, and fewer members needed to propose a resolution under the section. As last year’s action programme indicated, these changes reflect the appropriate assignment of roles between the executive and political elements, strengthening the checks and balances and minimising possible conflicts of interest.

Part 7 also contains provisions relating to the devolution of functions to local authorities. While provisions are already in place under section 72 of the Local Government Act 2001 to

devolve departmental functions to local government, this Bill now extends the provisions to cover functions of State bodies, thereby underpinning a core objective of the action programme to expand the role of local government in Ireland to maximise the benefits of local decision-making on services that are local in nature, and the utilisation of what is a country-wide network of public service. I also intend to work with my colleagues in government to ensure that all of the Government's decisions on the provision of services at local level will require formal consideration of the potential for the services to be delivered through the local government system, as a further safeguard against any future bypassing of local government or establishment of new bodies or agencies at local level, something which would unravel the very significant progress that this Government has made in terms of agency rationalisation.

The action programme signalled some major enhancements of local authority functions in the areas of local development, economic development and local enterprise support. However, I see this as just the first phase in the expansion of the role of local government which I envisage progressing on a more far-reaching basis as the other reforms to structures, funding, governance and operational arrangements are seen to increase the effectiveness and credibility of local government over time.

Part 7 also introduces more transparency in relation to the payment of expenses to elected members, including disclosure and publication of expenses arising from their membership of other bodies by virtue of their membership of a local authority. I am also separating out expenses for attendance at conferences from attendance at training events, to allow for a significant reduction in the funding made available for attendance at conferences, and a presumption against conferences organised by commercial interests. New provisions are included regarding attendance at training, to allow for a more structured approach to training for elected members and their continuing professional development, and for training to be provided at a more local level. Persistent non-attendance by elected members at training specially being provided for them can, in future, lead to financial penalties.

Part 8 consists of two chapters. The first contains provisions for the financial relationship between county and district levels, the funding arrangements in respect of district level functions, as well as amendments to the Local Government Act 2001 to reflect the financial arrangements needed following the dissolution of town councils. A regulation-making power is provided for in section 53 whereby the Minister may set out the budgetary format and the process to be followed in developing a draft local authority budget. It also makes provision for budgetary procedures at municipal district level, which will underpin the financial discretion of these new sub-county structures.

Members at the municipal district level may, by reserved function, make amendments to the relevant local authority budgetary plan and provision is also made in that section to ensure that the chief executive takes account of the budgetary plan adopted by the elected members of the relevant municipal districts in the preparation of a draft local authority budget. Other provisions relate to the timing of budgets, which, under EU provisions, will in future have to be adopted by 31 December. A key provision in this context is the power for the elected members at municipal district level to determine priorities in the various programmes of works within the district. While members are normally consulted on such matters at present, this will represent a significant departure in giving the elected members a statutory role in deciding the detail of programmes within their districts.

Chapter 1 of Part 8 also introduces new provisions in relation to audit procedures and regu-

lations bringing greater oversight and accountability into the local government process. Following the enactment of the Bill, local authorities will be required to establish an audit committee within three months of taking office. The functions of the committee are also set out in this chapter, as well as provision for the Minister to make regulations regarding matters such as membership, meetings and reports. Various existing provisions relating to attendance by the auditor at a meeting of the audit committee or the local authority are being restated, and provision is also made for qualified legal privilege for an auditor attending a meeting under these provisions, which strengthens the position of the auditor in reporting objectively and rigorously on the financial affairs of the local authority. The Bill, in Schedule 1, Part 2, also repeals now archaic legal provisions for surcharge or charge which reflected nineteenth century circumstances. Similar quasi-judicial powers have long been repealed in the audit provisions for central government. The modern financial control and governance framework in local government means that these specific powers are now also redundant in local government.

At national level, chapter 2 of Part 8 provides for the establishment of a national oversight and audit commission, NOAC, for local government. This is a very significant development in public accountability. The NOAC will provide an independent scrutiny of local government performance in fulfilling national, regional and local mandates, bringing accountability and coherence to the forefront of consideration of local government performance. In addition to its oversight and audit functions at local level, the commission will have a specific oversight function to ensure value for money is achieved where State funds are being channelled through local government. It will have an independent chair and will comprise members with relevant expertise in a range of areas.

The NOAC will report to the Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government; to other Ministers in respect of services performed within their overall policy responsibility; to the relevant regional assembly or assemblies; to the relevant local authorities; to the Oireachtas Joint Committee on the Environment, Culture and the Gaeltacht; and, as appropriate, to other Oireachtas committees with oversight responsibilities for the relevant policy areas. The NOAC will not give rise to additional resource requirements as it will be staffed from within my Department, but with a facility to request a regional assembly to prepare a specific report, or to engage with other bodies for the same purpose, or to carry out other research or tasks for the commission.

Part 9 provides for the revision of regional structures and functions. This will be undertaken primarily through the replacement of the eight regional authorities and two assemblies by a single set of regional assemblies, to be established by ministerial order, subject to the agreement of the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform. The main functions of the regional assemblies, which will be further elaborated in the Establishment Order, will be the formulation of regional spatial and economic strategies and management of the EU structural funding programmes.

The Bill will not directly alter local government structures in Dublin. The action programme for effective local government indicated that it was not feasible to carry out a review of local government arrangements in the capital in time to implement significant changes for the 2014 local elections. Instead, Part 10 provides for a forum of elected members from the four Dublin local authorities to consider local governance arrangements for the Dublin metropolitan area, including options for the introduction of a directly elected mayor to be put for decision through a plebiscite in 2014. This forum has already been convened at my request and in advance of the legislation, it is progressing its work, including a recent public invitation for views.

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A plebiscite will be held in the four Dublin authorities at the same time as the local elections, if a resolution to that effect is adopted by each Dublin local authority. The plebiscite will decide whether an office of directly elected mayor should be established for the Dublin metropolitan area. Part 10 sets out the detail around the holding of the plebiscite, including voting entitlements, costs, reports to the Houses of the Oireachtas, etc. It will be a matter in the first instance for the four elected authorities to form a consensus view on the type and function of directly elected mayor they consider most suitable for the metropolitan area, and the resulting adjustments to existing governance arrangements they deem appropriate. Then it will be for the electorate in Dublin to decide whether or not they support such a mayoral arrangement, in light of all the implications of the proposals.

I can see possible merits in such a mayoral office in terms of metropolitan roles and promotion of Dublin, but, unlike the previous Government's proposals, this procedure will ensure that an additional office-without real powers-is not simply grafted on to the existing local government system. If such an office is to be created, and that will be for decision by the electorate in Dublin in light of all the implications including cost, this will happen only on the basis of having substantive functions and with any necessary adjustments to existing governance arrangements which would inevitably involve local authorities and indeed central government agencies ceding functions to the office of directly elected mayor.

There are five Schedules to the Bill which provide for consequential amendments to the Local Government Act 2001 and other enactments within the local Government Acts 1925 to 2013; consequential amendments to other Acts including the Housing Acts 1966 to 2013, the Planning and Development Act 2000 and to the electoral law, including provisions for revised spending limits at local elections, involving an average reduction of 13%, following the significant changes to the local electoral areas arising from the report of the Local Electoral Area Boundary Committee in May and the dissolution of the town councils.

I have referred to Schedules 3 and 4 in my previous comments on the associated parts of the Bill. Schedule 5 provides a list of the relevant public authorities and other publicly funded bodies that will have a statutory duty to co-operate with the work of the new local community development committees.

Finally, I would like to signal to the House that I will, as I mentioned earlier, be bringing forward several amendments on Committee Stage, which I hope will be taken early next month. Chief among these will be amendments related to the development of regional spatial and economic strategies, the preparation of local economic development plans and the linkage between these and the regional strategies. Other Committee Stage provisions will include local authority annual service delivery plans, performance standards and performance indicators as an element of the service delivery plans and shared services as well as a range of consequential amendments arising from linkages with other Acts.

I am happy to be in a position that I can put on record that this legislation and the various non-legislative measures that are being implemented add up to the most comprehensive programme of local government reform ever undertaken in the history of this State. They also give substance to the vision set out at the start of last year's action programme document that local government will in future be the primary vehicle of governance and public service at local level answering more effectively to the needs of our citizens and communities. This will be achieved not only by virtue of the measures that are now being provided but through the potential that is being created for the further development of local government as a vibrant force in restoring

and advancing our country based on stable resources, efficient structures and operations, active community engagement and strong and responsible local governance, leadership and accountability. I commend the Bill to the House.

*7 o'clock*

**Deputy Barry Cowen:** Given that we are discussing the Local Government Bill, which proposes the amalgamation of various councils, including Waterford City Council, I wish to mention Councillor Gary Wyse who, unfortunately, passed away suddenly earlier today. I wish to pass on my condolences to his wife and family on this sad occasion.

The Local Government Bill 2013, as put before the House, represents a real and major threat to the fabric of local democracy. It falls into the growing category of spin-obsessed politics by a Government that trades short-term headlines for long-term institutional damage. The same type of slash and burn attitude that underpinned the constitutional crusade of the defeated Seanad referendum has driven this legislation. Instead of thoughtful reform, all we have witnessed from this Government is an axeman's approach to the democratic institutions of the State. The end result will be the single most centralised state in the democratic world.

The abolition of town councils, the slashing of councillor numbers, the continued emasculation of local authorities' powers and the half-hearted gesture towards directly elected mayors represent a missed opportunity for real change in one of the most neglected areas of Irish politics. If we are willing to change how politics works in this country, we need to start from the bottom up. Local government is the tier of the State that is closest to the citizen but Ireland has one of the weakest systems of local government in the western world, second only to the UK.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I note that Deputy Cowen is sharing time. There will be 20 minutes for him and-----

**Deputy Barry Cowen:** Ten minutes for Deputy Ó Cuív.

This Bill prolongs that failure. There is a broader trend across the globe of ordinary citizens being alienated from the decision-making process. Power is seen to be exercised by faceless bureaucracies. Putting decision making on local issues back firmly in the hands of local people is a critical step in addressing this disparity of power. There is immense potential in how we reshape our local political structures, engage citizens, strengthen representation and deliver on the ground. Real political reform must start from the corridors of Cabinet power and go all the way to the local community hall. We need a local government system and a local government Bill that provides local leadership, engages citizens and gives them a voice in local decisions. This Bill fails in that area. We need a system that delivers on the ground in seeking to support local business, revitalise town centres, sustain local sports and recreation developments and work in partnership with educational providers. This Bill fails in that area. Fianna Fáil has put forward a detailed radical alternative that can achieve these goals and will underpin our amendments to this Bill. It is incumbent upon Opposition parties to put forward detailed and constructive alternatives if they are willing to grasp the nettle and genuinely change how local government works.

Today's Bill misses that opportunity to take a radical approach to government from the bottom up. The Minister has traded that chance in exchange for a few headlines relating to re-balancing councillor numbers and slashing town councils. The elimination of 80 town councils across the country and the removal of councillors from rural areas with an increase in Dublin

threatens to exacerbate the gap between elected representatives and citizens. Instead of radical reform, we will have the centralisation of power through the abolition of town councils. Rather than moving power closer to the citizen, this Bill will see it become even more distant. In place of efficiencies, we will have large, inflexible organisations where size is mistaken for savings.

Power should rest at the closest possible level to the citizen. This is a principle enshrined in the Maastricht treaty and the Council of Europe's Charter of Local Self-Government to which Ireland is a signatory. It is bitterly ironic that the last census revealed that the biggest population growth has occurred in towns of over 10,000 people when we are here discussing the abolition of their main forum for self-governance. Ireland now has 62% of its population in urban areas and we need to be more imaginative in addressing urban governance rather than what is proposed in this Bill, which is a slash and burn policy with no thought as to its impact. At a time when towns across the country are suffering in the middle of the recession and when vacancy rates scar our streets, the Minister and Government, by virtue of this Bill, are threatening to remove focal points for town centre revitalisation.

This Bill replaces these forums for local work with emasculated municipal district councils which lack any real powers or independent fiscal autonomy. In the absence of a clear alternative structure that will fight the corner of struggling towns across the country, this legislation undermines the leadership these areas need. I am not necessarily engaging in a simple defence of the status quo. Town councils must change, be made to work more and better for people and be standardised to avoid the current bizarre discrepancies in representation but we cannot and should not abandon Irish towns. We need to support these urban centres which play such a vital role both for their residents and their hinterlands. This takes real political leadership, not a crude cut and run strategy as enshrined in the Local Government Bill.

Real political leadership takes ownership of problems and slices through bureaucratic problems. A directly elected mayor has the potential to achieve that role in cities across Ireland and ultimately across all local authorities. This Bill offers a half-hearted measure to bring a directly elected mayor to Dublin. The Government should fully grasp the nettle of reform and outline a far more radical vision of what mayors can achieve. The argument for directly elected mayors rests upon the concept of leadership. A key individual can provide an opportunity to drive forward an agenda, fight for the advancement of local government needs, heighten the visibility of the local authority and the locality, broaden engagement with the public and promote greater accountability. In the Irish case a directly elected mayor would require specified powers. A full-time remunerated position should effectively replace the county manager position. There is no reason why other urban centres, such as Cork, Limerick, Galway and Waterford, could not be led by directly elected mayors before moving to implement this model across all counties in the long term. This incremental process would allow for sharing of best practice among local authorities. Rather than unelected bureaucrats driving local authorities, they should have democratically mandated leaders.

The Minister has claimed this Bill provides the most radical reform of local government in 100 years. In reality, however, the actual powers and functions of local government will remain the weakest in the western world. It is disingenuous of the Government to state otherwise. Water services have already been stripped from local authorities under the Government's plans for Irish Water. No real new powers have been added. Aside from tinkering around with enterprise plans, the role of local authorities remains severely restricted. Behind the jargon and acronyms Merrion Street and the Custom House have kept a tight rein on the capacity of local government to tackle local problems. There are no new powers in educational partnerships, Garda oversight,

sports and recreation or competitive funding with public private partnerships. In terms of fiscal autonomy, which is the crux of the issue, there is little real progress. The local property tax of €500 million per annum is effectively replacing the local government fund, which has already been cut to the bone. The suggestion that it represents new revenue is the worst type of spin. Local residents will come to see the bare faced nature of that claim as local services continue to suffer and decline. This Bill contains no fresh initiatives such as tax increment financing or an overhauled commercial rates system that would provide a badly needed shot in the arm of the local economy. The idea of competitive funding pots, where instead of centralised block grants councils are encouraged to collaborate with the private sector to put forward proposals on spending projects, is entirely absent. The ability of local authorities to take the initiative with real financial powers remains non-existent. There is nothing radical about that.

In February 2011, the Irish people sent an unmistakable message that they wanted real reform. The defeat of the Seanad referendum earlier this month underlined that thirst for genuine change. Changing how we do politics must be a comprehensive exercise that encompasses all tiers of the State, ranging from the Cabinet and the Oireachtas all the way to local government. They cannot be treated in isolation because the entire system is interlinked. Deputies filling the vacuum of weak local government representation has a knock-on effect on their role in parliamentary oversight and scrutiny. Fianna Fáil has a radical vision for the future of local government involving genuine reform of the tier of the State that is closest to the citizen. It forms part of a broader package of reform we have prepared in regard to changing the way the Dáil works, the Dáil's relationship with the Cabinet and a new vision for how the Seanad can play a meaningful role in Irish politics. Taken together, this holistic series of measures can transform Irish politics. When we look at local government we have to bear this bigger picture in mind.

We believe local government should involve the retention of town councils and enhancement of councils in towns with a population of over 7,500. New voluntary community councils could be established to represent areas with no town councils. Local referendums could be held on major local issues, such as local area plans. A new cabinet style system could replace council policy groups to offer greater accountability and a bigger role in shaping local policy. New anti-corruption plans, including enhanced auditing systems, complete transparency on planning issues and mandatory declaration of interests, could be drawn up and a greater role in local government could be developed for the Standards in Public Office Commission. Enhanced supports could be provided for local businesses, including new competitive funding pots for enterprise initiatives and new local credit facilities for SMEs. These are the kind of radical ideas that will help create a system of governance fit for purpose in 21st century Ireland and they will form the basis of our amendments to this Bill. These measures would give citizens the opportunity and financial strength to pursue fresh solutions to the problems of struggling local businesses, inadequate sports facilities or antisocial behaviour, and transform the nature of governance in Ireland into a more responsive process that tackled the issues people care about.

The country has a thirst for real reform and this debate presents an opportunity for agreeing reforms. However, with the Local Government Bill 2013 the Government is seeking to develop the most centralised State in the western world. Powers are being stripped from local authorities, councils are being slashed and Merrion Street will continue to hold the purse strings.

**Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív:** I welcome the opportunity to speak on the Local Government Bill 2013. As the Minister will no doubt tell us, it introduces far ranging reform. I agree that we need reform and I examined this issue during the previous Administration. I accept that the system previously in place was hotchpotch and riddled with inconsistencies. We need to



reconsider local government. However, the question arises as to whether we will get real local government from this Bill.

Members of this House from all parties, including my own, have a great grá for regional authorities. However, they are a handy vehicle for the Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government to have a regional strategic plan drafted with only a small number of councillors present from each county. Councillors might endorse it without even reading it. When their counties come to draft their own county plans, however, they find themselves hamstrung by a document called the regional strategic policy guidelines. I was told that these were needed to take a larger view of the world. For example, Clare and Limerick could be taken together in a regional authority. This was a plausible argument, but then I asked about Athlone. The old problem would arise there because there would be two different regions regardless of how they were configured. A region that crossed the Shannon would not be coherent.

I am not a great fan of regional authorities. They are anti-democratic, as they are not elected by the people. Some 98% or 99% of people have no input into them or even know that these bodies that make major decisions exist.

There is a logic for having a fourth tier for everyone as long as it is genuinely powerful. The Minister has claimed that he will give power to this fourth tier of government. Not all of the local district councils will be municipal councils, as not all have municipalities. This country is obsessed with towns. Under the Minister's proposal, the fourth tier can make plans to beat the band, but it cannot make decisions on planning in councils' respective areas, nor will it have control over housing or direct control over roads. These are the practical issues in which councillors excel.

I have been in this House for a long time and I was on a local authority for a considerable period. Plans have multiplied in size. A county plan used to be a manageable document. Now, it will stretch into books. If one could find out how many councillors read through every line of their respective plans, one would find that the plans were much more the creation of the planners than the local authority members. One might claim that this is how it should be. Perhaps this is so, but any plan must take into account the realities of people's lives, their time pressures, etc. The so-called fourth tier, the local level, should have the type of powers that the most powerful town council used to have. These powers should be uniform across the State.

I can never understand what the magic difference is between a town and an area that has a mixture of town and countryside. As I used to ask in my sarcastic moments, what are so special about people with much smaller back gardens than others? They all need the same services nowadays, for example, water, street lighting in villages, refuse, etc. They pay for them. I compliment the Minister in this regard, as I can never understand why people claim that we need a greater level of local government for those who happen to live in houses close together than we do for people in houses that are a little farther apart. That system created distortions between town and county planning authorities, in that people built in whichever area enjoyed cheaper rates. This issue is rightly addressed in the Bill.

What the Minister is trying to do with the local development organisations that run the Leader partnerships is vague. I am unsure as to whether the Bill explains the situation.

**Deputy Phil Hogan:** I am surprised that the Deputy does not know what is happening.

**Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív:** I tried to find out. Unfortunately, the companies are receiving

mixed messages.

**Deputy Phil Hogan:** I assure the Deputy that they know what is happening.

**Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív:** The Minister will undoubtedly clarify the issue as we go through the Bill. However, if he tries to amalgamate the system into a county structure, it will be an utter disaster. He referred to the possibility of handling this at a municipal level. That might work. The idea of a single Leader company covering everything from west Cork to Youghal is farcical. I could refer to somewhere closer to where I live. Unless one travels across the lake, one cannot get from Connemara to the rest of County Galway without going through another local authority's area. Being included again in a single, large county organisation would be farcical. Previously, there was just one person from Connemara or west of the Corrib on a board of 23 people. This issue needs clarification. I am for positive reform, but I am not for destroying that which works. Nor am I in favour of ignoring natural geography and affinities.

The Bill makes no mention of the Gaeltacht's unique situation. It has its own authority, yet no recognition has been given to *Údarás na Gaeltachta*, which was an elected authority for the Gaeltacht area until this Government entered into office. The Bill seems to make no provision for ensuring the delivery of comprehensive services for the people of the Gaeltacht in a language that the Government has committed to develop under the 20-year strategy.

I am always surprised by the argument that the idea of a municipal area should not apply to Dublin city. The belief that north of the Liffey, the old Pembroke ward and the south of the city comprise an amorphous totality unlike the rest of the country where we accept the idea of municipalities is far from my experience of this city. In reality, there is less contact between people in its different areas than there is between people from rural areas that are much farther apart. Therefore, I cannot understand why there will not be municipal powers for the city's electoral areas. They are chalk and cheese, as there is no connection between different parts of this city on a daily basis or the people living therein. I do not know who is advising the Minister. I presume that many of the people advising his Department live in Dublin. They should be aware-----

**Deputy Phil Hogan:** The Deputy could be wrong. They do not all live in Dublin.

**Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív:** Not all of them, but some do. They must be aware of the dramatic differences between various areas.

The Minister referred to providing the power to raise finance. It was the most tongue-in-cheek statement made by any Minister. He and I know that the rate support grant, the block grant or whatever its new name is, the Minister can remind me-----

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I ask the Deputy to move the adjournment.

**Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív:** I will just finish this sentence and that will be the end of my contribution.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Okay.

**Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív:** All the Minister knows is that he can force local authorities to raise this 15% for no extra services. It will happen because when he is short in the next budget all he will do is take a cut in the central support to local authorities and leave them with no option but to raise the local property tax by 15%.

Debate adjourned.

### **Older Citizens: Motion [Private Members]: Motion [Private Members]**

**Deputy Billy Kelleher:** I move:

“That Dáil Éireann:

agrees that Irish society should protect the rights of older citizens and solidarity between the generations;

accepts that services for older people should be protected to allow them to live independently and with dignity;

agrees that older people are more anxious now about services being removed from them which will lead to isolation and illness;

concur that older people do not want to be pressurised about means tests and application forms for health care services;

agrees that the elderly should not be used as just economic statistics; and

calls for:

— all public services to be maintained for older citizens in a fair and progressive manner; and

— the Government to reaffirm Ireland’s agreement to the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing while working towards a new UN Convention on the Rights of Older People.”

I wish to share time with a number of other Deputies, as outlined.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Is that agreed? Agreed.

**Deputy Billy Kelleher:** Under standing orders we were not allowed to move the reversal of cuts in the motion itself, as it would have been repetitive in the context of a motion two weeks ago. It would also pre-empt the debate on the social welfare Bill that will come before the House on Thursday and Friday. Needless to say, however, we are calling for a reversal of the cuts in last week’s budget announcement. We are doing so for a number of reasons but primarily because we believe this budget is unfair and regressive. A cursory look at the budget, and the policies and philosophy surrounding it, shows that this is so. In fact, the last three budgets introduced since this Government came into office, have been regressive and unfair. It is not just me who is saying that - all independent analyses by reputable organisations and institutions have acknowledged that prior to this Government taking office, even in difficult circumstances, budgets were at least fair and progressive. We now find, however, that with Fine Gael and Labour in Government, they are bringing forward regressive and unfair budgets.

People were outside Leinster House today protesting about savage cuts affecting the elderly. The orthodoxy of Fine Gael is to protect wealth and the rich but once a political party starts from that premise, it will always be difficult to bring forward a fair and just budget. In such circumstances, Fine Gael has stated that it will not increase tax and the party is holding rigidly to that position. At the same time, however, they are asking the oldest, sickest and poorest in our society to pay for the budget imbalance and close the deficit. In other words, the burden of bringing the deficit down to 3% in the coming years is falling on those who can least afford to carry it. Meanwhile, those who could most afford it will get away scot free.

I am all in favour of ensuring that entrepreneurship is incentivised, but that is a separate issue. The key issue is that Fine Gael has decided to protect the wealthiest. At the same time, they are asking the people who were outside the gates of Leinster House today, as well as those who were unable to attend the protest, to carry an unfair burden. That is why this motion is before the House. Because of the standing order it is, albeit in a roundabout way, asking the Government to reverse the cuts.

The rise in prescription charges is another example. A short time after taking office in 2011, the Minister for Health, Deputy Reilly, said he would get rid of prescription charges. He outlined all the reasons for cancelling what was then a 50 cent charge per prescription item. At the time, the Minister said the charge was a regressive step that would disincentivise people from accessing basic medicines. In addition, he said it would force people to access health care through the acute hospital setting. These were the reasons why he said he would drop the prescription charge when he became Minister. We can now see what happened, of course - the Minister has increased the charge fivefold to a maximum of €25 per month. That is a direct attack on the living standards of the oldest people in our society.

A man rang me from Cork today because he knew I was raising this matter in the House. He said I could cite his personal circumstances. I do not want to mention his name but the man is on 12 prescription medicines per month. He suffers from chronic obstructive pulmonary disease and has a pacemaker. He also has arthritis and other complications. He is on a basic pension but will have to pay €25 per month in prescription charges. That is a direct attack on the living standards of a person on the old age pension. There is no way of dressing it up otherwise.

This goes against every policy stated by the Minister for Health both in opposition and in government. When he became a Minister in 2011, he was so enthusiastic about protecting the living standards of the elderly that he said the prescription charge should be dropped. He cannot pretend that he did not know what was happening in the economy. Surely, at that stage when he took office he realised that difficult decisions had to be made.

It is fascinating to hear Government Ministers, including Labour Party ones, say that they are making tough decisions. There is nothing tough about taking money from the oldest and most vulnerable in society. It is tough to take on the powerful and elite in our society. Those would be tough decisions but the Fine Gael orthodoxies have come through in droves, which means protecting the elite and not having a fair and progressive approach to asking citizens to carry the burden of the budget deficit.

For all those reasons this motion is timely. It calls on Dáil Éireann to agree “that Irish society should protect the rights of older citizens and solidarity between the generations”. That is what we represent here. Last week’s budget announced by the Minister for Finance, Deputy Noonan, and more importantly, the cuts announced by the Minister for Public Expenditure and

Reform, Deputy Howlin, simply undermine every basic decency whereby older people's living standards should be protected.

In 2008, I well remember the large crowds protesting on the streets when we introduced a €700 monthly limit for medical card eligibility. The figure was €1,400 for a couple. That was the start of undermining universality in the context of the over 70s. The then leader of the Opposition and current Taoiseach, Deputy Enda Kenny, and the current Tánaiste, said this was a disgraceful assault on universality and older people's entitlements. They said the State should not interfere in their right to access medical cover and services. Back then, the current Taoiseach said elderly people did not want to be pressurised about means tests and application forms, or have to worry about their property, savings or whether a man from the Government will call to their home or if they will lose their right to a medical card.

The man from the Government did call, however. It was the Taoiseach himself, together with the Minister for Finance and the Minister for public expenditure and cuts. There has been a complete undermining of people over 70 in the context of medical card eligibility. At the time we were talking about people with basic public service pensions being caught when the limit was €700 per person per month. It is now down to €500 - in fact the eligibility figure for a couple is €900 - so the principle of universality has been absolutely undermined.

I accept that resources are scarce but they were as scarce in 2008 as they are now. The choices made in the budget were the wrong ones. Once the Government, and particularly the Labour Party, supported the principle that the wealthy must be protected at all costs, it meant that those with the least amount were being asked to carry the biggest burden. There is no way the circle can be squared otherwise.

Fine Gael's philosophy of protecting that cohort has come through and the burden has fallen on those who were protesting outside the gates of Leinster House earlier today. It also affects those who protested last year about the loss of personal assistants for those with disabilities. Their services were withdrawn until there was a partial reversal of last year's Government decision.

We should also look at the great furore over giving GP cards to under fives. Again, this is a smoke and mirrors effort on behalf of Government. What it is asking us as a society to do is to strip medical cards from those who most need them, be they medical cards obtained under income eligibility guidelines or discretionary medical cards awarded because of illness. These people are being asked to forego their entitlement so that the Labour Party can applaud itself for giving free GP care to children under five years of age. The public is not buying this. It does not want see a situation whereby those who are ill and in need of the support of the State are paying for free GP care for children under five. It will now be the case that a child of a person on an exceptionally high income will receive free GP free care while a child of six years of age with profound disabilities, whose parents are in receipt of low incomes, will have his or her discretionary medical card withdrawn. Can the Minister of State, Deputy Lynch, honestly say this is fair and equitable? It is anything but. This principle is being supported by the Labour Party.

As I stated earlier, older people have a just entitlement to resources from the State to support them and help them to live independently at home free of harassment from the State and any organisation at arms length from the State. We now have a situation whereby people are being harassed on a daily basis by the HSE in the context of a review of medical cards under the income guidelines. There is not a Deputy in this House who is not consistently assisting

people in respect of medical card reviews and appeals by the HSE. Many of these people have been awarded medical cards based on income. We are told people are being randomly selected for review. People of 88 years of age are being randomly selected for review. Budget 2014 has been referred to as fair and just. It is anything but when an 88 year old person is being asked to undergo a review in respect of a medical card to which he or she understood they would be entitled for the remainder of their lives. We are told people are being randomly selected by a computer. I do not accept that people are being randomly selected. I believe people are being intentionally selected and targeted. The evidence is there for all to see in the context of the number of queries being raised in this House by way of parliamentary questions and highlighted on the airwaves countrywide. People are being harassed. People who would have their just entitlements with regard to a medical card are being harassed. For all of these reasons, I cannot accept that this Government has done anything to protect and defend the living standards of the elderly. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Medical card withdrawals and prescription charge increases are only two issues which affect the elderly. They are also subject to many savage attacks in the social welfare area. I would like to remind Members of how our elderly people were used in the context of political capital, through the use of emotive language which does not stand up to scrutiny in the context of what was done only five years later by the individuals who stood in Molesworth Street and promised that they would reverse the cuts being imposed on the elderly, which they said they found abhorrent. In 2008, Deputy Kenny, now Taoiseach, said, "Surely, this Judas response to the elderly will be the Government's epitaph". He then said in this House last week that budget 2014 is fair and just. It is an unjust and unfair budget. In 2008, Deputy Shatter, now Minister for Justice, Equality and Defence, said, "This was a callous and cold-hearted decision made by a totally incompetent Government ... If one extends the right to universal health care in circumstances in which they rely on it for their lives, one cannot simply withdraw it arbitrarily". Also in 2008, Deputy Eamon Gilmore, now Tánaiste, when speaking about the then Taoiseach said:

The Taoiseach has stated that the formula he announced this morning means that 95% of those who are over 70 now will qualify for a full medical card ... If that is the case, why does he not just do the decent thing and leave them with an automatic entitlement to a medical card? This should be done instead of having them worried, as they are, that their income will creep up above the limits of €700 and €1,400, respectively, for those who are single or married. They are worried about what will happen if one partner dies and what income will be left to the other partner. They are worried whether, at some future stage, the Minister will reduce the level of the means test.

Deputy Gilmore, now Tánaiste, was correct in his prediction because the Minister will reduce the level of the means test. Unfortunately, he never told the people in Molesworth Street five years ago that it would be a Labour Party Minister that would force the Minister for Health into the situation of having to reduce the income limits.

It is unacceptable that these particular cuts are being foisted on the oldest and, often the sickest, in our society. As I said previously, this is an unfair budget and an unfair Government. The philosophy being espoused by Fine Gael has now inculcated into the Labour Party, with it now asking the oldest and sickest people of this country to fund and support the elite in society. This is a decision made by Fine Gael and bowed to by the Labour Party.

I commend the motion to the House.

**Deputy Willie O’Dea:** I compliment Deputy Kelleher on tabling this motion. The people we are seeking to represent tonight are elderly people, many of whom have retired having played their part, paid their dues and are now trying to live out their twilight years with some degree of comfort, security and decency. This is not, however, the case in respect of every elderly person. There are exceptions. Only last week my constituency colleague, the Minister for Finance, Deputy Noonan, proudly announced in a local newspaper that he intends to stand for election to Dáil Éireann in 2016 at the ripe young age of 74 years. Good luck to him. He is an exception.

The actions of this Government over the past two and a half years would appear to presume that the elderly are a vast untapped resource or crock of gold to be accessed each time it needs to raise money. The reality could not be more different. Seven out of ten pensioners live exclusively on the State pension. Of the 30% who do not, many have small private pensions, which are even smaller now as a result of the pension levy which was supposed to end next year but instead has been increased and expanded. Some 57% of elderly people in this country suffer from a chronic illness, one third of whom suffer from a disability. The reality for many elderly people in this country is poverty, cold, inadequate diet, loneliness, isolation and despair.

It is salutary to reflect on what has happened to the elderly under the social welfare code during the two and a half years since this Government took office. During the noughties, covering the period 2001-09 inclusive, the old age pension was increased in actual terms by 65%. When one strips out the official figure for inflation of 25%, there was a real increase of 40%. I wish it could have been more. The elderly deserved more. A 40% increase in purchasing power was not a bad start. When the crash overtook us and austerity became the reality the then Government was forced to introduce a number of austerity budgets and to take some hard decisions. However, the elderly were protected under the social welfare code. There was no diminution whatever in the old age pension and ancillary benefits were preserved, which ancillary benefits had been increased and improved in conjunction with the pension increases between 2001 and 2009.

Let us look at what has happened since. The method of calculation for the contributory old age pension has been changed, and not in favour of the pensioner. I know of pensioners who have lost up to 50% of what they would have obtained under the previous method of calculation. It was a straight money-saving exercise.

The transition pension is abolished from 1 January. People who are compulsorily retired at 65 will now have to persuade the social welfare office that they are available and fit for work. Perhaps they will be offered one of those new training courses at 65 years of age and they will be compelled to take up whatever they are offered in order to get jobseeker’s benefit until they reach the age of 66. The free electricity allowance has been emasculated. In last year’s budget alone, €84 million was taken out of the household benefit package, most of that from the free ESB allowance at a time when ESB prices are going up in leaps and bounds, along with the cost of fuel. Last year, the process also began of dismantling the free telephone rental allowance, and that process was completed in this budget.

In the programme for Government - not one of those manifestos that the Minister, Deputy Rabbitte, tells us mean nothing anyway - the Government is committed to tackling fuel poverty. What has the Government done? It has reduced the fuel allowance from 32 weeks to 26 weeks, which is something that strikes directly at the elderly. In addition, the Government has reduced the respite care grant. I am only referring to measures in the social welfare area. Deputy Kelle-

her averted to the change in medical cards for the elderly, the increase in prescription charges by 500%, even though that charge was supposed to be abolished, and capping tax relief for people who are paying private insurance, people trying to look after themselves because they do not trust the State system. Who would blame them? The older a person is, the more likely the person will be affected. Home help has been slashed by 1 million hours last year. We have seen the introduction of the carbon tax and property tax, which has to be paid at double the rate it was paid last year, often by people on €230 per week with no account of ability to pay. We have seen the pension levy introduced and extended for people who are thrifty enough to look after themselves. We have seen the gradual erosion of the nursing home support scheme. Finally, we have seen the abolition of the bereavement grant.

I have mentioned 17 measures, but that list is by no means exhaustive. Any objective observer looking at this would have to conclude that this has amounted to a relentless assault on a section of the population, many of whom are vulnerable, poor and ill. Somebody once said that growing old is like being increasingly punished for a crime one did not commit. Whoever committed crimes against this State, it was not the elderly and they should not be punished. This debate is a charade to some extent, because no less a person than the leader of the Labour Party, the Tánaiste, said that no matter what is said tonight, no matter what arguments are advanced, no matter what case is made or examples, it is all irrelevant and the cuts stand, and if people do not like it, they can lump it. If that is what the leader of the Labour Party meant when he promised a democratic revolution before the election, then God help Ireland.

I was talking to a woman in her 80s yesterday in Limerick who was living in a very cold house. Her husband is dead 20 years and her only company is a little dog which she keeps as a pet. She told me that she has to go to the dog shelter in Limerick next week to hand over the dog. She can no longer afford to feed him because she needs to save the money out of her €230 per week pension to pay the property tax next year. Somebody like that must be gagging when they listen to the likes of the guff we heard from the Tánaiste this evening, a man who is paid almost €200,000 a year, with his spouse in another big State job on over €100,000 a year. It is very difficult for poor pensioners to listen to this.

**Deputy Kathleen Lynch:** There is no need to get personal. We all know stories.

**Deputy Willie O’Dea:** The Minister of State has manoeuvred this debate in such a way that there cannot be a vote because she is afraid somebody here will break ranks and the Government backbenchers do not want the embarrassment of voting to do down the elderly. That is very clever parliamentary gamesmanship. I am sure the elderly will be very impressed indeed.

**Deputy Ciarán Lynch:** Deputy O’Dea would not be guilty of that at all.

**Deputy Kathleen Lynch:** Learn from the master.

**Deputy Willie O’Dea:** The Labour Party should do a U-turn. I know that U-turns can be politically embarrassing, but sometimes it is more important to do what is right. Take the pressure off the elderly and get the money from those who can afford to pay it. The Minister of State knows who they are.

**Deputy John Browne:** I support the motion in the name of Deputy Kelleher. The attack on the elderly in the last two budgets is nothing short of a disgrace. People who worked all their lives, mostly in bad times, to build up this country are under attack from this Government. This is a new departure for the Government. I am in this House over 30 years, and every previous



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government always prided itself on looking after the elderly but for some unknown reason this Government has decided to wage war on the elderly in our community. We have seen the withdrawal of the telephone allowance. Many people have come to my clinics over the weekend expressing serious concern about this issue. Many of them are dependent on panic buttons, and the Taoiseach last week stated that he would talk to Community Alert. I have spoken to representatives of Community Alert in my own county and they do not see any way forward in dealing with this issue, which is causing serious problems. We have seen an increase in prescription charges, while ESB allowances were reduced last year. The Taoiseach pointed out that those allowances were not reduced this year; big deal. Old age pensioners are not going to be exempt from the property tax and water charges. There has been a 30% increase in the costs of gas and oil. This is all causing major burdens on the elderly in our community.

We received a document in our pigeon holes today and on one of the pages there is a reference to a "fair and progressive system", which must have come from the Department of Social Protection or the Government itself, but certainly there is nothing fair about this budget. Many of the cuts will have a serious impact on the elderly in our community. The medical card guidelines have been drastically reduced for those aged over 70, and this is frightening the life out of old people, who are afraid they will lose their cards. Over the last month we have had the issue of the discretionary medical cards. The Taoiseach and the Minister for Health have frequently said that there is no change to the discretionary medical card. Well I can tell them that people are coming to my clinic having lost their medical cards. These are people with disabilities, people with cancer, and people suffering from chronic diseases.

A month ago a constituent of mine applied for a medical card and as a result, the letter from the consultant stated "end of life situation". Having refused it twice, and after about 20 telephone calls from me and from his family, the officer involved decided to issue the medical card. That person should not have to go through all of that to receive his medical card. The consultant stated clearly on the letter that this was an end of life situation. People in the medical card section will say that they cannot issue them and that the issue must go to the chief medical officer in the medical card section, but when a consultant's letter states "end of life situation", there should be no question but that a discretionary medical card should be issued.

This Government has launched a major attack on the elderly in our community. It is the first time I have seen a government hell bent on taking the extra incentives the old people have to live in their community.

*8 o'clock*

People are now afraid to live in the community. The local Garda stations, HSE offices and health centres in many areas have been closed. We now have older people living in fear because of the lack of gardaí and the lack of services available to them. It is not a big deal to ask the Government to reverse its decision to cut the telephone allowance and would not cause major disruption to the Government finances. Over the weekend I had more representations on this issue than on any other issue. Most old people still have a landline. In many cases they are the only people to still hold on to the landline. They need it for panic buttons, and to contact their friends and family members because many of them are not able to use mobile phones. It is a callous decision by the Government to withdraw the telephone allowance.

I do not believe the Minister for Health was in the House last week - he is not too fond of coming in here to hear the truth. He will appear on the airwaves at every opportunity to attack

and criticise Fianna Fáil. We have been out of government for three years. He is the Minister for Health and needs to deal with the day-to-day issues. He is doing a very bad job on it at present.

**Deputy Robert Troy:** I compliment my colleague on introducing this important motion, which gives us, elected representatives, the opportunity to echo what 5,000 to 6,000 voiced outside the gates of Leinster House today. Those 5,000 to 6,000 elderly people came out on a cold wet day to show their frustration and annoyance at how the Government has reneged on so many commitments its parties made in advance of the last general election. The people to whom I spoke in my constituency at the weekend feel betrayed. This budget represents a betrayal of the older people in our society. Where has the coalition's national positive ageing strategy gone? Was that consulted when the decisions were being made around the Cabinet table?

The budget for 2014 has made cuts to the medical card criteria, which will result in a minimum of 35,000 medical cards for people over 70 being taken out of circulation. It would be interesting to go back and listen to what some of the current Ministers had to say when income limits of €1,400 and €700 were introduced for the over 70s to get medical cards. Why have their opinions on those limits suddenly changed?

With the latest hike in the prescription charge, it is now fivefold what it was when the Government came into office despite no major evidence to show there is any reduced demand on medication. It was originally introduced to dissuade people from getting unnecessary medication. I do not believe there is any evidence to suggest this has worked. We know that when he was Opposition spokesperson for health, the Minister, Deputy Reilly, said he would abolish it. Not alone did he say it as Opposition spokesperson on health, on one of his first days in office as Minister he said he would abolish it. We have now seen a fivefold increase.

As my colleague has rightly said, the abolition of the telephone allowance is the meanest, lowest, dirtiest and slyest cut of all times. On Monday in my constituency clinic I met a man aged 82 and his wife aged 72 who came in to thank me for getting them a panic button, which had been secured after two or three young men broke into their house. The man is profoundly deaf and walks with the assistance of a Zimmer frame, and is minded by his wife. She said the panic button is their lifeline and they wondered what they would do without it. They said that if it was not for the panic button they would never have considered staying in the house on their own because they are petrified. They are petrified because law and order has broken down in the country. People of that age bracket are sitting ducks in their homes.

What else has the Government done? It increased the rate of DIRT so that the people who had saved a few bob in the local credit union or bank now think there is no point in keeping it there and will keep it at home instead. There is no incentive for anyone with a few bob to keep it in a bank or financial institution.

The Government has also scrapped the bereavement grant. Why does it target people who cannot speak for themselves? It is because when the people are six feet under they can no longer vote. Talk about a political act. When it is pointed out that the cost of funerals has increased, the Government suggests that people should shop around for an undertaker. What does it want the people to do in their time of grief and sorrow? Should they put it on *www.e-tender.ie* and see who comes in with the best price?

The Government has suggested that people can approach the community welfare officer to get a grant even though their budget has been slashed in the past three years. Community welfare offices in many rural areas have closed, including those in Ballynacargy, Rathowen and Multyfarnham. Where is the lady who used to carry out the clinics in those areas? She has been sent to Trim, which is 50 miles from Mullingar, and is paid mileage to get there instead of being available for the people in the rural communities who need her there. Where is the logic in that? It is blatant waste.

The Government has also cut the tax relief for private health insurance. The Minister, Deputy Noonan, referred to this as gold-plated health insurance. Whom does he think he is codding? I was contacted today by a 72-year old man and his wife, both of whom are on the State retirement pension. Last week they got a VHI bill for €3,270. They will not be going into the Blackrock Clinic or the Bon Secours Hospital with it. It is a fairly basic package providing cover to ensure that if they need a critical operation they will be able to get into hospital promptly. It provides them with peace of mind. Following last year's VHI increase and this new cut in tax relief, VHI advised him today that his premium has gone up to €4,200, an increase of 25%. I can guarantee the Minister of State that it is not a gold-plated premium. He asked me how they could pay it given that he and his wife are both old-age pensioners. He reminded me that the budget speech claimed that nothing had happened to the old people. From 1 January they will need to pay property tax for a full year. Last year the Government cut the electricity allowance. His wife lost out when the Government abolished the transition pension.

Last year the Government also seriously reduced the home-help hours. These all affect a generation of pensioners and grandparents, including my parents, who are thankfully still with me, who worked hard to build our country. These people are not in a position to supplement their income. Their income is their income and that is it.

I am pleased the Minister of State, Deputy Lynch, is here to deal with the motion because my final point relates to mental health and dementia. Many of our elderly people suffer from mental health issues and dementia. The Minister of State made a promise and she has reiterated it time and again during Topical Issues debates in the House to the effect that €35 million would be ring-fenced for community mental health for three years. In the first year the budget ran into the second year and in the second year, 2013, a total of 477 staff were promised. However, as of 30 September this year 4% of these staff have gone through the full process. Why is this? It is because we are going to kick that into next year's budget. We kick it in and the €35 million will be absorbed into the black hole that is the HSE budget. Where is the €35 million for 2014? Is it still in the back pocket of the Minister of State? That is where she said it was in 2012 and 2013. She said she had it in her back pocket and that it would be spent on mental health.

Mental health is not only an issue that affects our elderly; it affects everyone in society. Mental health is of such importance that people on all sides of the House come in time and again to raise the difficulties facing many people. These people are not getting sufficient support in their communities. How can they get the support they need in their communities when the Government continues to break promises made in the programme for Government in the full knowledge of the financial constraints? I call on the Minister of State to answer that question. Where is the €35 million for 2014 gone? It is gone where everything else has gone: into the black hole that is the HSE.

**Deputy Ciarán Lynch:** That was a great crack.

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Kathleen Lynch):** I intend to share time with Deputy Regina Doherty and Deputy Ciarán Lynch. On foot of the last speaker I wish to put all of this into context. We are discussing the collapse of an economy, an economy that was deliberately stoked by the Government parties at the time. Deputy Troy should note that I do not intend to talk about mental health tonight, but if he was as concerned about mental health when his party was in government as he claims to be now we would be further along the way.

**Deputy Robert Troy:** That is a low point. The Government cannot fulfil its commitments.

**Deputy Kathleen Lynch:** I wish to reply to one thing Deputy Kelleher said about a gentleman in Cork who has a prescription for 12 items. Although it has not been mentioned by anyone, there is a cap in respect of the prescription charge of €25 per month. It is not as if it is open-ended.

I thank the Deputies for raising this matter and for giving me the opportunity to outline some key elements of our approach to the care and support of our older people. From the outset the Government has given a high priority to the issues concerning older people and this continues today across a range of policy areas. I can, therefore, accept the motion proposed by the Deputies.

In general, we are living longer than previous generations. A century ago, average life expectancy was in the region of 50 years. Today, average life expectancy for men is almost 77 years and for women almost 82 years, while life expectancy at the age of 65 years is rising faster here than anywhere else in the European Union. Ireland will experience an unprecedented ageing of the population in the first half of the 21st century. By 2040 there will be an estimated 1.3 million to 1.4 million people aged over 65 years, representing between 20% and 25% of the total population. The greatest increases are expected in the over 80s age group, where numbers are expected to increase fourfold from 110,000 in 2006 to approximately 440,000 in 2040. Ireland currently has one of the youngest populations and the lowest proportion of people aged over 65 years in the European Union. We have a little more time than others to plan for the future. To achieve this it is necessary to plan now and in doing so we should remember that to provide effectively for the health and welfare of older people we must consider not only health services but the built environment, transport links, social cohesion, crime, the health of the economy, personal income, availability and quality of services and social engagement as well.

The programme for Government promised to publish a national positive ageing strategy. In April this year we delivered on that promise. This strategy was led by me as Minister of State with responsibility for older people at the Department of Health but its scope encompasses many Departments and agencies. The strategy seeks to ensure that older people are recognised, supported and enabled to live independent full lives. The development of the strategy was informed by consultations with a cross-departmental group and NGO liaison groups and a review of international strategies on ageing combined with an extensive public consultation process.

The strategy is underpinned by the 2002 World Health Organization active ageing policy framework and the UN principles for older persons from 1991, which can be summarised as independence, participation, care, self-fulfilment and dignity. The strategy exhorts all of us to look at population ageing in Ireland as a vast demographic bounty, with older people continuing to contribute as consumers and producers, often fulfilling a vital role in families and communities. This strategy is significant because it was based on what older people said about their

needs. It is in line with the Madrid international plan of action on ageing, which proposes that a necessary first step in changing attitudes towards older people is to mainstream ageing into national frameworks and strategies.

The positive ageing strategy is based around participation, health, security in the home and policy supported by research. The four national goals and their underpinning objectives are specific to particular policy areas. However, actions to combat ageism and to improve provision of and access to information are required in all policy areas. The strategy goals are being translated into time-framed actions to be implemented and monitored under structures established under the healthy Ireland framework.

The first annual report on the implementation of the positive ageing strategy will be published by the end of this year. Further annual reports on positive ageing activity will be informed by annual positive ageing forums to be convened by the Department of Health. The Cabinet committee on social policy will oversee the implementation of the strategy. To this end, the Department of Health is actively engaging with other responsible Departments and agencies to drive the implementation of their elements of the strategy.

While planning for the future is important, I emphasise that there is already an extensive system of supports and services available to our older people including the nursing homes support scheme and the home help and home care packages. Deputy O'Dea should note that we have not decimated the nursing homes support scheme.

**Deputy Willie O'Dea:** I did not say the Government had; I said it had reduced it.

**Deputy Kathleen Lynch:** Approximately 22,000 people are in receipt of financial assistance under the nursing homes support scheme, with another 900 approved but not yet in payment. This arises for various reasons and Deputy O'Dea knows that as well as I do. In 2013, home help hours were not decimated. A total of 10.3 million hours of home help will be delivered to over 50,000 clients, exactly the same as last year with an additional almost 10,870 people to receive home care packages. I hope the review of the fair deal scheme will move more in that direction.

Government policy is to support older people to live in dignity and independence in their own homes and communities for as long as possible and to support access to quality long-term residential care where necessary. The nursing homes support scheme began on 27 October 2009. The purpose of the scheme is to provide financial support for people assessed as needing long-term nursing home care. Since 27 October 2009, the nursing homes support scheme is the single funded means of accessing long-term nursing home care for all new entrants. In line with a commitment given when the scheme was launched, a review is now under way to examine its sustainability, taking account of Government policy, relevant demographic trends and the current fiscal situation as well as to have costed recommendations relating to how the scheme should operate in the short to medium term. The objective is to ensure it best supports Government policy and how residential and community provision will be balanced as part of an overall approach. The Department of Health has carried out a public consultation to inform the review and it is expected the review itself will be completed by early 2014. Overall, 43% of the total population holds a medical card or a GP visit card. One must accept this is due to the fact that the economy collapsed and hundreds of thousands of people were put out of work. Such cards ensure access to a GP service without charges at the point of use. As for the elderly, well over 90% of people aged 70 years and over hold a medical card or a GP visit card. Deputies

will be aware that under budget 2014, it was announced that the gross income thresholds for the over-70s medical card will be reduced. However, it should be noted that eight out of every ten people aged 70 and over will be completely unaffected by the changes in the over-70s medical card income limits. An individual earning a gross income up to €500 per week or a couple with a gross income of up to €900 per week will continue to qualify for a medical card. To be clear, a person over 70 with a gross income of €26,000 or an over-70s couple with a gross income of €47,000 per year will not be affected by the budget change. The budget changes ensure that no one aged over 70 who currently has a medical card will lose access to a GP service as they will receive GP visit cards. Individuals aged over 70 years whose gross income does not exceed €36,000 per year and couples whose income does not exceed €72,000 per year will retain their GP access.

To assist in counteracting recent concerns raised, my colleague, the Minister for Health, Deputy Reilly, has asked the Health Service Executive, HSE, to draw up a communications plan to inform the public about the recent changes. I believe there is a lot of misinformation in circulation. The HSE continues to move ahead with additional improvements for all medical card applicants and medical card renewals to improve the application process. The Department is also actively considering how those with Alzheimer's and other forms of dementia are looked after. It is a terrible pity that Deputy Troy did not remain in the Chamber. An expert group, including advocates of those affected by dementia and their families, health sector professionals and researchers has been convened to assist in developing a national dementia strategy. The objectives include the promotion of greater public awareness of the nature of dementia, its symptoms, causes and risk factors, latest information on how risk can be reduced and of what treatments, services and supports are available to those diagnosed with dementia and their families and carers. A second objective is to facilitate effective preparation and planning for their futures by those diagnosed with dementia. I believe everyone accepts the biggest problem is lack of diagnosis. A third objective is to recognise and facilitate the wish of many people with dementia to stay in their own homes and communities for as long as possible, using early intervention, integrated care pathways, case management and enhanced community services. A fourth is to simplify and streamline, to the greatest extent possible, the administrative processes applied to those seeking State services or supports or both for or on behalf of persons suffering from dementia. A final objective is to recognise and support the role of carers in accordance with the provisions of the national carers strategy, something that also was long-promised, including in the areas of advice, training and respite services.

The last point is very dear to my heart because carers are the unsung heroes of many homes and communities. They sacrifice huge parts of their own lives to bring comfort to those they love and they often succeed in doing this, as no one else can. For this reason I was delighted to be able to deliver a national carers strategy, which was published in July 2012. The national carers strategy is a cross-departmental strategy that sets the strategic direction for future policies, services and supports provided by Departments and Government agencies for carers. It sets out a vision with an ambitious set of national goals and objectives to guide policy development and service delivery. The Government's aim is to ensure that carers feel valued and supported in their caring role and are empowered to have a life of their own outside of their caring role. The strategy also contains a roadmap for implementation. It outlines the timelines and the Departments with responsibility for the implementation of the strategy's various elements. As implementation progresses, the strategy will be reviewed on a periodic basis to consider whether adjustments or additional actions are required.

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A wide range of supports and benefits of course is provided by the Department of Social Protection. Budget 2014 has protected and maintained the State pension, carer's schemes, free travel, fuel allowance and free television licences. The tax treatment of the elderly remains unchanged, with no change in net income for pensioners as a result of this budget. Those aged 65 and over will continue to be treated more favourably under the Irish income tax code than all other taxpayers and this favourable treatment of pensioners has been protected in this budget. While it was decided to end the bereavement grant, the Government has maintained the current practice where, when someone in receipt of a certain social welfare payment passes away, his or her spouse, civil partner or cohabitant receives this payment for six weeks after the death. In addition, anyone having financial difficulty with funeral expenses can apply for supplementary welfare support from the Department of Social Protection. There is a range of additional supports available for people after a death that are worth considerably more than the bereavement grant. These include the widow's, widower's or surviving civil partner's pension, which is a weekly payment based on contributions or a means test, the widowed or surviving civil partner grant, which is a once-off payment of €6,000 where there is a dependent child and guardians' payments in cases in which someone is looking after an orphaned child. Moreover, if a person dies because of an accident at work or occupational disease, a special funeral grant of €850 is paid.

The original notion of an allowance covering handset rental, standing charges and a number of calls is now outdated. In recent years, the nature of the telephone market has been transformed with deregulation, mobile services and bundled services including television, broadband and telephone. Therefore, on examining the household benefits scheme, it was decided that retaining as far as possible the other elements of the package, such as the electricity and gas allowance and the television licence, would be more valuable to a recipient. The level of living alone allowance is being maintained at €7.70 per week. The senior alert scheme offers the more vulnerable members of the community a chance to live a more secure life, safe in the knowledge that help, if they need it, is never far away. The Government will examine the scheme to ascertain what additional resources are needed to provide peace of mind for elderly and vulnerable people. Those currently spending less than €17.21 each month on calls can join the Eircom vulnerable user scheme, which entitles a person to the first €8.05 worth of calls free. The announcement of an additional €200 million in new capital projects includes funding for 5,700 housing adaptation grants for older people and people with disabilities. Recent surveys on life for older people have demonstrated that Ireland ranks highly as a place in which to grow old, particularly in areas such as social connections, access to public transport and physical safety. While there is no doubt that these are challenging times - I outlined the reason these times are so challenging - I reiterate today that the Government will continue to prioritise older people and to support them to live their lives with dignity and independence.

I do not believe any Government, regardless of its colour or hue, likes to remove or cut a service to anyone. However, when this Government came into office, money for five months remained in the Exchequer and when one finds oneself in a position whereby one must ensure the country gets back on its feet, this is the type of money that would have paid for pensions and all those items.

**Deputy Willie O'Dea:** If the Labour Party knew the position was so bad, why did it make all those promises?

**Deputy Billy Kelleher:** That comment about five months' money being left is inaccurate.

**Deputy Regina Doherty:** According to the World Health Organization, approximately 1 million every year pass the threshold of 60 years of age and very soon in Ireland one in four of our population will be over the age of 65. That will have significant social and economic implications at an individual, family and societal level. There is no doubt it will pose challenges but it will also bring good opportunities. Older people continue to make a major contribution to our society as workers, mentors, care-givers, child-minders - many of us have grandparents looking after our children - and, most importantly, as volunteers and active members of our community. This challenge can be met and opportunities exploited by planning now to ensure that Irish society is age friendly in the years ahead. It is the Government's policy to support older people to live with dignity and independence in their own homes and communities for as long as possible. This is achieved through a range of enhanced community-based services such as home help, meals on wheels, a service in which I am involved, respite or day care services and, in more complex cases, enhanced home care packages can be provided. Where it is not possible for a person to live in their own home, our policy is to support access to quality, long-term residential care.

In 2011 there were more than half a million people over the age of 65 in this country and in response the Government policy has been to move the health system towards primary and community-based care to reduce growing pressure on our hospitals. The vehicle for this has been the promotion of integrated care. Interventions such as falls clinics in the community for older people and enhanced geriatric community care, all liaising between primary care teams and health and social networks, are designed to keep people from being admitted to hospital or having to go into nursing homes.

Budget 2014 made difficult choices and sometimes among all the measures the good news gets lost. For example, as the Minister of State pointed out, the announcement of the additional €200 million for new capital projects includes funding for housing adaptations and grants for older people, particularly people with disabilities. Budget 2014 protected and maintained the State pension, the carers scheme, free travel, fuel allowance and the free television licence. The tax treatment of elderly people remains unchanged with no change in net income for pensioners as a result of this budget. That is worthy of saying. People aged 65 and over will continue to be treated more favourably under the Irish income tax code than all other taxpayers. This favourable treatment of pensioners has been protected in this budget.

While an ageing population is one of the success stories of the modern age, society needs to prepare in order to cater efficiently for the specific needs of that population. I am talking about the care we provide for them. We have seen new key senior care services that have been launched recently, particularly in the area of home care and medical support.

In April this year the Minister published the National Positive Ageing Strategy, which provides a blueprint for planning for the ageing of our society. In the past policy relating to older people tended to deal almost exclusively with health and social care issues. The national strategy seeks to highlight that ageing is not only a health issue but requires a whole of government response to address a range of interconnected factors that affect health and wellbeing. The strategy is a significant life cycle approach to the issues of ageing and promotes a view that all Departments must take responsibility for the key issues underpinning positive ageing, endorsing a strong and positive message about the place and role of older people in our society, and its identification of key goals and objectives which address key aspects in older people's lives. That is very much to be welcomed. Successful implementation of the strategy will not only enable older people live fulfilled lives but it will enable Irish society to capitalise on the



considerable democratic bounty of Ireland's gradually ageing population. The strategy reflects the aspiration that we all have of society, which is an inclusive one, an inclusive Ireland. The National Positive Ageing Strategy provides a blueprint for this planning, for what we can and what we must do individually and collectively to make Ireland a good country in which to grow old. At its core, the strategy seeks to create a shift in the mindset of how we conceptualise ageing and what needs to be done, particularly to promote positive ageing.

As we are living longer, one of the objectives of the strategy has been to combat ageism by encouraging our media and other opinion-making actors to give an aged balance image of society. With regard to much of the talk about our elderly, particularly of the people protesting outside the House today, naming them the grey brigade is a disgrace. This is a prime example of what we are trying to avoid with the positive ageing strategy. Positive dignified ageing is of relevance to every one of us because no matter what age we are today we will all age. Ageing is a lifelong process that does not start at 65 years of age and it is something hopefully we are all going to share.

**Deputy Ciarán Lynch:** The Government will not be opposing the motion, rather it supports it. If there was a suggested Government amendment to it, it would probably relate to the last point of the motion which states "agrees that the elderly should not be used as just economic statistics". Perhaps that wording should be amended to include the words "and should not also be used as political footballs". If there was a Government amendment to the motion, I would support one along that line.

The two critical lines in the motion are those referring to the elderly living lives independently and with dignity and the concerns that arise regarding isolation and illness as people grow older. I am fortunate that my parents are still alive. My father will be 90 year of age next month and my mother is a lot younger than him. I dare not mention her name and put it on the record of the Dáil for fear of the retribution I might get on leaving the House. I have been fortunate in that they live in the house in which they have lived for the past 50 years and they have been able to do so because of the types of supports elderly people get in this State.

If an element has been absent from the debate, it is examining new thinking as to how we can support people, not only the measures that have been put in place to date and which were discussed in the budget debate.

One of the great absences of the developer-led years when Fianna Fáil was in government, and we had a developer-led government, was that housing strategy did not take account of the full life cycle that Deputy Regina Doherty mentioned. There were not structured down-sizing programmes in the housing developments that were built. We had housing estate after housing estate, three-up and three-down or four-up and four-down, being built with no opportunity for people as they got older to downsize and continue to live in their community. From my experience of having served on Cork City Council, I know that downsizing projects work when the downsized units are available in the community in which the people have lived and in that way people continue to go to the same credit union, church, shop and use the same bus services. Unfortunately because of the bubble years created by Fianna Fáil, downsizing programmes were usually located many miles from the communities in which people had lived for 40 or 50 years. In debating this motion on the elderly we should focus on how we create a society that is not only about the provision of social welfare benefits but about the community as a whole and how we treat our elderly into the future.

I am concerned about one aspect of the motion which states, “concurr that older people do not want to be pressurised about means tests and application forms for health care services”. There are two issues in that statement. The first is the simple plain language used in any form that is issued by the HSE or any other body. This issue arose last year when Revenue issued a letter to every elderly person in the State, only for Revenue to discover that it did not relate to the vast majority of people to whom it was issued. However, that was not discovered until one read the end of the letter. It would have been helpful if that letter issued by Revenue had stated that if one was earning under such an amount or if one’s old age pension plus one’s private pension is below this amount, please disregard this letter and do not read any further. There is the issue of the language State agencies use in engaging with all people, not only the elderly, which can be confusing, distressful and create anguish.

The other issue in the statement in the motion to which I referred is that it seems to offer a blanket approach. We have seen Fianna Fáil return to adopting a blanket approach to economics again. It was wrong to give a blanket medical card cover to all people over 70 years of age, regardless of their income. That was a wrong decision. The idea that a retired Taoiseach, and we have many of them from the years Fianna Fáil was in power, who is nearing pension age and on a pension that is immense would qualify for a medical card on reaching the age of 70, simply on the grounds of being 70 years of age, is crazy. It was a crazy approach but it was type of blanket approach Fianna Fáil took to the economy at the time but that has been rightly corrected in this budget.

**Deputy Billy Kelleher:** Universality is a Labour Party principle.

**Deputy Ciarán Lynch:** An income threshold in this respect had to be put in place for the over 70s. The idea that somebody who has an income in retirement greater than that of a Deputy qualifies for a medical card is bananas.

**Deputy Billy Kelleher:** The Deputy supported it.

**Deputy Ciarán Lynch:** I refer to what was maintained in the budget. Despite the economic meltdown we inherited and the necessary programme of recovery we are in, the core rate of State pensions has been maintained in full; free travel has been maintained in full; the fuel allowance has been maintained in full; the living alone allowance has been maintained in full; the television licence has been maintained in full; the free electricity and gas allowance and over 80 allowance has been maintained in full; and the extra payment for caring for more than one person is retained and the carer’s allowance and half rate carer’s allowance has been protected.

Returning to the key point being discussed, the medical cards, as a result of budget 2014, 85% of those over 70 years of age in our population will still retain their medical card and only those with incomes of more than €500 per week for a single person or €900 per week for a couple will continue to receive GP visit cards. Even after all these changes, 97% of persons over 70 will still have access to a free GP card.

I listened to Deputy Willie O’Dea earlier who was a Minister on many occasions. He is doing a lot of name-checking of Government politicians lately but what he fails to recognise is the consequence of cause and effect. In terms of a name-check, perhaps somebody should create a Twitter account called Micheál Martian, the profile of which would be “Just landed on earth. Take me to your leader, and they made me leader of the Opposition”. We would be reading Tweets such as: “Came into the House today and spoke about the housing crisis - how did that

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happen? Came into the House today and spoke about the banking crisis - how did that happen? Came into the House today to talk about the HSE - whose brainwave was that?" These are the legacies Fianna Fáil has given us and that we are correcting.

I will conclude on this point. What this Government is doing is creating a sustainable future not based upon the boom and bust type of politics of Fianna Fáil. We are not just engaged in the present for electoral opportunity. We are getting this country back on its feet. We are making the right decisions, and we are not being self-righteous about it.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Liam Twomey):** I call Deputy Caoimhín Ó Caoláin who is sharing time with Deputy Ellis.

**Deputy Caoimhín Ó Caoláin:** How much time have we each?

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Liam Twomey):** Seven and a half minutes.

**Deputy Caoimhín Ó Caoláin:** We in Sinn Féin have repeatedly pointed out that Fine Gael and the Labour Party are implementing the very Fianna Fáil strategies and policies they so loudly denounced while in opposition. This coalition Government's treatment of our older citizens in budget 2014 now proves conclusively that Fine Gael and Labour are indeed, by virtue of their actions and decisions, "Continuity Fianna Fáil". There is no other way to describe them at this point in time. The Minister of State, Deputy Lynch, has done a fair bit of political party musical chairs over the years but look at where she is now - "Continuity Fianna Fáil". Who would ever have thought?

Like Fianna Fáil, the Minister of State and her Government colleagues have imposed a series of attacks on the livelihoods and security of our older citizens. Last year it was the respite care grant and cuts to over-70s medical card eligibility. This year in budget 2014 they have come forward with a further series of attacks on older people, and that is indisputable. The axing of the monthly telephone allowance is a callous act that has caused widespread concern, and indeed real fear among older people. None of us can be in any doubt about that after the weekend, being back in our respective constituencies following the budget of last Tuesday. I have no doubt about it, having spoken to a variety of people of senior years, all of whom are reflecting the impact these measures will have on their lives.

How is that acceptable to any Government that claims to value the security of older people and that claims to vindicate the right of our older citizens to remain in their own homes as long as possible? The telephone allowance was a very important support. I know of instances, and people very close to me, where the bill for the two-monthly demand for the telephone is multiples of the use but the importance of the telephone is why it is retained. It is not dispensed with, and a mobile telephone is not an option so it is critically important that the telephone allowance is restored. That is the first demand I would make of the Minister and of her colleagues in Government - to restore the telephone allowance without any further prevarication. As the Irish Senior Citizens' Parliament has pointed out, many of the security and monitoring devices which older people have installed in their homes rely on land lines - especially in areas where broadband coverage is poor, including in my own area of the country. Replacements or changes to these systems would be costly and accessibility has been affected by severe cuts to the community groups who supply them.

Once again the over-70s medical card has been restricted, affecting an estimated 35,000 people on top of the 30,000 cut last year. The then Deputy James Reilly denounced such

changes under Fianna Fáil and now he is implementing them. Age Action Ireland put the position well when it stated:

It is contradictory to be removing means-tested cards from a section of society which has high medical needs, in a Budget which is rolling out free GP care for children and heralding it as the roll out of its universal primary care plans. This year's cuts are part of a continuing process of reductions which began in 2008 when the automatic entitlement for the Over-70s Medical Card was abolished.

At the time of the abolition of the over 70s automatic entitlement, one of its strongest critics was the then Deputy James Reilly, who sat here in close proximity to me. There was a partial climb-down by the Fianna Fáil-led Government, thanks to the massive mobilisation of older people, and we have seen that again today, but the Minister, Deputy Reilly, and his Cabinet colleagues have set their face against any changes to the raft of measures penalising older people that they are imposing in this budget, and they will pay a price for that.

The then Deputy James Reilly and Deputy Jan O'Sullivan, as Fine Gael and Labour health spokespeople respectively, denounced the imposition by the then Minister, Mary Harney, and Fianna Fáil of 50 cent per item prescription charges for medical card holders, yet in Government they have now increased those charges five-fold. The budget figures claim that €43 million will be raised in 2014 by the increase in prescription charges but in Sinn Féin's Alternative Budget 2014, we show that €258 million can be saved in 2014 by delivering further savings on branded medicines and altering prescribing practices. We have also identified €66 million that can be saved by the introduction of generic substitution and reference pricing for the 20 most commonly used off-patent medications, and these are savings in medicines alone. We have identified further savings of over €330 million in the health budget without affecting patient care and without affecting people's medical card and other entitlements. It clearly shows that this Government, and very particularly this Department of Health, made no effort to look at real alternatives, going for the "cut, cut, cut" approach they inherited from their predecessors. The Minister for Health and his Cabinet colleagues, rather than deliver on their promise to make these savings on medicines, chose instead to break their promises to the people and to penalise medical card holders yet again, in particular older people and people with disabilities who require a lot of medication.

A particularly callous budget measure is the abolition of the bereavement grant, and we must bear in mind that this was a payment people were entitled to because it was based on their PRSI contributions during their working lives, but the contribution of older people during their working lives has been degraded and devalued by this Government's decision in this respect.

There is much focus now on the position of health Minister, Deputy James Reilly, and the question on the lips of many in political life, media commentators and across wider society is: should the Minister resign? My answer to that is clear - of course he should, but it should not only be the Minister, Deputy Reilly. It should be the entire Cabinet because they are responsible collectively for imposing anti-people austerity policies which they have aped and copied from their predecessors and, with a new vigour and enthusiasm, have imposed on an ever more straitened and economically challenged society. It is time to fold up the tent and give the people the chance to elect a Government which will act in the interest of the overwhelming number who are currently suffering.

**Deputy Dessie Ellis:** I dtús báire, caithfidh mé a rá go bhfuil mé i bhfábhair an rún seo ar

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ghnó Comhaltaí Príobháideacha. I agree with the sentiment represented by the motion. It reads like a clear enough statement that there were fairer options this Government could have chosen in budget 2014 but did not. It makes the point that it will create financial hardship and that it is unfair and disproportionate. It recognises that the least well-off, those who have nothing left to give, are being targeted for cuts by this Government. It is, despite the negative of not offering a real solution, a correct summation of the budget presented by the Government.

Let us be honest with ourselves. The Government will not accept even this very moderate criticism of a budget, which was unfair, will hurt many people and will put lives at risk. Why not make a real statement for change? Why not use this motion to set out the stall for a real alternative to the policies of Fine Gael and the Labour Party? It is helpful to highlight wrong that is done but so much more valuable to offer solutions, which could avoid those wrongs.

The reason this motion lacks this is because it comes from a party which, like the Government, pays only lip-service to fairness. Fianna Fáil is not opposed to targeting the vulnerable, the old, the unemployed and the poor for cuts. It just believes it is the only party that has the authority to do so. It certainly showed no such qualms about austerity when in government, from its first austerity budget, through the bailout period and until it was shown the back door by the people utterly sickened at the result of 14 years of its rule.

If Fianna Fáil were serious about opposing austerity and about promoting fairness and equality, it would not have been so quick out of the traps to use spin and outright lies to attack the alternative proposals of Sinn Féin which were founded on just those principles Fianna Fáil would like to fool us all into believing it has an understanding of. Fianna Fáil's alternative to Fine Gael and the Labour Party austerity is no alternative. The only difference is a few millimetres in the comparative thickness of their brass necks.

This budget was the seventh austerity budget of which the State has been the victim since the collapse of the property bubble nurtured by Fianna Fáil and cheered on by the political and media establishment. These budgets have brought great pain and hardship to working class communities, people with disabilities, the elderly, children with learning difficulties, those from the Traveller community, young people struggling to get work and families with empty chairs at the dinner table marking a generation of young people once again sent to the four corners of the globe in the hope of a life their home could not offer them. This budget continued that tradition and, despite the spin of Fine Gael and the Labour Party, it will offer no comfort to ordinary people.

Young unemployed people will have to live on €100 per week until the age of 25, and even then they will be on a reduced rate. This is a slap in the face to young people who did nothing to create this mess but who are paying dearly for it with their future. Any working class family one cares to pick has a son, daughter or cousin in London, Sydney, Toronto or New York. Every family has someone who is considering emigration while many have multiples. Whole communities and social groups have been decimated as we enter the seventh year of a policy of forced mass emigration of young people. I have family who have left Ireland to seek work in recent times and not for a holiday or the craic as some spin doctors would have it.

Today we witnessed thousands of old people outside Leinster House who clearly have had enough of the cuts by stealth. They are not being fooled. The incremental erosion of benefits over the years has forced the elderly to fight back. We should remember what happened to Fianna Fáil the last time the grey vote reacted. The lives and well-being of the elderly are

under serious threat. The cutting of thousands of medical cards is a crime. That is what these cutbacks mean. The extra costs for prescriptions will surely see people go without as people are forgoing critical medicine due to these costs. The telephone line is a vital part of security for the elderly and a necessity as a direct line to vital services, which can be a matter of life or death. With the cuts to the fuel allowance and the increase in the cost of living, the isolation of the elderly, in particular in rural areas, will have serious repercussions.

There has been constant confusion over the past year in regard to medical cards, and many cases have defied imagination as to why they were refused. A debacle is about to unfold. A further 35,000 medical cards will be cut. My constituency has been inundated with medical card refusals over the past year. We were told the over 70s were entitled to a medical card. We now have new thresholds and further means testing. Inevitably, huge trauma and pressure will be placed on a vulnerable section of our community.

Some of the criteria laid down and the illnesses which qualify and which do not are difficult to understand. I cannot believe some of the cases I have seen which have been refused a medical card. I have met many people over the past year who have been refused medical cards. People who could not even walk and were bent over were refused. We will now add to that by requiring people to fill out forms and by leaving people waiting for medical cards and not knowing what will happen with these new thresholds. The dead are not even safe. The bereavement grant has disappeared so one is not even safe when dead.

It is true to say that the Labour Party is the bones on which Fine Gael sharpens its teeth. How did the Labour Party support these measures? What impact statement did it request? Has it any idea of the problems this will create? It is out of touch and has lost the plot, which the people are telling it. It would want to wake up. What is happening is a catastrophe for the people.

**Deputy Seamus Healy:** I support the motion and, in particular, the amendment to it in the name of Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett. I compliment the Irish Senior Citizens' Parliament on the huge protest it held outside Leinster House today. Thousands of people from throughout the country gathered outside the House. I say "well done" to Mairead Hayes, a native of Clonmel, who is a very senior person in the Irish Senior Citizens' Parliament, and I thank all those from Tipperary who came to Dublin by bus, train and car to support the elderly today.

The Minister of State, Deputy Kathleen Lynch, said there was a lot of misinformation. Indeed there is, but it has been put out by the Labour Party and Fine Gael. The Tánaiste was at it again today when he insulted the intelligence of elderly people by suggesting they had been untouched by austerity. If I were charitable, I would call it spin, but if I were less charitable, it could only be described as a three letter word which starts with "l" and finishes with "e".

The record of this Government in regard to elderly people is as follows. The Government was hardly a wet week in office when in July 2011, the Minister for Social Protection cut the electricity allowance from 2,400 units to 1,800 units. The 2012 budget cut six weeks from the fuel allowance. The 2013 budget reduced the household benefits package and the electricity and telephone allowances, and it introduced a carbon tax. The fair deal scheme thresholds were increased in that budget in that the 15% of the value of the house was increased to 22.5%. The respite care grant was cut as were home help hours. Some 40,000 medical cards for elderly people were targeted, and that was before this budget. We have seen the various changes affecting elderly people and the attacks on them in this budget.

*9 o'clock*

**Deputy Maureen O'Sullivan:** Tá sé soiléir go bhfuil an buiséad seo ag cur isteach ar dhaoine áirithe. Tá sé soiléir freisin nach bhfuil sé ag cur isteach ar dhaoine eile in aon chor. The first point I would make is that the principle of equality should be driving budgets. There is a real need for significant equality-proofing when it comes to budgets. I acknowledge that the basic rates paid to the elderly, such as the fuel and travel allowances, were not touched. Those positives have been undermined by the cuts that have been made and are affecting people. There was visible proof of that today when a massive attendance gathered outside the Dáil.

These cuts are eating into the independence and dignity of the lives of elderly people in our communities. We should reflect on the lives these people have had. Many of them have worked very hard throughout their lives while rearing their children. I know that significant numbers of elderly people are bringing up their grandchildren in parts of central Dublin because of addiction issues and because of suicide rates. Many of these people are also involved in major work in their communities. I acknowledge the women, in particular, who have been the backbone of voluntary services throughout their lives. We are acknowledging that by adding stress, distress and anxiety to their lives.

I wish to comment briefly on the medical card issue. I have heard incredible stories about medical cards being taken from people of limited means in their 70s and 80s who have illnesses and disabilities. It is stressful for them to have to fill in forms and do additional work to prove that their cards should not have been taken from them in the first place. A realistic approach is needed in this regard.

The withdrawal of the telephone allowance affects elderly people who depend on landlines for their alarms. We are talking about people of limited means. Disability groups are particularly concerned about this measure. People of limited means need the telephone allowance to enable them to keep their landlines. They depend on the landline to connect to the Internet and get the information they need to live their lives. It gives them a social connection as well. The prescription charge is increasing substantially, from €1.50 to €2.50. I appreciate that the maximum amount that can be paid in a single month is €25, but that is a significant amount of money for a person of limited means.

I would like to make another point before I finish. The One Family organisation has pointed out that the replacement of the one-parent family tax credit is a retrograde step because it will punish separated parents who take a collaborative approach to the rearing of their children. This decision needs to be reconsidered because it is causing massive difficulty. We have received e-mails in that regard. I suggest we could pay for this if we could collect the entire 12.5% rate of corporate tax. We do not collect it all, however. It is difficult to get information on this matter. If we collected all of this tax, we would have enough money to ensure the elderly are not affected by these cutbacks.

Debate adjourned.

The Dáil adjourned at 9.05 p.m. until 10.30 a.m. on Wednesday, 23 October 2013.